Distributed Leadership: A Systematic Literature Review

Abstract

Purpose: This paper critically examines the distributed leadership literature, identifying its conceptual foundations, thematic developments, and research gaps. Synthesising existing studies aims to advance theoretical and practical understandings of distributed leadership across diverse contexts.

Design/methodology/approach: A rigorous three-step systematic literature review (SLR) process was employed to analyse 111 peer-reviewed studies published between 2002 and 2022. This approach integrates descriptive and thematic analyses to address key research questions on distributed leadership's conceptualisation, thematic trends, and research gaps.

Findings: The review highlights distributed leadership as a dynamic and context-dependent concept, emphasising its social, collaborative, and performance-driven dimensions. Three primary themes emerged: behavioural perspectives, contextual influences, and performance implications. Gaps were identified in empirical, theoretical, population, and methodological domains. These include insufficient research in non-educational sectors, limited exploration of distributed leadership's applicability in developing nations, and the need for empirically validated frameworks and qualitative methodologies.

Originality/value: This review is among the first to systematically map distributed leadership's evolution across multiple contexts using an SLR approach. It provides a robust synthesis of the field, offering a validated baseline for future research. The study's methodological rigour and its focus on underexplored areas contribute significantly to advancing the discourse on distributed leadership.

Keywords: Systematic Literature Review, Distributed Leadership, Leadership, Behavioural Perspectives, Organisational Performance

Paper type: Literature review

Introduction

Distributed leadership has emerged as a pivotal paradigm in leadership studies, challenging traditional hierarchical models by emphasising collective responsibility and collaborative decision-making. Initially conceptualised within educational settings, distributed leadership has gained traction across various organisational contexts (Spillane, 2005; Harris et al., 2007). However, its implementation and theoretical underpinnings remain fragmented, necessitating a comprehensive synthesis of existing research.

While numerous studies have explored distributed leadership, previous reviews have often been narrow in scope, focusing on specific sectors or conceptual frameworks. This paper addresses this gap by offering a systematic literature review (SLR) that examines distributed leadership across diverse settings and identifies underexplored areas. Unlike prior reviews, this study adopts a cross-sectoral approach, integrating empirical findings with theoretical advancements to provide a holistic understanding of the field.

The primary aim of this review is to critically assess distributed leadership's conceptualisations, thematic developments, and research gaps. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is distributed leadership?
2. What themes have emerged from its study?
3. Where are the gaps in existing research?

This review contributes to the literature by synthesising over two decades of research, drawing attention to the underrepresentation of non-educational contexts and the limited application of robust qualitative methodologies. The study provides a foundational framework for future research and practical applications in leadership development by addressing these gaps.

This study is among the first to present a sector-agnostic systematic literature review (SLR) of distributed leadership, integrating findings from over 111 peer-reviewed studies across multiple domains. Adopting a three-stage SLR methodology ensures transparency and replicability, providing a validated framework for synthesising complex and fragmented research. This methodological rigour highlights critical gaps and offers a foundation for future research by identifying underexplored areas such as non-educational sectors and developing nations. By employing a robust thematic synthesis, this study bridges empirical, theoretical, and methodological gaps, positioning distributed leadership as a dynamic and versatile paradigm.

Methodology

The systematic literature review (SLR) is a rigorous methodology used to systematically gather, evaluate, and synthesise existing academic studies to address specific research questions (Budgen and Brereton, 2006). The primary aim of an SLR is to provide a comprehensive and critical overview of the published research relevant to the topic under investigation. They are used by researchers as an important tool for gathering and summarising the current state of knowledge about a specific subject (Clark et al., 2019; Mcquade et al., 2020; Sawyerr and Harrison, 2020). In contrast to traditional narrative reviews, the SLR methodology applies strict inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure that only high-quality studies are considered, thereby improving the reliability of the conclusions drawn from the evidence (Mulrow, 1994). By employing this structured approach, the SLR allows for a more transparent and objective evaluation of the literature, facilitating the identification of research gaps and the formulating evidence-based recommendations for future research.

The methodology outlines standard procedures, including selecting a two-decade time frame (2002-2022). This period was chosen to capture developments in distributed leadership, particularly following its growing prominence in the education and health care sectors (Lumby, 2013; Bolden, 2011). These years reflect a critical period when distributed leadership gained traction, allowing for an in-depth exploration of its evolution.

The present study applied SLR based on the Harrison et al. (2016) argument, which considered developing a trusted knowledge base and proof-based strategy to be a recognised approach. The SLR content is a keyword strategy for determining the scope of the study. Tranfield et al. (2003) and Omeihe and Harrison (2024) support this idea. It provides insights into a comprehensive understanding of both published and unpublished sources. Tranfield et al. (2003) propose a three-stage SLR approach:

Stage I: Planning of the Review
The first stage of the SLR is engaging in comprehensive discussions and consultations with subject matter experts in leadership to baseline the review appropriately. The significance of this stage is to frame out the knowledge and concepts of distributed leadership. Subsequently, the outcome of the first stage identifies the entry criteria for the included studies in the SLR.

 The following questions are key in conducting the review:

>   RQ1. What is distributed leadership?
>   RQ2. What themes have emerged from the study of distributed leadership?
>   RQ3. Where are the gaps in the research of distributed leadership?

Selection criteria are substantial in filtering results and evaluating the relevant research and information to be included in an SLR (Denyer and Tranfield, 2009; Omeihe and Harrison, 2024).

The evaluation criteria stress the quality of the literature as a ground rule in the selection of the papers. The following summarises the critical determinants of the ***inclusion/exclusion*** criteria.

The inclusion criteria

- The paper is peer-reviewed and published in English language.
- The articles are indexed as incredible sources.
- "Distributed Leadership" is mentioned in the title or the abstract.
- The paper focuses specifically on distributed leadership.
- The paper tackles one or more of the review questions.

The exclusion criteria

- The papers have insufficient references/citations.
- The paper is not published in a journal (such as conference papers).
- The paper is not informative about the review questions.
- The papers generally discuss leadership ideologies.
- The paper is closed access where the full text is not available.
- The paper has a mismatch between the proper citations and the bibliography.

Stage II: Conducting the Review

In the second stage, the researcher identified the search strings and keywords *(see Figure 1)*. The sources were selected and refined based on critically reviewing the papers' titles and abstracts to avoid replication and irrelevance. Further, this stage entails the identifying of the databases, namely:

- SAGE Publications,
- SpringerLink
- Wiley Online
- Emerald Insight
- Taylor and Francis

Figure 1: Keywords and Strings used in the Search

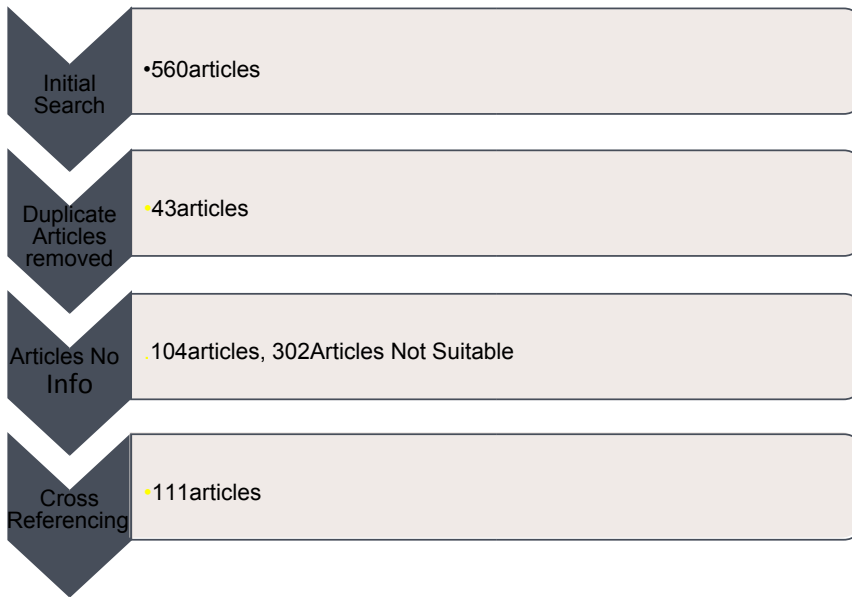|	
Searchstring01	•Distributed leadership(in title)
Searchstring01a	•Distributed Leadership(anywhere)
Searchstring02	•Dist**ANDLead******(in title)
Searchstring02a	•Distributed Leadership(anywhere)
Searchstring3	•DistribANDLead*****(in title)
Searchstring3a	•Temes(anywhere)
Searchstring4	•Dist***ANDlead*****
Searchstring4a	•Democratic**** OR Participative OR Shared anywhere

Source: Authors own work

Stage III: Reporting and Dissemination

A total of 560 articles were initially retrieved, of which 43 duplicates were removed. An additional 132 articles were excluded because they were predominantly theoretical, focusing solely on conceptual discussions of distributed leadership without presenting empirical evidence or substantive data relevant to the research questions. Of the remaining 385 articles, 104 were found to lack sufficient detail to address the core research questions. The remaining 281 articles underwent a thorough review for relevance and suitability. Following this comprehensive assessment, 271 articles were deemed appropriate for further analysis. Ultimately, 111 articles were selected and incorporated into this systematic review (see Figure 2), forming the foundation for the study and findings presented in this paper.

Figure 2: Article Selection Process

|	
Initial Search	•560articles
Duplicate Articles removed	•43articles
Articles No Info	104articles, 302Articles Not Suitable
Cross Referencing	•111articles

Source: Authors own work

Descriptive Analysis of the Studies

The descriptive analysis in this context examines the distribution of studies based on the country of origin, study type, empirical study type, data collection method, the number of publications, and a five-year interval. Furthermore, it describes the number of publications of the literature sources and the number of citations. The following bar charts illustrate some classifications, namely (geographical origin, the number of papers by five-year interval and top five articles based on year of publication and number of citations). The pie charts illustrate the types of descriptive data, empirical study type, and data collection method. The tables show the order of journals ascending as per the number of publications.

Geographical Distribution of Studies

As shown in figure 3 below, many of the studies reviewed were from emerging and developing nations. In detail, the results list shows the USA at the top with 37 studies followed by the UK with 34 studies, Canada with seven studies, Malaysia with 10 studies, Australia with six studies, Sweden with three studies, New Zealand, and China with two studies, Turkey, Singapore, Belgium, South Africa, Indonesia, Lebanon, Ghana, and Denmark with one study each. The other two studies are SLR studies. The reviewed studies were published in developed and emerging nations. More focus in the past has been directed to perspectives from developed countries. However, few studies have been conducted in the developing nation context.
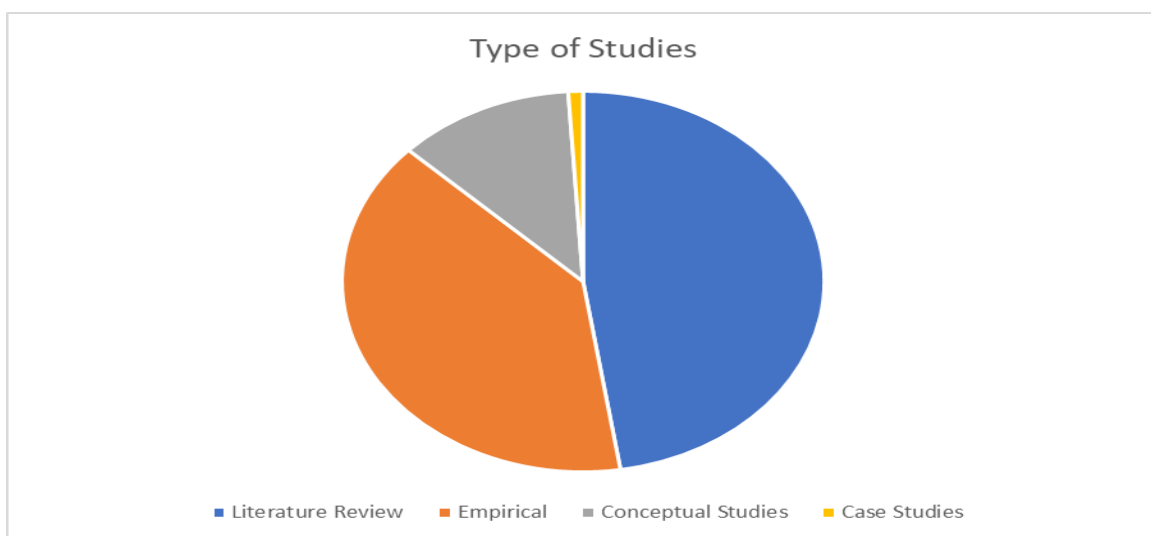
Figure 3: Geographical Distribution of studies
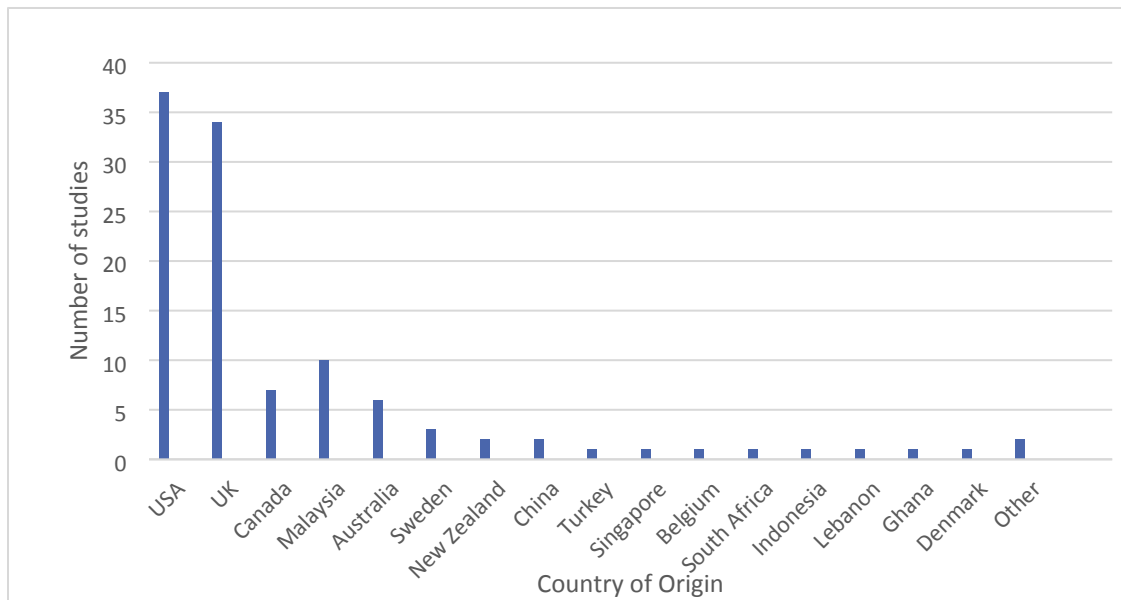
Source: Authors own work

Type of Study
Distributed leadership papers were 53 literature review studies, 44 empirical studies, 13 conceptual studies, and one case study, which corresponds to 48%, 40%, 12% and 0.09%, respectively *(see Figure 4)*.
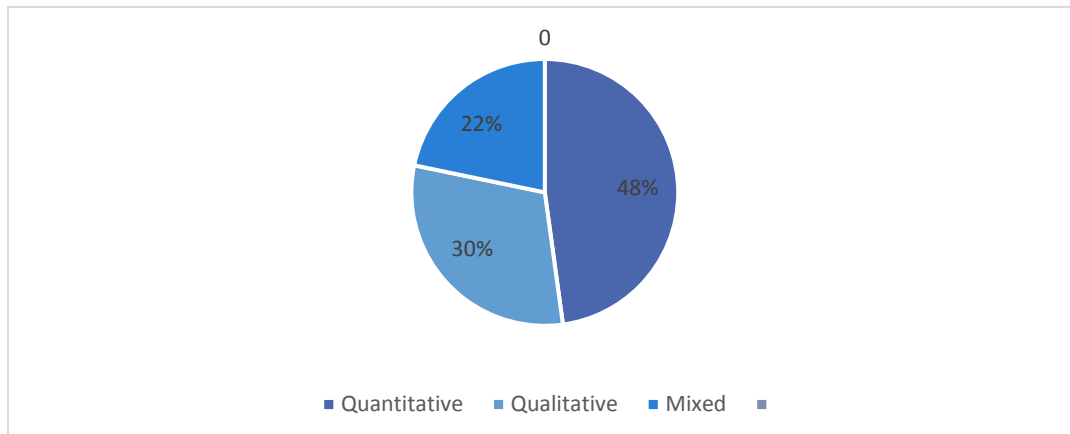
Figure 4: Type of Studies

Source: Authors own work

Empirical Studies

Out of the reviewed distributed leadership empirical studies. Quantitative papers were 22 (48%). The qualitative papers were 14 (30%) and 10 (22%) papers were mixed studies (see figure 5).

Figure 5: Empirical Studies

Source: Authors own work

Method of Data Collection for Empirical Studies

Across the reviewed papers, 19 used questionnaires, seven used questionnaires and interviews, four applied interviews and the same number employed the observations. Further, eight of them adopted interviews and observations. Two applied the SLR, while only two adopted the observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis. This corresponds to 41% Questionnaires, 17% Interviews and Observations, 16% Interviews and Questionnaires, 9% Interviews, 9% Observations, 4% SLR and 4% Documentary analysis (*See Figure 6)*.

**Figure 6:** Data Collection Method
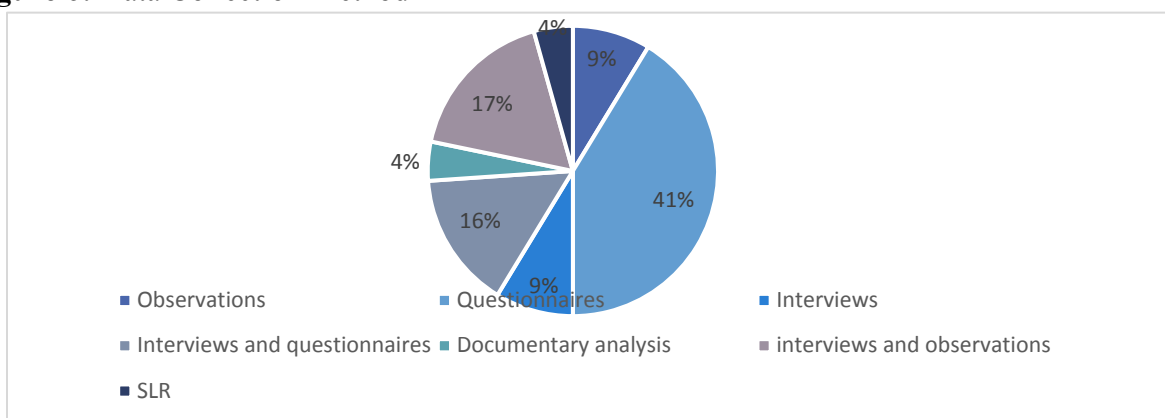
Source: Authors own work

Number of Papers by Five-year Interval

The reviewed studies were categorised into five groups based on the publication time frame. The publications between 1995 and 1999 were three papers, the publications between 2000 and 2004 were nine, the publications between 2005 and 2009 were 23, and the publications between 2010 and 2014 were 44. The publications between 2015 and 2019 were 26 papers and those of 2020 and 2021 *(as the last two years)* were six *(see Figure 7)*.

Figure 7: Number of Papers by Five-year Interval
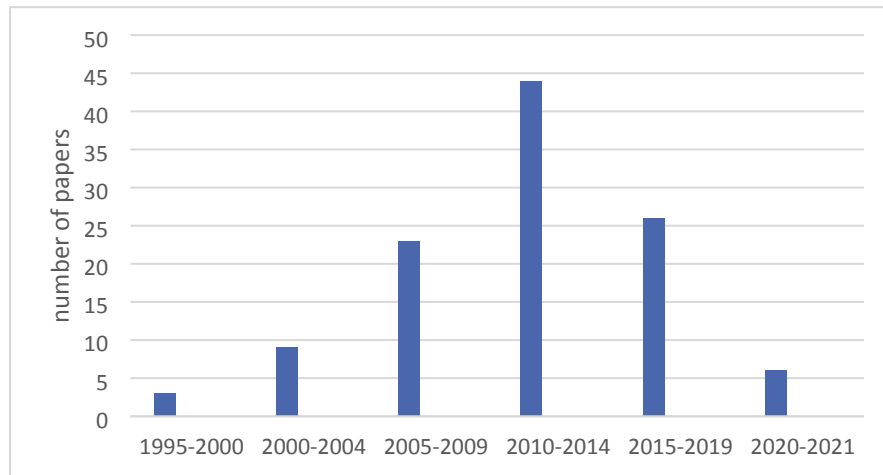
Source: Authors own work

Number of Publications of the Literature Sources

The 111 reviewed papers were distributed in different journals. Most were published in the Educational Management Administration & Leadership, followed by the International Journal of Management Reviews, Leadership, Tourism Management and Curriculum Review, Leadership and Policy in Schools, School Leadership and Management and International Journal of Leadership in Education *(see Table I)*.

Table I: Journals with the highest number of publications

| Type of Journal	Number of articles
Educational Management Administration & Leadership	11
International Journal of Management Reviews	9
Leadership	3
Tourism Management	3
Curriculum Review	2

Leadership and Policy in Schools	2
School Leadership and Management	2
International Journal of Leadership in Education	2

Source: Authors own work

Citations

The articles were also verified and validated against the number of citations. Brudgen and Brereton (2006) wrote the most cited article, with 4073 citations *(see Figure 8)*. The considerable number of citations is justified due to the detailed examination of distributed leadership within the paper. Similarly, many scholars agree that the ideas and baselines of this paper have contributed significantly to the understanding of distributed leadership. Last, this paper was among the first empirical works that explored distributed leadership.

Figure 8: Top Five Articles Based on Year of Publication and Number of Citations
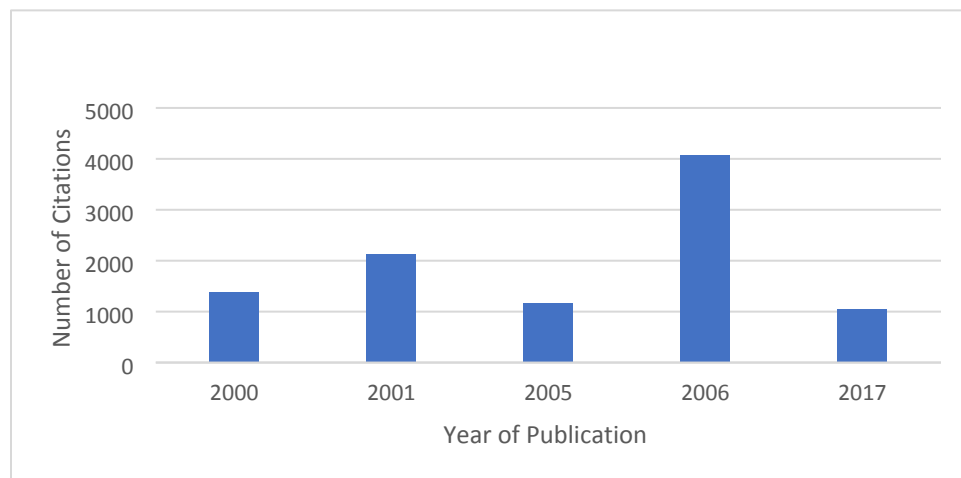
Source: Authors own work

Answering the review questions

This section of the paper provides the answers to the three review questions of the SLR.

RQ1: What is Distributed Leadership?

Distributed leadership is a paradigm that shifts focus from individual leaders to collective practices, emphasising collaboration shared responsibilities, and the dynamic interplay between leaders, followers, and context (Spillane, 2005; Gronn, 2002). Across the 111 reviewed studies, 29 definitions were identified, often overlapping with concepts such as shared, participative, and democratic leadership (Duif et al., 2013; Harris et al., 2007).

The concept has evolved to incorporate a broader range of applications, from educational institutions to healthcare, tourism, and virtual team management. These definitions underline distributed leadership's adaptability to different organisational cultures and structures, reflecting its situational and socially constructed nature. For example, Edwards (2011) highlighted how unique organisational environments shape leadership acts, while Gronn (2000) emphasised the intersection of agency and structure in leadership distribution.

What emerges from these definitions is not merely a typology of leadership styles but an evolving framework that aligns leadership practices with organisational needs. The diversity of interpretations signals the concept's theoretical richness and ambiguity, which future research must address by integrating perspectives across disciplines and cultural contexts. (*See Table II*).

Table II: The Studies and the Definitions of Distributed Leadership

#	Study	Adopted Reference
1	Angelle, P.S., 2010. An organisational perspective of distributed leadership: A portrait of a middle school. *RMLE online*, 33(5), pp.1-16.	It is a collaborative leadership approach in which beliefs and new understandings are shared.
2	Beirne, M., 2017. The reforming appeal of distributed leadership. *British Journal of Healthcare Management*, 23(6), pp.262-270.	It is a culturally sensitive and socially constructive process that is collective to promote the sharing of new ideas.
3	Bennett, N., Wise, C., Woods, P.A. and Harvey, J.A., 2003. Distributed leadership: A review of the literature. *National College for School Leadership*	It is dynamic, relational, inclusive, collaborative and contextually situated leadership.
4	Bolden, R., 2011. Distributed Leadership in Organisations: A Review of Theory and Research. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, Volume 13, pp. 251-269.	This leadership style includes collaborative, collective and coordinated distribution.
5	Brownell, J., 2010. Leadership in the service of hospitality. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly,* 51(3), pp. 363-378.	It is a prominent aspect of a group or network of individuals interacting, requiring openness in leadership

		boundaries and the various distributed leaders.
6	Carter, D. and Dechurch, L., 2012. Networks: The Way Forward for Collectivistic Leadership Research. *Industrial and Organisational Psychology,* 4(412-415), p. 5.	It is a collaborative leadership aspect involving parents, students, the local community, teachers and governors.
7	Cleveland-Innes, M. (2014). Distributed leadership for distributed learning. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning.*	It is a leadership approach in which leadership activities are distributed randomly.
8	Cope, J., Kempster, S. and Parry, K., 2011. Exploring distributed leadership in the small business context. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 13(3), pp.270-285.	It is leadership that promotes the usefulness and involvement of the leadership processes.
9	Currie, G., Lockett, A. and Suhomlinova, O., 2009. The institutionalisation of distributed leadership: A 'Catch-22' in English public services. *Human Relations,* 62(11), pp. 1735-1761.	It is a situation where leaders work for their goals independently.
10	Duif, T., Harrison, C., Van Dartel, N. and Sinyolo, D., 2013. Distributed leadership in practice: A descriptive analysis of distributed leadership in European schools. *School leadership as a driving force for equity and learning. Comparative Perspective. EPNoSL Project, Del*, *4*.	It is shared leadership or participative leadership.
11	Edwards, G., 2011. Concepts of Community: A Framework for Contextualizing Distributed Leadership. *International Journal of Management Review*, 13(3), p. 301–312.	It is constitutive of leadership practice and hence demands identifying leadership acts in more extraordinary ways.
12	Fitzsimons, D., James, K.T. and Denyer, D., 2011. Alternative approaches for studying shared and distributed leadership. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 13(3), pp.313-328.	It is a collective and collaborative way of leading people.
13	Göksoy, S., 2015. Distributed leadership in educational institutions. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 3(4), pp.110-118.	It is a leadership requiring identification and delegation of leadership acts.
14	Gronn, P., 2000. Distributed properties: a new architecture for leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership,* Volume 28, p. 317–338.	It is a leadership that interlinks agency and structure and action and distributed cognition**.**

15	Gunter, H.M., Hall, D. and Mills, C., 2015. Consultants, consultancy and consultocracy in education policymaking in England. *Journal of education policy*, 30(4), pp.518-539.	It is a leadership that offers an analytical framework that helps articulate how leaders have been distributed in the firm.
16	Hairon, S. and Goh, J.W., 2015. Pursuing the elusive construct of distributed leadership: Is the search over?. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 43(5), pp.693-718.	It is a collective leadership approach that promotes knowledge sharing as well as the sharing of new ideas.
17	Harris, A., 2013. Distributed leadership: friend or foe? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 41(5), pp.545-554.	It is a collaborative leadership approach with a delegation of duties.
18	Harris, A., Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P. and Hopkins, D., 2007. Distributed leadership and organisational change: Reviewing the evidence. *Journal of educational change*, 8(4), pp.337-347.	It is a framework as a planned alignment in which guidance, resources and role are assigned to individuals or groups effectively placed to accomplish a particular function or task.
19	Hulpia, H., Devos, G. & Rosseel, Y., 2009. The relationship between the perception of distributed leadership in secondary schools and teachers' and teacher leaders' job satisfaction and organisational commitment. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement,* 20(3), pp. 291-317.	It is the carrying out of different delegation activities in their sphere of influence.
20	Jain, A.K., 2016. The mediating role of job satisfaction in the relationship of vertical trust and distributed leadership in a health care context. *Journal of Modelling in Management*, 11(2), pp.722-738.	It is a leadership involving the sharing of vital information, beliefs, and new ideas.
21	Jones, S., 2014. Distributed leadership: A critical analysis. *Leadership*, 10(2), pp.129-141.	They are regarded as shared leadership or democratic leadership.
22	Leithwood, K., Mascall, B., Strauss, T., Sacks, R., Memon, N. and Yashkina, A., 2007. Distributing leadership to make schools smarter: Taking the ego out of the system. *Leadership and policy in schools*, 6(1), pp.37-67.	It can be used to integrate objectives of different organisational levels by allowing input in decision making across the organisation.
23	Lumby, J., 2013. Distributed leadership: The uses and abuses of power. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 41(5), pp. 581-597.	It is leadership that promotes the usefulness and involvement of the leadership processes.
24	Mascall, B., Leithwood, K., Straus, T. and Sacks, R., 2008. The relationship between distributed leadership and teachers' academic optimism. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 46(2), pp.214-228.	It is an approach that allows leaders to delegate duties, share vital information and receive feedback.

25	Mayrowetz, D., 2008. Making sense of distributed leadership: Exploring the multiple usages of the concept in the field. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(3), 424-435.	It is a leadership approach in which functions are distributed randomly.
26	McKee, L., Charles, K., Dixon-Woods, M., Willars, J. and Martin, G., 2013. 'New' and distributed leadership in quality and safety in health care, or old and hierarchical? An interview study with strategic stakeholders. *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*, 18(2_suppl), pp.11-19.	It is how a leader works to meet their goals by undertaking delegative activities.
27	MacBeath, J., 2005. Leadership as distributed: A matter of practice. *School leadership and management*, *25*(4), pp.349-366.	It is formal, pragmatic, incremental, and opportunistic strategic and cultural.
28	Spillane, J.P., 2005, June. Distributed leadership. *The educational forum* (Vol. 69, No. 2, pp. 143-150). Taylor & Francis Group.	It is a leadership that encompasses social and situational contexts and aspects of language, physical environment, and organisational systems.
29	Supovitz, J.A. and Tognatta, N., 2015. The Impact of Distributed Leadership on Collaborative Team Decision Making (vol 12, pg 101, 2013). *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 14(2), pp.256-256.	It is constitutive of leadership practice with a high demand for identifying leadership acts in more incredible ways.

Source: Authors own work

RQ2. What themes have emerged from the study of distributed leadership?

The review of the 111 papers categorises distributed leadership into three themes: the behavioural perspective, context perspective and performance perspective *(see Table III)*. The categories and themes provide a more in-depth understanding of distributed leadership. The existing literature reveals three primary themes related to distributed leadership. First, the behavioural perspective focuses on leadership interactions and their impact on team dynamics (Spillane, 2005). Second, the contextual perspective highlights sectoral influences, with education and healthcare providing fertile grounds for distributed leadership research (Harris et al., 2007). Finally, the performance perspective examines the outcomes of distributed leadership, including team efficiency and organisational adaptability (Mascall et al., 2008). These themes inform the findings of this study, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding distributed leadership.

Behavioural Perspective
The behavioural perspective focuses on leadership as a social process involving interaction, collaboration, and mutual influence among team members. Studies within this theme highlight the significance of relational dynamics, such as trust and communication, in fostering effective distributed leadership practices (Spillane, 2005; Edwards, 2011). For instance, Harris (2013) found that distributed leadership promotes knowledge sharing and collective problem-solving,

leading to enhanced organisational learning. However, discrepancies in how leadership behaviours manifest across contexts suggest the need for more nuanced, sector-specific investigations.

Contextual Perspective

This theme explores the influence of organisational and cultural contexts on distributed leadership. The review identified significant geographic and sectoral variations, disproportionately emphasising educational settings in developed nations (Harris et al., 2007; Angelle, 2010). Studies from developing countries remain sparse, and the underrepresentation of sectors such as manufacturing and technology indicates a critical gap. Cultural dimensions, such as hierarchical versus collectivist orientations, further shape how distributed leadership is enacted and perceived, underscoring the importance of contextual sensitivity in future research (Beirne, 2017).

Performance Perspective

The performance perspective examines distributed leadership's impact on organisational outcomes, including team cohesion, innovation, and efficiency. Empirical evidence supports a positive relationship between distributed leadership and key performance metrics. For example, Dinham (2005) demonstrated its role in achieving outstanding educational results, while Mascall et al. (2008) linked distributed leadership to increased teacher optimism and job satisfaction. However, these findings are predominantly sector-specific and lack generalizability, highlighting the need for cross-sectoral studies that explore distributed leadership's broader applicability.

Table III: Category of Papers/articles based on Themes

Theme	Key Insights	Prominent Studies
Behavioural Perspective	Focuses on leadership as a social process involving interaction, collaboration, and trust.	Spillane (2005); Harris (2013); Gronn (2002)
Contextual Perspective	Examines how organisational and cultural contexts shape distributed leadership practices.	Angelle (2010); Beirne (2017); Oborn et al. (2013)
Performance Perspective	Explores outcomes such as team cohesion, innovation, and organisational efficiency resulting from distributed leadership practices.	Dinham (2005); Mascall et al. (2008); Harris et al. (2007)

Source: Authors own work

RQ3.Where are the gaps in the research on distributed leadership?

The systematic literature review (SLR) identified four critical gaps in distributed leadership research: empirical, theoretical, population, and methodological. These gaps, rooted in the existing body of knowledge, represent significant limitations in advancing a comprehensive understanding of distributed leadership and its applicability across various organisational contexts.

Empirical gap

Research on distributed leadership remains predominantly focused on educational contexts, particularly schools and higher education institutions (Harris, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2007). Other sectors, such as healthcare, technology, and manufacturing, are underrepresented despite their growing reliance on collaborative leadership models (Beirne, 2017; Oborn et al., 2013). This sectoral concentration limits the transferability of insights to diverse organisational environments. Furthermore, cross-sectional studies dominate the empirical landscape, offering a limited understanding of distributed leadership practices' longitudinal impact and evolution over time (Mascall et al., 2008). The absence of longitudinal research constrains the ability to evaluate how distributed leadership adapts to organisational changes and dynamic challenges.

The empirical landscape of distributed leadership research is heavily concentrated in educational settings, with over 80% of reviewed studies focused on schools and universities. In contrast, critical sectors such as healthcare (7%) and manufacturing (3%) remain underexplored. This imbalance limits the generalizability of distributed leadership frameworks and neglects these industries' unique challenges and opportunities. Furthermore, studies from developing nations are sparse, constituting less than 10% of the total research, which reflects a significant gap in understanding distributed leadership within diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts.

Theoretical gap

The theoretical foundations of distributed leadership lack cohesion and depth, with limited integration of interdisciplinary frameworks. Existing studies primarily describe leadership behaviours and outcomes without exploring underlying theoretical constructs, such as the role of social identity in shaping leadership dynamics (Haslam et al., 2003; Spillane, 2005). Similarly, the interplay between distributed leadership and traditional hierarchical models remains underexplored despite its critical importance for understanding leadership transitions in hybrid organisations (Gronn, 2002). Addressing these theoretical voids requires synthesising insights from psychology, sociology, and organisational studies to construct robust, integrative frameworks that capture distributed leadership's complexity.

Population Gap

The review reveals a significant geographic imbalance in distributed leadership research. As illustrated in Figure 9, most studies originate from developed nations, particularly North America and Europe, which collectively account for over 80% of the reviewed literature. Developing

nations remain substantially underrepresented, contributing less than 10% of the total research output. This regional disparity is consistent with previous findings, highlighting the dominance of leadership research conducted in high-income countries (Harris, 2007; Klar et al., 2016).

The lack of research in developing nations neglects the socio-cultural and economic diversity that may shape leadership practices differently in these contexts. For instance, distributed leadership in collectivist cultures may prioritise group-oriented decision-making, whereas individualistic cultures may emphasise personal autonomy (Hofstede, 2001). This gap underscores the need for inclusive research that captures the complexities and variations of distributed leadership across diverse regions and cultural frameworks.

Figure 9: Regional Distribution of Studies
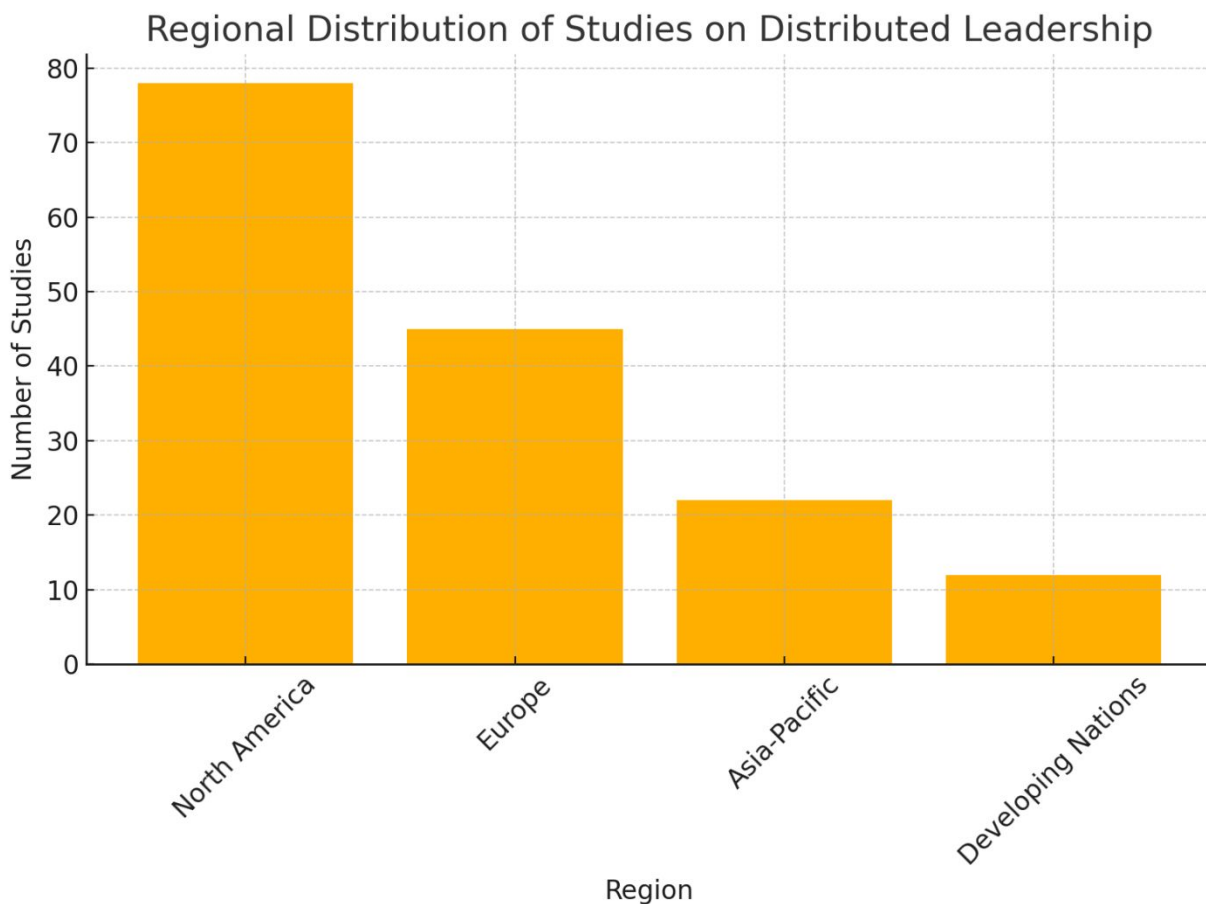
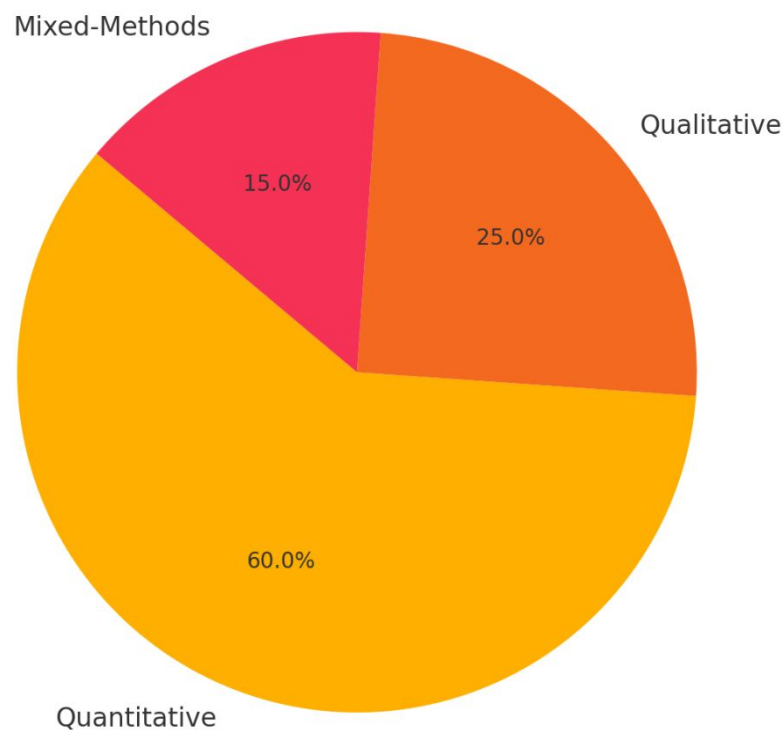**Source: Authors own work**

Methodological gap

The methodological approaches in distributed leadership research are heavily skewed towards quantitative methods. Figure 10 shows that 60% of studies utilise quantitative methodologies, such as surveys and questionnaires, which align with previous observations of the dominance of statistical methods in leadership studies (Tranfield et al., 2003; Spillane, 2005). While these

methods provide broad generalisations, they often fail to capture the depth and complexity of distributed leadership, particularly in context-sensitive environments.

Qualitative methods, such as case studies and ethnographic research, remain underutilised, accounting for only 25% of the reviewed studies. This underrepresentation limits the exploration of the social dynamics and interactions that underpin distributed leadership (Harris, 2013). Moreover, mixed-methods research constitutes just 15% of the literature despite its potential to combine the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Creswell, 2014). These methodological gaps highlight the need for greater diversity in research designs to advance a more comprehensive understanding of distributed leadership's impact across organisational settings.

Figure 10: Distribution of Methodological Approaches in Studies

Distribution of Methodological Approaches in Studies

Source: Authors own work

Implications

Bridging these gaps offers the potential to enrich distributed leadership literature significantly. Expanding research into non-educational sectors and developing nations will provide a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of distributed leadership, enhancing its global relevance. Integrating interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives and adopting diverse, robust methodologies will allow more profound insights into leadership dynamics, fostering theoretically sound and practically applicable frameworks across organisational contexts.

Implications for Scholars

Future research should prioritise exploring distributed leadership in underrepresented healthcare, technology, and manufacturing sectors. With their reliance on collaboration and innovation, these fields present unique opportunities to test and refine distributed leadership theories. Researchers are also encouraged to expand the geographic focus of their studies, particularly to developing countries, where socio-economic and cultural factors may influence leadership dynamics in distinct ways. Employing mixed-methods approaches and longitudinal designs will enable a deeper understanding of the temporal and contextual factors that shape distributed leadership and its outcomes. These efforts can address the empirical and methodological gaps, providing the field with richer insights and more generalisable findings.

Implications for Practitioners

Practitioners across industries can harness the principles of distributed leadership to enhance collaboration, innovation, and organisational performance. For instance, healthcare leaders can improve patient outcomes and team satisfaction by fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and shared decision-making. Similarly, distributed leadership in technology sectors can empower teams to address complex problems, autonomously driving innovation and adaptability. Tailored leadership development programs that emphasise distributed leadership's core principles, such as delegation, trust, and accountability, can help practitioners build more cohesive and high-performing teams.

Implications for Policymakers

Policymakers play a crucial role in creating an environment conducive to the adoption and effectiveness of distributed leadership. Investing in leadership training programs that emphasise collaboration, shared responsibility, and adaptive practices is essential, especially in traditionally hierarchical sectors. These programs could incorporate experiential learning modules to simulate distributed leadership scenarios. Additionally, targeted funding for research in underrepresented regions and sectors can ensure a more inclusive understanding of distributed leadership, facilitating policies that support its application across diverse organisational and cultural contexts.

Study Limitations

Within one form of distributed leadership model, we recommend further studies to challenge the assumptions of existing distributed leadership models made for teachers and the often-cited arguments that such practices are more democratically equal for teachers. There is a limited number of studies that extend to business areas. However, inherent to the research design was the lack of differentiation between the leadership style required from senior/executive management and middle management in organisations and the lack of differentiation among sectors, such as manufacturing and services: a different style of leadership may be required in various industries and across organisations of varying sizes. Future research should explore distributed leadership in underrepresented sectors, such as technology and manufacturing, to broaden its applicability. Comparative studies between developing and developed countries could provide insights into how cultural and economic factors shape leadership models. Additionally, longitudinal studies are necessary to track how distributed leadership evolves in response to technological advancements and organisational changes. These directions will enrich the field and ensure its continued relevance.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review thoroughly examines distributed leadership, synthesising its conceptualisations, thematic dimensions, and research gaps to advance understanding and guide future inquiry. Distributed leadership emerges as a dynamic and multifaceted approach, defined by shared responsibilities, collaborative decision-making, and context-sensitive practices. Despite its widespread application in various domains, its theoretical and empirical boundaries remain underdeveloped, necessitating deeper exploration.

Three primary themes dominate the literature: behavioural, contextual, and performance perspectives. The behavioural perspective emphasises distributed leadership as a social process rooted in interaction, trust, and collaboration. The contextual perspective highlights the significant influence of cultural, sectoral, and organisational settings, while the performance perspective examines its impact on team cohesion, innovation, and organisational outcomes. These themes collectively underscore the versatility of distributed leadership but also reveal critical limitations in its current conceptualisation and application.

The review identifies four key gaps in the research. Empirically, distributed leadership remains disproportionately studied within educational contexts, with limited application to other critical sectors, such as healthcare, technology, and manufacturing. The theoretical foundations of distributed leadership lack coherence, particularly in integrating interdisciplinary insights and addressing its interplay with hierarchical models. Population-wise, the geographic focus is heavily skewed toward developed nations, neglecting the unique socio-cultural dynamics of leadership in developing countries. Methodologically, the dominance of quantitative approaches and the

scarcity of qualitative and mixed-methods studies limit the field's ability to capture distributed leadership's nuanced, context-dependent nature.

Addressing these gaps provides a pathway for advancing the field. Expanding empirical research into underrepresented sectors and regions can provide a richer, more inclusive understanding of distributed leadership. Theoretical development should focus on integrating diverse disciplinary perspectives to build cohesive frameworks that bridge conceptual ambiguities. Methodological diversification, including longitudinal studies and mixed-methods approaches, is essential to uncover distributed leadership's evolving dynamics and practical implications across various organisational contexts.

This study offers significant contributions to the field by providing a validated baseline for future research. For scholars, it delineates a roadmap for addressing critical gaps and enhancing distributed leadership studies' theoretical and methodological robustness. For practitioners, it provides actionable insights for implementing distributed leadership effectively, fostering innovation, collaboration, and organisational adaptability. Policymakers can leverage these findings to develop training programs and policies that promote distributed leadership practices in diverse sectors and regions.

In conclusion, this review reaffirms the relevance of distributed leadership as a critical leadership paradigm and highlights the urgent need for more nuanced, interdisciplinary, and context-sensitive research. By bridging the identified gaps, future studies can unlock the transformative potential of distributed leadership, ensuring its impact on organisational performance and leadership development globally.

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