A Qualitative Analysis of Distributed Leadership and Teacher Perspective of Principal Leadership Effectiveness

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Abstract

In recent years, expectations for schools have increased to the point where they are now expected to ensure that all students are learning at high levels. This is a daunting, complex, and ambitious aspiration that requires leadership beyond that provided by the principal. The purpose of this qualitative study was to analyze teachers’ perception of principal practices that positively or negatively influence distributed leadership in a school, as well as teachers’ perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of such efforts. In doing so, this researcher will improve ways in which a principal can best support a distributed leadership model.

The study focused on the perspectives of 57 middle school teachers from one suburban school district in Central Massachusetts. Data collection involved the following components:

a) An anonymous online questionnaire to obtain information regarding teachers’ perceptions of distributed leadership and a principal’s influence on distributed leadership in a school,

b) A series of three focus groups, heterogeneously grouped to represent a cross-section of teachers and specialists, discussing participants’ personal experiences in the context of distributed leadership.

c) Reflective note-taking to assist with recall of group dynamics and information shared.

These data were thematically coded and analyzed in order to identify principal practices that positively or negatively influenced distributed leadership in a school, along with the benefits and drawbacks of such efforts. The findings provide teachers’ perceptions of principal practices that support distributed leadership. Results of the study are relevant to principals and school leaders.
who seek to better understand what a principal does (or does not do) to influence distributed leadership in a school, while considering the benefits and drawbacks of these efforts.

*Keywords: teacher leadership, distributed leadership, shared leadership, collaboration, professional learning communities*
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Chapter I: Introduction

Problem Statement

The pressure for improved student achievement has never been greater as schools face significant challenges to respond to the demands associated with preparing students for the 21st century and standards-based reform (Elmore, 2000). The enormous weight of the many associated expectations rests traditionally upon the school principal (Danielson, 2007). Indeed, according to Fullan (1998), “the constant bombardment of new tasks and the continual interruptions keep principals off balance. Not only are the demands fragmented and incoherent, but even good ideas have a short shelf life as initiatives are dropped in favor of the latest new policy” (p. 6). As such, researchers investigating school leadership contend, that no one person can effectively lead a school, and recommend a collaborative model that involves the participation of school faculty through shared decision-making as defined by a distributed leadership model (Gronn, 2008; Spillane, 2005; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Blase & Blase; 1994). A distributed leadership model is one in which teachers and principals share leadership roles (Spillane, 2005). Though research contends that distributed leadership is a valuable pathway to school improvement and a necessary skill for principals in the current educational environment, it remains unclear how principals influence the course of distributed leadership in their schools (Crow, Hausman, & Scribner, 2002).

Distributed leadership is evident in schools where teachers and principals share leadership functions including facilitating grade level curriculum meetings, coordinating professional development opportunities, and serving as school representatives on district-wide sub committees. It is important to note, however, that distributed leadership is a way of thinking about leadership within an organization. In other words, it is a perspective rather than a
prescription for how leadership should be accomplished (Spillane, 2005, 2006). Though it has been demonstrated to be a successful model for school management, it has not been clearly defined as to how principals should go about developing and implementing a distributed leadership model (Harris & Spillane, 2008). What is known is that in order for distributed leadership to take hold and thrive in a school, principals need to determine ways to empower teachers to assume leadership opportunities with the ultimate goal of influencing one another to improve student learning, which is the mission of all schools (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). In order to do this, the role of the principal must change, as this requires a different set of facilitative skills that, in turn, transforms the role of the teacher (Barth, 2001; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). It cannot be presumed, however, that principals understand how this can be accomplished. As noted previously, with distributed leadership practices as yet undefined as to how these changes occur, further investigation is needed. The problem of practice explored in this research is the gap between the concept of distributed leadership and teachers’ perceptions of this concept when a principal enacts a distributed leadership model in a school. This research investigated the experiences and insights of teachers to determine some of the ways in which the practices of a school principal can foster and support positive outcomes through distributed leadership and sought to identify the benefits and drawbacks of such efforts.

**Significance of the Problem**

Given the expectations that schools have upon them in the education reform era, it is not possible for the leadership of the principal alone to enable the school to meet those demands. Schools are expected to do more than ever before, so the idea that one formal leader can meet those demands by adhering to the policies and mandates set before them is not realistic (Blase & Blase, 1994, 1999; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996; Spillane, 2005, 2006). While principals are
significantly impacted by these demands, teachers are also at the pressure point of such policies (Achinstein, 2002; Hallinger & Heck, 1996). Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) observed that many previous reform efforts, often created and communicated by administrators or others who are either not associated with the school or lack any classroom teaching experience, “sent a message to teachers that they were incapable of creating adequate learning environments for their students. The teachers rarely saw the strategies as relevant to their work. The teachers were viewed as individuals who needed ‘fixing’” (p. 41). In other words, these efforts and mandates that were intended to be supportive of teachers were viewed with disdain and disappointment, as teachers found them to be ineffective. Researchers contend that the key to engaging teachers in effective reform is to not only include them as professionals in the work of improving student learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour & Marzano, 2011), but tap into their power to help lead these efforts in their schools. To the extent that a distributed leadership model can facilitate this, how principals make this shift needs to be further explored.

In its 1996 report on improving teaching in the United States, the National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future (NCTAF) clearly stated that in order to improve, schools must become places where teachers are treated as professionals and where they are allowed the opportunity to collaborate. DuFour and Eaker (1998) proposed that schools become professional learning communities that include teachers in all aspects of school improvement and emphasized the importance of this concept. They argue that in order to achieve a true professional learning community, “principals must foster this image of the teacher as a leader and demonstrate that they regard teachers as fellow leaders rather than subordinates” (p. 198).

Promoting, cultivating, and utilizing a distributed leadership model is a potentially powerful way for principals to involve teachers meaningfully in the improvement of public
education (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990, 1999), but it must be understood from the teachers’ point of view in order to successfully occur. Because the norm in American schools has been and continues to be the bureaucratic model where teachers are workers and administrators are managers, research and practice in educational leadership has mainly focused on the administrator as leader. Virtually all of the literature on teacher leadership cites the importance of the principal’s influence as a key determinant of whether teacher leadership is cultivated in a school. Barth (2001), Crowther et al. (2002), Donaldson (2001), DuFour and Eaker (1998), Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001), and Lambert (2003) all make specific reference to the crucial role that the principal plays in supporting teacher leadership. Crowther et al. (2002) stated, “[W]here we have seen teacher leadership begin to flourish, principals have actively supported it, or, at least, encouraged it” (p. 33). Based on his work with teacher leaders in Rhode Island, Barth (2001) said that principals can “inspire a culture of teacher leadership in their schools” (p. 110).

Ultimately, the goal of any school is to provide an environment where student learning takes precedence over everything else. Barth (2001) advised that schools work to become communities of learners where the leadership of the principal leads to teacher development which leads to successful student development and where teacher leadership shapes educational practice and the profession of teaching. Distributed leadership is evolving as one vehicle to accomplish this goal (Barth, 2001; Blase & Blase, 1999; Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; Fullan, 2001; Marzano, 2003). However, further investigation is needed to determine how principals can influence its practice.
Intellectual Goals

Maxwell (2005) suggested five possible intellectual goals for qualitative studies: to understand the meaning of events, situations, experiences, and actions; to understand a particular context; to identify unanticipated phenomena; to understand the process by which events or actions take place; and to develop causal explanations. The intellectual goals for this study were to understand teachers’ perceptions of a principal’s practices of distributed leadership and to identify the benefits and drawbacks of such practices, in order to improve teaching and learning. These goals emerged from both the researcher’s observations in one school and a review of literature that explored how distributed leadership is fostered in an organization. Identifying teachers’ perceptions may provide insight into how principals can develop distributed leadership in a school community.

Practical Goals

This study investigated teachers’ perceptions of principal practices in order to identify how principals influence teachers’ decisions to assume leadership roles in a school and to gain an understanding of teachers’ perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of such efforts. By engaging in collaborative dialogue with teachers and listening and responding to their questions and comments, this researcher sought to become better equipped with practices that foster and support distributed leadership at Lydon Middle School. Further, the researcher identified teachers’ perceptions of principal practices that had either a positive or negative influence on the school community and outlined the benefits and drawbacks of such practices. In accomplishing these goals, the study not only provides solutions to the problem of practice, but offers insights into the field of education, as schools and districts confront increasing challenges in meeting local, state, and national mandates.
Summary of Research Questions

Two research questions guided this study. The questions are:

**Question 1.** What principal practices do teachers perceive as having a positive or negative influence on distributed leadership at Lydon Middle School?

**Question 2.** What do teachers perceive as the benefits and drawbacks of a principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school?

Participants involved in this study provided insight into the ways in which distributed leadership positively and/or negatively influences a school and considered the benefits and drawbacks of a principal’s efforts to support a distributed leadership model.

Document Organization and Content

This dissertation is presented in five sections and is organized in a way that provides the reader with a framework for understanding what distributed leadership is and how teachers perceive that a school principal positively or negatively influences distributed leadership practices in a middle school. The theoretical framework of distributed leadership, and its relevance to the problem of practice, forms the foundation for the study and is outlined in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 reviews the literature to gain a better understanding of what distributed leadership is, how teachers emerge into communities of teacher leaders, ways in which professional learning communities contribute to how leadership is practiced in a school, why trust is essential to collaborative practice, and finally, how distributed leadership has emerged as a vehicle for improvement. Identified gaps in the existing bodies of work affirm the goals and establish the merit of this additional research. Chapter 3 consists of the research design of the study, the research questions, methodology, information about the site and participant demographic data, data collection methods, and data analysis. In addition, qualitative
approaches including survey and focus group design, data gathering, coding and thematic analysis are described. Further, the steps that were taken to ensure validity and credibility, including adherence to strict ethical research standards and protection of study participants from potential harm are included. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the findings, draws conclusions about their relevance and presents the study’s significant contributions in the ways that principals will positively influence distributed leadership in a school, with an understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of such efforts. Appendices include all pertinent supporting documentation that was used in the study or referenced within the report of findings.

**Theoretical Framework**

Distributing leadership in a school community provides an opportunity for teachers to influence meaningful collaborative practices through shared leadership. Spillane (2005) explained that distributed leadership is a perspective—a conceptual or diagnostic tool for thinking about school leadership. It is not a detailed outline for effective leadership, nor a description of how school leadership should be exercised. This type of leadership focuses on what people do and how and why they do it. Using a distributed leadership framework, leadership practice is viewed as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situation. Leadership practice is not viewed as the result of a leader’s knowledge and skill, but is viewed instead as the interactions between people and the circumstances surrounding them. It is through these interactions, rather than actions, that leadership practice is understood, as the interactions inform, influence, and construct leadership practice.

**Distributed Leadership Theory**

Distributed Leadership Theory framed this research and informed the problem of
practice; namely, how does a school principal influence distributed leadership practices in order that all students are learning at high levels? As mentioned previously, this is a daunting, complex, and ambitious goal that requires leadership beyond that provided by the principal. At the middle school where this researcher serves as principal, a distributed leadership model is emerging, yet it is uncertain what is influencing the development of this model. This researcher’s interest involved analyzing the practices, actions, and structures that teachers perceive to cultivate the practice of distributed leadership. Distributed leadership theory advises that a principal develop leadership throughout an organization, in individuals and in teams, in order to meet the increasing demands of education, and specifically the policy measures, mandates, and calls for continuous improvement (Gronn, 2000). Distributed leadership theory is at its core a theory of practice as viewed from both social and situational aspects, and offers a lens through which to reflect on leadership as it relates to the inner workings of a school community consisting of various stakeholders (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001).

Distributed leadership theory promotes the decentralization of the leader within the organization and supports the idea that every individual has an opportunity to demonstrate leadership in a distributed capacity. Leadership in this context is fluid rather than individually fixed, as a specific role defined phenomenon within an organization (Gronn, 2003). This type of leadership does not imply that everyone in a group is a leader, but opens the possibility for a more collective leadership approach (Harris, 2003). Central to distributed leadership is the capacity to work together to provide leadership using collaborative measures. Further, distributed leadership is a framework whereby leadership practice is examined and organized in a way that is inclusive of all in the organization. Leadership is viewed as a stream of activities and interactions in which organizational constituents find themselves engaged (Gronn, 2000).
Spillane (2006) explained,

What distributed leadership, like all leadership theory, can do to benefit practice, is to provide a framework that helps school leaders and others interpret and reflect on practice as a basis of rethinking and revising it. In this way, a distributed leadership approach can be a powerful tool for transforming the practice of leadership. (p. 87)

It is this framework that forms the foundation of distributed leadership practice and fosters its development.

Distributed leadership theory provides a framework for understanding and identifying teachers’ perceptions of the practices and structures that either limit and/or broaden distributed leadership practices in a school. It highlights the ways in which distributing leadership throughout a school community influences teaching and learning, school culture, collaboration, and motivation of those within the organization. Little (1990) discussed the benefits of distributed leadership, as it pertained to collegiality,

The reason to pursue the study and practice of collegiality is that, presumably, something is gained when teachers work together and something is lost when they do not; in effect, the perceived benefits must be great enough that the time teachers spend together can compete with time spent in other ways, on other priorities that are equally compelling or more immediate. (p. 166)

It was the intent of this researcher to gain a deeper understanding of teacher perception of principal practices that positively or negatively influence distributed leadership in a school. Data from an anonymous survey and focus groups were used to inform this research.

Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001) provided a theoretical framework for distributed leadership. Embedded within the framework included the “argument…that school
leadership is best understood as a distributed practice, *stretched over* the school’s social and situational contexts” (p. 23). This *stretching over* is illustrated in much of the research over the past decade and continues today under the theoretical framework of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2005). Distributed leadership is inclusive of all members of an organization—not simply those in formal authority roles. This type of leadership is embedded within the organization and is realized through social interactions between and among the members of the organization (Crow, Hausman, & Scribner, 2002; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). It is non-exclusive and can be realized through the social interactions between *leaders and followers* (Spillane, 2005). Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001) contend:

> Attending to situation as something more than a container for leaders’ practice, we argue that socio-cultural context is a constitutive element of leadership practice, fundamentally shaping its form. In our distributed view, leadership practice is constituted in the interaction of leaders and their social and material situations. (p. 27)

Specific descriptions regarding principal practices that are used in schools to support a distributed leadership model need to be further explored. This study investigated teachers’ perceptions of principal practices in order to identify how principals influence teachers’ decisions to assume leadership roles in a school and to gain an understanding of teachers’ perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of such efforts.

Central to distributed leadership is the opportunity and capacity to collaborate with team members and share leadership responsibilities among all members of a school community. This is different than delegating responsibilities, as described by Diamond (2007),

> …distributed leadership moves beyond trying to understand leadership through the actions and beliefs of single leaders…It is constituted through the interaction of leaders,
teachers, and the situation as they influence instructional practice. Distributed leadership is a powerful way to understand leadership activity in schools in more complex and interconnected ways. (p. 156)

Distributed leadership is not absent of conflict, as it involves shared decision-making. In order for decision-making to be shared effectively, teachers need to be taught how to engage in this process. School principals are called upon to provide teachers with the training needed to develop effective facilitation and collaboration skills. This training results in a common understanding of how to facilitate meetings and other initiatives in order to lead effectively.

A principal’s influence on teacher leadership, school culture, shared decision-making and collaborative practice forms the foundation from which distributed leadership theory informed this research. Central to effective distributed leadership practice is the willingness and capacity of individuals within an organization to work together to improve their practice. Sergiovanni (1984) described this work as a participative approach to leadership. He wrote, “The burdens of leadership will be less if leadership functions and roles are shared and if the concept of leadership density were to emerge as a viable replacement for principal leadership” (p. 13). This approach brings faculty together and reduces the burden on the school principal.

Copland (2001) celebrated the potential of easing the burden on principals and distributing leadership throughout the organization. In doing so, the principal is not expected to be the “superhead,” but rather the facilitator of leadership opportunities (p. 6). Copland contended, “Leadership is embedded in various organizational contexts within school communities, not centrally vested in a person or an office…exciting work is under way that explores specific ways in which schools might distribute leadership more broadly…[There is] a need to identify and support aspects of leadership beyond the role of the principal” (p. 6). This
distribution of leadership within an organization is accomplished after identifying clear, observable and measurable goals. One of those goals includes formulating “the design and enactment of tasks involving the identification, acquisition, allocation, coordination and use of social, material and cultural resources tied to the core work of the organization” (Spillane et al., 2001; Spillane, 2006). Distributed Leadership Theory provides a framework for understanding the leadership within an organization and how that leadership influences and is influenced by, the development of its members.

Distributed leadership emerged as a shared practice by individuals seeking to collaboratively share responsibilities in an organization. Bush (2003) placed Distributed Leadership Theory in the context of shared collegiality and discussed Distributed Leadership Theory as a “collegial model” (pp. 64–65). He defined the collegial model as follows,

Collegial models assume that organizations determine policy and make decisions through a process of discussion leading to consensus. Power is shared among some or all members of the organization who are thought to have a shared understanding about the aims of the institution. (p. 64)

Bush (2003) discussed the major features of collegial models, which included the following:

1. They are strongly normative in orientation…collegial approaches in particular reflect the prescriptive view that management ought to be based on agreement. It is an idealistic model rather than one that is founded firmly in practice.

2. Collegial models seem to be particularly appropriate for organizations such as schools and colleges that have significant numbers of professional staff. Teachers possess authority arising directly from their knowledge and skill…Collegial models assume that professionals also have a right to share in the wider decision-making process.
Shared decisions are likely to be better informed and are also much more likely to be implemented effectively.

3. Collegial models assume a common set of values by members of the organization. These may arise from the socialization which occurs during training and the early years of professional practice.

4. The size of decision-making groups is an important element in collegial management. They have to be sufficiently small to enable everyone to be heard…The collegial model deals with this problem of scale by building in the assumption that staff have formal representation within the various decision-making bodies…Where heads seek the advice of colleagues before making a decision…the process is one of consultation, whereas the essence of collegiality is participation in decision-making.

5. Collegial models assume that decisions are reached by consensus rather than division or conflict…The case for consensual decision-making rests in part on the ethical dimension of collegiality. It is regarded as wholly appropriate to involve people in the decisions, which affect their professional lives (pp. 65-67).

Collegial models are distributive in nature and involve members of the community in decision-making, but questions remain regarding how teachers perceive principals to influence collegiality, collaboration, and leadership. Distributed leadership theory supports these questions, but a further investigation into the literature is needed to understand its specific relevance to the problem of practice. The next section summarizes the bodies of scholarly literature that currently exist, and includes pertinent information regarding the emergence of distributed leadership through the lenses of teacher leadership, professional communities, and the role of trust in collaborative practice.
Chapter II: Literature Review

In recent years, expectations for schools have increased to the point where schools are now expected to ensure that all students learn at high levels. The reference made to all students includes students who are English language learners; students diagnosed with moderate to severe learning disabilities; and students who suffer from mental, physical, and/or emotional disabilities. This is a complex and ambitious aspiration that requires leadership and skill beyond that provided by the principal. Elmore (2000) characterized the issues facing both policy makers and school leaders as they seek to improve their work: “Schools are being asked by elected officials—policy leaders, if you will—to do things they are largely unequipped to do. School leaders are being asked to assume responsibilities they are largely unequipped to assume” (p. 2).

Embedded within his response is a call for distributed leadership:

This shift requires first, a redefinition of leadership, away from role-based conceptions and toward distributive views. Distributed leadership…derives from the fact that large scale improvement requires concerted action among people with different areas of expertise and a mutual respect that stems from an appreciation of the knowledge and skill requirements of different roles. (pp. 35–36)

Smylie, Conley, and Marks (2002) described specific principal behaviors that may support teacher leadership:

Principals may be required to provide examples, incentives, guidance, and support, as well as the means of accountability. It may fall to them to keep teacher leadership focused on meaningful work. Principals need to know how to develop, support, and manage these new forms of leadership. (p. 182)

Further attempts to synthesize distributed and transformational leadership continued in the early
part of the last decade and continue to emphasize the centrality of collaboration to do this work today.

Education in the 21st century has become quite complex, as schools and educators are confronted with the important task of preparing students for a global world that is changing at a rapid rate. In the state of Massachusetts, requirements outlined in the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 significantly influenced teachers’ and principals’ practices and challenged the requirements that teachers are expected to meet in order to be considered highly qualified. These mandates have occurred in an effort to hold schools and communities accountable for teacher quality and student performance. In order to focus efforts on the increasing policy demands placed on schools, principals are called upon to strengthen teacher and student performance; a task that can be purposefully accomplished through a distributed leadership model where teachers serve as teacher leaders.

At the middle school where this researcher serves as principal, a distributed leadership model is emerging, yet it is uncertain what is influencing and sustaining the development of this model. This study investigated teachers’ perceptions of principal practices in order to identify how principals influence teachers’ decisions to assume leadership roles in a school and to gain an understanding of teachers’ perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of such efforts. As a backdrop and context for the research, a literature review was conducted in the following four areas: The Emergence of Communities of Teacher Leaders, The Power of Professional Communities, The Role of Trust in Collaborative Practice, and the Emergence of Distributed Leadership. In studying these areas, this researcher was provided with a lens through which she could better understand a distributed leadership framework.
The Emergence of Communities of Teacher Leaders

Over the past three decades, researchers and scholars have proposed ways in which they believed the complex task of leading in a culture of change could be accomplished. Judith Warren Little and Peter Senge were among those whose work paved the way for further study in the area of organizational and teacher leadership. Judith Warren Little’s (1982, 1990) work of the early 1980s focused on organizational and instructional characteristics that contributed to teacher training and teacher quality. Peter Senge’s (1990, 1993, 2006) seminal work of the late 1980s and early 1990s, focused on the transformation of organizations from “resource-based to knowledge-based,” as transformational leadership initiatives were underway and progress toward the development of professional communities, including professional learning communities had taken hold. Arguably one of the most promising initiatives included the emergence of teacher leadership. Teacher leadership, an area of focus prevalent in the 1990s that continues to be refined today, focuses on the teacher as leader in a community of learners. Barth (2001) contended that the goal of a school should be to build upon its “community of learners” to become a “community of leaders” (p. 85). Teachers are called upon to be involved in decision-making that ultimately impacts students, faculty, and the entire school community, as teachers are the key ingredient to student success. Educational scholars including Saphier (2005) discussed the long-lasting impact that effective teaching and school cultures that promote effective teaching have on student learning. Saphier asked, “Have you ever had someone in your life who consistently communicated to you that you were an able person, that you were valuable, and that you had worthwhile things to accomplish?...Teachers who send these messages and schools that are organized to do so get results that others do not” (p. 88). Teachers’ belief
systems are critically important to the school culture and need to be taken into consideration when looking at student performance.

Educators have never experienced such pressure to perform. Expectations outlined in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, further illustrated the need for high quality teaching and improved student learning. As referenced previously, due to the increasing pressure to prepare students for standardized testing including the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and other mandated assessments, administrators and teachers have become inundated by the amount of assessment data they receive, and understand that they are responsible for preparing students for these assessments, while simultaneously ensuring that they are planning effective instruction, communicating closely with parents, advocating for students who need additional support, in addition to their other responsibilities. Michael Fullan (2000) observed:

The main enemies of large-scale reform are overload and extreme fragmentation…All those involved in reform, from the schoolhouse to the state house, can take advantage of the growing knowledge base embedded in this framework to combat these enemies of large-scale reform. The prospects for reform on a large scale have never been better—or more needed. But it will take the fusion of spiritual, political, and intellectual energies to transform that reform into a reality. (p. 584)

Much of this pressure has been placed on the shoulders of the school principal or building leader who is called upon to act with decisiveness, while being charged with creating a school culture that encourages teacher collaboration, teacher leadership and student achievement. The involvement of teacher leaders increases the likelihood that this important work will be done through the support of professional communities that promote its practice.
The Power of Professional Communities

Peter Senge’s (1990, 1993, 2006) seminal work centered on the transformation of organizations from resource-based to knowledge-based, as transformational leadership initiatives were underway and progress was made toward the development of professional communities. Senge (1993) explained the shift toward the “knowledge-based” organization and identified characteristics of the “knowledge creating, or learning, organization” and contrasted five tasks “common to all organizations: direction setting, thinking and acting, the nature of thinking, conflict resolution, and the role of leadership (p. 8). Senge’s idea that the learning of a group or team is far superior to the individual knowledge of its members contributed to the understanding of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. He believed that in order for teams to succeed, active collaboration and a distribution of leadership between members was needed. He described:

Traditional resource-based organizations are giving way to knowledge-based organizations, a fundamental change that requires a transformation of the practice of management. Knowledge-creating companies will require distributed leadership built on a four-level foundation of philosophy, attitudes and beliefs, skills and capabilities, and tools {artifacts}. (p. 5)

Leadership is only as successful as the skills of the leaders who promote it within the organization. In the case of school leadership, it is the practices of the principal that determine the likelihood that teachers will assume leadership roles and responsibilities and behave as professional communities.

Professional communities are only as successful as the individuals within those communities. As such, schools require leadership that is keenly focused on the success of the
students and faculty within the school community, with student achievement being the ultimate goal. Hallinger’s and Heck’s (1996) meta-analysis explored the relationship between principal leadership and student achievement—the results of which emerged in 1996. They concluded,

The general pattern of results drawn from this review supports the belief that principals exercise a measurable, though indirect effect on school effectiveness and student achievement. While this indirect effect is relatively small, it is statistically significant, and we assert, meaningful. (p. 30)

Ten years later, Hallinger (2006) explored the journey from instructional leadership to leadership for learning and described “…instructional leadership has morphed into a new term, leadership for learning, and has become a new paradigm for 21st century school leadership” (p. 2). Fullan (2001) discussed the importance of relationship building between all members of a professional learning community, as relationships are an essential ingredient to forming, strengthening and maintaining a positive and professional school culture. He wrote, “If moral purpose is job one, relationships are job two, as you can’t get anywhere without them” (p. 51). Ten years later, DuFour and Marzano (2011) joined Fullan (2001) as they discussed creating the collaborative culture of a professional learning community:

Effective leaders with moral purpose don’t do it alone. And they don’t do it by hiring and supporting ‘individuals.’ Instead, they develop and employ the collaborative…The collaborative, sometimes known as professional learning communities, gets these amazing results because not only are leaders being influential, but peers are supporting and pressuring each other to do better. (p. 65)

The idea of colleagues challenging one another to improve is one of the key components of a professional learning community. Professional learning communities are those that thrive
through collaborative practice. Barth (2001), DuFour and Eaker (1998), Lambert (1998, 2003), and Sergiovanni (1996) endorsed the desirability of a school’s faculty functioning as a community of learners where collegiality and collaboration are the norm. It is within such environments that these and other theorists (Crowther et al., 2002; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001) propose that teacher leadership will transpire and flourish. In order for this to occur, members of a community must trust one another.

**The Role of Trust in Collaborative Practice**

The belief that trust is essential to effective collaboration is a recurring theme in the theoretical work of researchers and scholars over the past few decades. In order for principals to form positive relationships with those in their school communities, they must build the trust necessary to sustain those relationships. Professional learning communities cannot be developed and leadership cannot be distributed if members do not trust one another. Helen Tschannen-Moran (2001, 2009) focused a significant portion of her work on the critical role that trust plays in the transformation of school culture, noting that “collaboration involves the investment of time and energy, as well as the sharing of resources, responsibility and rewards, and this is difficult without trust” (p. 315). Her study affirms the notion that in order for teachers to position themselves as leaders, there must be a culture of trust present in the school environment. In the absence of trust, leadership will not flourish. Trust is an essential ingredient to transformational leadership.

Leithwood and Jantzi (1990, 1998) paved the way to what became known as transformational leadership in the early 1990s. Their work focused on school culture, collegiality, and trust building. They contend that cultural change is the most critical element of school reform and can best be realized through collegial relationships. They contended that the
principal, as cultural leader, is at the forefront of the practice of creating, developing, and sustaining a school’s culture in his or her role. In fact, they offered specific behaviors that prevent a school community from working in collaboration. Leithwood and Jantzi (1990) used Little’s (1982) indicators of collaboration as described previously, in order to articulate ways in which principals and building leaders positively impact professional collaboration. Leithwood and Jantzi (2009) investigated transformational leadership in an effort to obtain a deeper understanding of the development of strong professional communities. Their research included a look at the ways in which principal and administrator behaviors and practices influence collaborative school cultures. The practices of administrators in 12 schools who had developed highly collaborative professional relationships over the course of a three-year period as they worked to accomplish school-wide initiatives were examined. They identified six broad strategies regarding school administrator behaviors:

• Strengthen the culture by clarifying goals, reducing isolation, and finding ways to have those less committed to the change move on from the school.
• Use bureaucratic mechanisms to support these changes, such as providing resources and using evaluation as a lever.
• Foster staff development.
• Engage in direct and frequent communication about cultural norms and values.
• Share power and responsibility with others.
• Use symbols to express cultural values, such as public recognition and encouragement to share practice. (pp. 22–23)

This important work helped to better identify and understand teachers’ perceptions of administrator behaviors that contributed to the formation of highly collaborative professional
relationships that led to the accomplishment of school-wide initiatives. Transformational leaders are focused on helping every member of the group succeed and work to distribute leadership within an organization.

The Emergence of Distributed Leadership

According to Gronn (2000), distributed leadership theory advises that a principal foster leadership throughout an organization, in individuals and in teams, in order to meet the increasing demands of policy measures and calls for continuous improvement. Central to distributed leadership is the capacity to work together to provide this leadership using collaborative measures. Principals lead the way in developing practices that support all members of the school community who demonstrate an interest in and willingness to lead. This collaborative leadership sets the stage for the important work that is accomplished in schools each day. Leithwood and colleagues (2006) determined that the core leadership functions in school systems that are often distributed by principals using distributed leadership strategies included: setting the school mission, establishing professional development initiatives, redesigning the organization, and managing instruction. According to these researchers, these core leadership functions are an integral part of a successful school community.

Gronn (2002) referred to “key defining criterion” of distributed leadership as “conjoint agency” (p. 423). He wrote, “As an alternative to focused leadership, I argue for a unit of analysis which encompasses patterns or varieties of distributed leadership” (p. 424).

perspective is actually a framework for thinking about leadership and what leaders do to facilitate shared leadership. This perspective on leadership recognizes the work of all individuals who contribute to leadership practice, regardless of whether or not they assume formal leadership roles (Blase & Blase [1990, 1993]; Spillane [2001, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009]).

While understanding that actions of leaders is important, understanding what they do, how they do what they do, why they do it, and when they do it, is critical if the research is to contribute to the understanding and improvement of leadership practice. For example, Blase and Blase (1997) discussed the “everyday micropolitical strategies and personal characteristics of principals who directly and indirectly contribute to teachers’ sense of empowerment.” An understanding of micropolitics, defined as “the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organizations” (p. 138) led to the overarching question, “What are teachers’ perceptions of the characteristics of school principals that influence their sense of empowerment, and what does being empowered mean to teachers” (p. 141; see also 1990, 1993, and 1999)? In their exploration of this question, Blase and Blase examined the characteristics of successful principals, used perceptual data from teachers, and analyzed the data to formulate descriptive categories, themes and conceptual ideas. Though their analysis was extensive, they discovered that questions remain regarding how to best address increasing policy and other demands, while at the same time provide teachers with opportunities for collaboration, shared learning and teacher leadership.

As the researchers noted previously suggest, schools and organizations led by many people sharing the same vision are more effective than one person working in isolation. Crow and Pounder (2000) studied interdisciplinary teams in middle school settings, and reported findings describing the principal as highly influential to the success of the school team.
Principals have a responsibility to provide teachers with time, resources, and professional development opportunities, as research indicates that it is the classroom teacher who has the greatest influence on a student’s education—not the principal, assistant principal, or curriculum coordinator.

Providing these resources to them appears to be a fairly simple task, yet teacher perception as to how this is best accomplished needs to be considered. For example, a principal may feel that providing classroom coverage for a group of teachers to meet together will be helpful to teachers, yet teachers may object to meeting during class time, as this means preparing plans for a substitute teacher, adding to their workload. Therefore, it is important to for the principal to focus her time on teachers who are interested in coordinating these efforts with the principal.

The journey from transformational leadership to teacher leadership to distributed leadership revealed the change in teacher perception from the principal as the cultural leader of the school to the principal as promoter and facilitator of leadership teams. Gronn (2002) proposed that distributed leadership is a result of interdependence and coordination. Following his initial work in this area, he joined researchers Day and Salas (2004) to study leadership capacity in teams and explored ways in which teams utilized shared leadership to confront challenges and increase the team’s capacity:

Team leadership capacity is thought to be an important resource for teams, especially when complex adaptive challenges are experienced. These are the kinds of problems that no single leader can be expected to solve…Team leadership capacity can be developed as an emergent state in teams through teamwork, team learning, and shared leadership. (p. 877)
Leadership in this context is fluid rather than individually fixed as a specific role-defined phenomenon within an organization (Gronn, 2003). Distributing leadership in a school does not imply that everyone in a group is a leader, but opens the possibility for a more collective leadership approach (Harris, 2003).

According to Spillane (2005), distributed leadership is a way of thinking about the practice of school leadership. Spillane’s work (2005), based on the 2004 Distributed Leadership Study (School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University), addressed how leadership is distributed “over an interactive web of people and situations, examining how leadership is spread over both leaders and followers given key aspects of their situation, including organizational routines, structures, and tools” (p. 143). Spillane believed that the interactions between leaders and followers are paramount when considering ways in which to involve people in leadership opportunities. However, questions remain regarding the types of tools, practices, actions and structures used by school leaders that are perceived by teachers to positively influence distributed leadership in a school community.

Researchers affirm the belief that principals play a critical role in defining and distributing leadership within their school communities. The discussions in which Harris and Spillane (2008) participated focused on the interactions, rather than the actions of building leaders. They dismissed the historic view of the leader as the singular hero and replaced it with a team focus that involves teachers, support staff, and student leaders. Spillane (2005) explained that distributed leadership practice is viewed as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situation. Leadership practice is not viewed as a product of a leader's knowledge and skill, but is rather viewed as the interactions between people and their situation. It is through these interactions, rather than actions, that leadership practice is understood, as
these interactions inform, influence, and construct leadership practice. Little (1982) discussed teacher motivation as a key ingredient to effective collaboration, yet the question regarding how principals foster and sustain teacher motivation remains. If teachers are not motivated to lead, principals will be unable to do their jobs well. There remains little question that principals need teachers to assume leadership responsibilities in a school community.

The movement that began in the 1980s focused on the principal as instructional leader, as there was, and continues to be, an increased public focus on the mission to improve public school performance in our nation’s schools. The instructional leadership of the principal was viewed as critically important to the success of the school. However, in order for the principal to serve in this role effectively, he/she is expected to understand best practices in education and ensure that teachers are consistently using these practices with students. The principal is charged with holding teachers accountable for increased levels of student learning, while also following the licensure requirements required by the state and federal departments of education. The end of the 1980’s gave way to a new understanding of the role of principal as instructional leader to the role of principal as cultural leader. Phillip Hallinger (1992) cautioned:

The predominant conceptions of schooling taught to principals assumed that the practices of effective teaching (and leadership) could be standardized and controlled. Thus, while instructional leadership demanded a new focus and set of work activities from the principal, the role conceived for the principal was still inherently managerial in nature.

(p. 35)

Hallinger (1992) believed that instructional leadership was not all encompassing, and therefore, was unable to fully promote a culture of true reform.
The journey from transformational leadership to distributed leadership entailed the change from the principal as the cultural leader of the school to the principal as the promoter and facilitator of leadership teams within the school. Distributed Leadership Theory espouses the idea of the decentralization of the leader within an organization and supports the idea that every individual can demonstrate leadership in distributive organizations (Gronn, 2003). Leadership in this context is fluid rather than individually fixed where people within the organization are assigned specific roles that do not change (Gronn, 2003). This type of leadership does not imply that everyone in a group is a leader, but entertains the idea of a more collective leadership approach and is accepting of non-binding roles (Harris, 2003).

Central to distributed leadership is the capacity of individual members of a team to commit to collaborate with one another to provide shared leadership throughout the organization. Distributed leadership is a collective trend where leadership is a stream of activities in which organizational constituents find themselves entangled (Gronn, 2000). Leithwood and colleagues (2006) determined that the core leadership functions in school systems that often get distributed by principals include: setting the school mission, professional development programs, redesigning the organization, and managing instruction. Blase and Blase (1999) studied teacher perceptions of effective instructional leadership with promotion of collaboration being one subset of this leadership. While they referred to instructional leadership, the research in this area is more clearly situated in the distributed leadership scholarship, as they described an inclusive instructional leadership different than the top-down approach of the 1980s. Their study provided many significant perspectives into this leadership, including specific advice including: “Principals who are effective instructional leaders use a broad-based approach; they integrate reflection and growth to build a school culture of individual and shared critical examination for
improvement” (p. 370). They advised that principals should “support collaborative efforts among educators by supporting the development of coaching skills and reflective conversations among educators. Work to provide time and opportunities for peer connections among teachers” (p. 371). At the conclusion of this survey-based quantitative study they noted,

[O]ur study, for example, provided no detailed contextual data about the particular schools in which the teacher participants worked. We suggest that the use of case studies of effective instructional leadership incorporate the perspectives of teachers, students, and parents and employ methods such as depth interviewing and observation. (p. 372)

This type of contextual data remains largely unexplored over one decade later.

As the discussion about the necessity of reforming school cultures and distributing leadership started to gain momentum, writers and researchers spent significant time specifically exploring the different forms that teacher collegiality and collaboration may take (Fullan, 2000). The research, in Fullan’s words, “does not tell educators how to change their own situation to produce greater collaboration. They can get ideas, directions, insights, but they can never know exactly how to go about it because such a path is exceedingly complex” (p. 582). Despite the merit of Fullan’s arguments that collaboration is heavily context-bound and cannot simply be lifted from one setting and repeated successfully in another, it is nonetheless important that we investigate successful instances and the principal leadership efforts that helped to shape and sustain collaboration.

Interactions between and among those in an organization became the focus of the work of Spillane, Camburn, and Pareja (2007), who revealed, “Rather than viewing leadership practice through a narrow psychological lens where it is equated chiefly with the actions of an individual and cast as the product of an individual’s knowledge and skill, the distributed perspective draws
attention to the interactions of people and their situations” (p. 110). That same year, a study by Goddard, Goddard, and Tschannen-Moran (2007) neglected to mention principal leadership when discussing teacher collaboration. The researchers contended, “… the most important outcome of teacher collaboration may be that teachers learn how to improve their instructional practice” (p. 892). The obvious omission regarding strategies used by principals to foster teacher collaboration and teacher leadership suggested its unimportance to this research, as they focused their attention almost exclusively on the actions and beliefs of the teacher, rather than those of the principal.

**Implications for Further Research**

One may wonder how distributed leadership in a school can be accomplished in a way that is inclusive of those not in the role of principal and specifically, those who represent, supervise, and evaluate the teachers in the school, namely the school administrators, each of whom is responsible for ensuring that teachers are provided with meaningful ways to become involved with the school community. There is no doubt that principals are ultimately responsible for providing high quality leadership opportunities to professional faculty in their buildings, but how this work is best accomplished continues to be studied. There is a need for continued exploration regarding specific ways in which principals can best support collaborative work and strengthen a school’s culture. Leithwood and Jantzi (1990) shared concerns regarding the lack of information that existed regarding ways in which strong cultures develop and are sustained over time. The authors also commented on the lack of research in the area of principal influences on strong school cultures (p. 2). Almost two decades later, Goddard, Goddard, and Tschannen-Moran (2007) studied teacher leadership extensively, yet never mentioned the role of the
principal when discussing ways in which teacher leadership is fostered within a building. It seems apparent that further investigation is needed.

Distributed leadership is a subject that warrants further examination and research, particularly as it relates to its impact on a faculty’s collaboration in a school community. Further research on the concept and practice of distributed leadership will help confirm the findings of this study and contribute to the understanding of the topic. It is recommended that studies be done similar to this one, where teacher perceptions are carefully considered when determining principal practices that help or hinder distributed leadership, and where the benefits and drawbacks of distributed leadership in a school community can be further examined. Such studies would further advance the understanding of the conditions and circumstances under which distributed leadership is effective (or not) as a tool to institute the change.

**Chapter III: Methodology**

This researcher conducted a qualitative analysis of teachers’ perspectives of distributed leadership as supported by a principal in a middle school in central Massachusetts. In particular, this investigation examined ways in which a school principal’s actions either supported or hindered distributed leadership in a middle school as perceived by faculty, as well as the benefits and drawbacks of the principals’ efforts. Given the focus of this investigation, the following questions guided the research investigation:

1. What principal practices do teachers perceive as having a positive or negative influence on distributed leadership at Lydon Middle School?
2. What do teachers perceive as the benefits and drawbacks of the principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in her school?
Rationale for a Qualitative Design

In this qualitative analysis, distributed leadership theory was used as the lens through which to better explore teachers’ perceptions of the actions and behaviors of the school principal that either positively or negatively influenced distributed leadership. A distributed perspective focuses on the leadership activity within an organization and advises that the role of the principal includes the cultivation of individual and collective leadership throughout an organization. Though distributed leadership is often equated with shared leadership, it is more than “multiple leaders in a school sharing responsibility for leadership activities” (Spillane, 2006, p. 13).

Shared decision making is undoubtedly an important ingredient to distributed leadership, yet the impact on instruction has long lasting implications when leadership is distributed in such a way that is respectful, trusting and collaborative.

Site and Participants

This research study occurred at Lydon Middle School (SMS), a suburban middle school in Central Massachusetts, where this researcher currently serves as the building principal. The site was chosen because LMS is the only fifth and sixth grade public school in the district and is home to 970 fifth and sixth grade students and 121 faculty members (80 professional staff). There is diversity among this large faculty, particularly in their teaching experience (number of years teaching) and in their areas of curricular expertise. The faculty is predominantly white and middle class, comprised of predominantly white females ranging in age from 22 to 74. Only eight are males, ranging in age from 30 to 48. Some of the teachers have worked exclusively in this district, but the majority has had experiences either teaching in other towns and states or working in the corporate world. There is a small minority of the teaching population (3 females) who are Asian and Hispanic. Each of these teachers is in the foreign language department. In
addition, there is a wide range of personalities, life experiences, and professional attributes among the members of the group on which to draw. This school setting and this population are appropriate for the purposes of this study because they are representative of a typical suburban middle school in Central Massachusetts, where 73% of the student body is white and the remaining 27% are Hispanic, Native American, African American, Asian, Indian, and/or other students of mixed-race. In addition, 13% of the student population meets the low-income criteria, 2% of the students are English Language Learners, and 18% of the students require special education services. The heterogeneity of the student population contributes to the need for talented teachers who are able to meet the needs of diverse learners. The name of the school has been changed and the actual names of the teacher participants will not be used in the study. The participants involved in this study will include a cross section of faculty members including classroom, special education, and special subject (technology, art, music, physical education, foreign language, etc.) teachers.

**Data Collection**

Data collection methods included an anonymous survey that was comprised of an online questionnaire with both Likert-scale and open-ended questions, audio recordings, focus group transcriptions, and reflective notes. During a regularly scheduled faculty meeting, all teachers were invited by me to complete the online survey on distributed leadership practices. I informed them that they would be receiving an e-mail from me outlining the details of this study, following the faculty meeting (see Appendix H). Teachers attending the faculty meeting were also invited to participate in smaller focus groups (three) for two, one-hour sessions. In order to participate in one of the focus groups, teachers were required to complete the questionnaire, as this exercise provided them with the experience upon which they would draw some initial ideas
and thinking regarding distributed leadership. The groups consisted of six to eight participants, each of whom agreed to meet to discuss distributed leadership practices at Lydon Middle School, and specifically, ways in which the building principal influenced distributed leadership. Focus group participants were selected according to the content area or special subject they taught, as I believed it was important to have a cross-section of faculty represented. I balanced the number of team content teachers with art, music, physical education, and foreign language teachers in each of the focus groups. The focus groups were representative of varying age groups and levels of experience teaching in the public schools.

The groups discussed what they perceived to be the benefits and/or drawbacks of distributed leadership in a middle school community. The verbal invitation provided at the faculty meeting consisted of sharing the voluntary nature of participation in the study, as that participation related to both the questionnaire and the focus group opportunities. Teachers were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The voluntary and confidential nature of participation was emphasized in order to alleviate any concerns the faculty may experience due to the dual role of the researcher as the principal of the school (and therefore the supervisor of the faculty). Emphasis was also placed on informing teachers that whether or not they chose to participate in this study would have no impact on their school-standing or in any future evaluation of their performance, per the supervision and evaluation practices outlined in the collective bargaining agreement. In other words, they would not be adversely affected as a result of choosing not to participate, nor would there be any consequences for speaking their minds should they choose to participate in the study. In fact, I communicated to participants that it was my hope and expectation that they would speak openly and candidly. This expectation was reinforced through verbal and/or written communication that was provided to the
participants. Given the researcher’s dual role of building principal and primary researcher of the study, it was imperative that this was made abundantly clear. Participants were asked to sign a consent form that indicated their awareness of the purpose of the study, the steps that would be taken to ensure the confidentiality of the information shared with the researcher, and the fact that information gained from the study would not be used in a way that would negatively impact their role in the school or in their professional evaluation.

**Online survey.** Following a verbal announcement to the faculty during a faculty meeting regarding details of the study, this researcher sent an e-mail memorandum to the entire faculty within 24 hours informing them of the anonymous online survey and asking that they complete the questionnaire within one school week, or five days. Faculty did not inform this researcher of their decision to participate in the survey, as that would not be in keeping with the tool’s anonymity. However, they were asked to follow the timeline for completion. If this researcher did not have 50% or more faculty responding to the questionnaire, this researcher planned to send out a reminder and extend the timeline three days. However, this was not needed, as there was a strong response rate of 75%, which provided a more thorough understanding of teacher perception, as it related to distributed leadership. Faculty were directed to a link to Survey Monkey. Survey Monkey was used as the surveying tool, as this was a familiar tool, consistently used by teachers at the school and throughout the district. The anonymous questionnaire that was used in this study was designed by this researcher specifically for the purpose of this research study (see Appendix A). Questions were phrased clearly and succinctly in order to ensure that the data was not corrupted in any way. The questionnaire included four statements to which respondents were asked about the extent of their agreement on a five-point Likert scale.
(strongly agree to strongly disagree) and six open-ended questions on the questionnaire, which included the following:

- The building principal supports teachers’ participation in distributed leadership practices at SMS.
- Distributed leadership supports teachers’ professional growth.
- The school’s culture is conducive for the growth of distributed leadership practices.
- Distributed leadership practices align with our school goals.
- Based on your experience and knowledge, what resources are in place at LMS for teachers to participate in distributed leadership?
- Based on your experience and knowledge, what obstacles exist at LMS that interfere with teachers who may be interested in practicing distributed leadership?
- What does the principal do to promote distributed leadership amongst teachers?
- What does the principal do to impede distributed leadership among teachers?
- What do you believe are the benefits of distributed leadership?
- What do you believe are the drawbacks of distributed leadership?

Themes that emerged from the survey guided the initial work of the focus group(s).

In order to be considered for participation in the focus groups, teachers were required to complete the questionnaire. Teachers were asked a series of questions regarding their perceptions of ways in which the transference of leadership from the principal to others within the organization supported the premise that every individual in the school can demonstrate leadership in distributive organizations (Gronn, 2003). Questions asked included teachers’ perceptions of the actions of the school principal, along with their understanding of what leaders do, how they do what they do, why they do it, and when, each of which was critical if the
research was to contribute to understanding and improving leadership practice. Understanding teacher perspectives allowed me to better determine ways in which a school principal could support distributed leadership practices. It was also important to understand teacher perspectives of the benefits and drawbacks of such leadership. Questions remain in the literature regarding ways in which teachers believe that principals foster and sustain teacher motivation to participate in distributed leadership practices within a school. It was the hope and expectation of this researcher that this information could be obtained from the focus groups and shared in ways that would positively impact the school and district.

**Focus groups.** Focus group participants were formed from those teachers who had completed the anonymous questionnaire and agreed to participate. An online consent form was used for the survey and was completed at the time of the survey. The consent form included an invitation to participate in one of two focus groups. The focus groups furthered the distributed leadership discussion, and specifically addressed the two research questions. All teachers were provided with an equal opportunity to participate in the study through the verbal and written invitations described previously, and were reassured that my dual role as researcher and principal would not interfere with their positions in the school in any way. Focus group participants were selected according to the content area or special subject they taught, as I believed it was important to have a cross-section of faculty represented. I balanced the number of team content teachers with art, music, physical education, and foreign language teachers. I selected teacher participants who represented different age groups and levels of experience teaching in the public schools.

**Reflective note-taking.** Reflective note-taking was utilized by the researcher as a strategy to capture the nature of the interactions, comments, questions and overall spirit of the
groups immediately following the focus group sessions. The researcher began with a review and analysis of field notes (Beyea & Nicoll, 2000), anecdotal observations and aspects of the conversations from the focus group sessions, while having an opportunity to reflect upon the context that was provided by the group participants. The notes allowed for a more thorough recall of the focus group conversations. The researcher gained additional insight into the nature of the conversations by reviewing and analyzing the notes, while formulating a reflection or researcher’s memo (Maxwell, 2005), from which the initial components of themes began to emerge. Discrepancies between the focus groups were included in the notes.

**Data Analysis**

At the core of distributed leadership is the capacity to work together to provide leadership using collaborative measures. Collaborative measures include activities such as engaging in peer observation opportunities whereby teachers visit other classrooms to gain a deeper understanding ways in which teachers engage students, use classroom management techniques, or provide support to students who are struggling to understand a concept or skill. Bogdan and Biklen (1982) defined qualitative data analysis as “working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (p. 145). As noted previously, one goal of this study was to ascertain teachers’ perceptions as they related to principal practices that either helped or hindered distributed leadership in a school. In order to gain an understanding regarding teachers’ perceptions, data was analyzed on an ongoing basis throughout the course of the study and began with an analysis of the information obtained through the questionnaire. Focus group data was then recorded, transcribed by this researcher, and reviewed by all focus group participants. Themes that emerged from the data were coded and measured in relation to
each of the research questions. This qualitative data that emerged from the open-ended responses on the anonymous survey, as well as through the focus group discussions that were digitally recorded, were reviewed and analyzed using the three-step process recommended by Creswell (2009): (1) data organization; (2) data review including marginal notes and analytical memos; and (3) detailed analysis through coding. The coding process, also adapted from Creswell (2009), consisted of (1) the selection and reading of three transcripts while recording marginal (column) notes; (2) code development, including listing of major topics, assigning codes to topics, assigning categories to codes, and performing analysis relative to the significance of categories and codes vis-à-vis the research questions, (3) using the analysis to determine most significant themes, and (4) selecting appropriate comments and narrative from the focus group discussions that were illustrative of the thematically coded data. Significant and recurring themes were further developed and organized in order to identify and understand participants’ perceptions of principal practices that teachers believe contribute to distributed leadership in a middle school and examined the benefits and drawbacks of such efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school.

**Survey analysis.** Data collected from the anonymous questionnaire included a combination of statements to which respondents noted their agreement or disagreement on a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) to four statements and responded to six open-ended questions that asked participants to share their perspectives regarding ways in which distributed leadership positively or negatively impacts a school community, and the degree to which principals serve a role in the development and sustainability of a distributed leadership model. Results from the questionnaire were compiled to see the extent to which survey respondents agreed or disagreed with a distributed leadership model in a school.
Trustworthiness was increased through the use of descriptive statistics, used to describe the fundamental aspects of the data in a study, which increases the likelihood that discrepant or unusual findings may be further understood by other data collected. This may be evident when seeking to comprehend the extent to which teachers believe that distributed leadership is important to a school’s culture. The use of multiple focus groups (Kidd & Parshall, 2000) enhanced the credibility of the study particularly as it became evident that the focus group discussions shared similarities that could not be attributed to any one focus group. Analysis of these data items provided knowledge of the participants’ understanding of the concept of distributed leadership and allowed this researcher to use this information to plan for the focus group discussions. Data obtained from the questionnaires included information regarding the participants’ experiences with teacher leadership and distributed leadership and indicated the degree to which individual teachers felt prepared and ready to lead. Further, analysis of the responses to the items on the questionnaire provided a clear understanding of the respondents’ initial understanding of the topic of distributed leadership, and the ways in which the respondents have been affected by distributed leadership in a school. Finally, teachers’ individual responses were analyzed for correlation with participant responses in the focus groups.

**Thematic coding.** Qualitative research consists of data collection and analysis taking place simultaneously in order that the data, initially collected, informs the following phase of data collection by using revelations that emerge to refine subsequent questions (Merriam, 1998). Responses to the open-ended questions on the questionnaire served as the talking points for the focus group discussions. These initial points were representative of themes that served as the basis for the thematic mapping that evolved as the focus group data were transcribed. Descriptive codes are codes that involve subtle interpretation or reliance on the context of the research.
According to Miles and Huberman (1994), descriptive codes can be developed before data collection, during data collection, or during the analysis. In this study, descriptive codes were used in the preliminary phase of analysis during the initial review of the transcribed data. During this stage in the analysis process, the researcher used words or phrases to describe or summarize portions of the data. Each group session was audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded thematically. As recommended by Creswell (2009), the coding process was repeated and clarified as both broad and subtle themes emerged.

The ongoing process of coding allowed different themes to emerge that were compared to information gathered through the questionnaire and group discussions. The codes with which this researcher began were based on the original questions. The themes were then considered in relation to each of the research questions. To accomplish this, this researcher created a spreadsheet that consisted of columns containing key words and phrases and rows identifying the patterns of thought that emerged from the questions. Individual responses were noted on the spreadsheet and categorized into themes (Creswell, 2009) that emerged throughout the conversations, which ultimately formed the basis for the coding process.

Focus group interviews were carefully transcribed from audiotapes and reviewed by me for accuracy. These focus group transcripts were hand-coded in order to understand the ways in which teacher responses reflected their thinking on the aspects of distributed leadership being researched. Coding by hand allowed the researcher to become physically involved with the data, touching pages, sorting sheets of notes, grouping notes, counting pages dedicated to various concepts (Klenke, 2008), and connecting ideas using Excel spreadsheets. Codes were developed to identify relevant and recurring themes that evolved regarding the ways in which teachers defined and understood distributed leadership, principal practices that influenced distributed
leadership, and teacher perceptions relative to the benefits and drawbacks of a distributed leadership model in a middle school community. As I collected and analyzed the data and note emerging themes, codes were added to reflect those patterns. Once each piece was coded, findings were shared across the other data sources in order to triangulate data and inform further collection.

**Review of reflective notes.** The reflective notes served as a reminder of the key points that emerged in each of the focus groups and provided a context for subsequent focus group discussions. This researcher synthesized the ideas gathered in the discussions by using written notes to allow for reflection regarding ideas that were emerging. The review of these notes was critical at this stage of the research process. “Memos not only capture your analytic thinking about your data, but also facilitate such thinking, stimulating analytical insights” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 96).

**Data analysis summary.** Data was triangulated and consisted of three data streams including the following:

- Anonymous Questionnaires
- Focus group interviews
- Reflective note-taking by this researcher

As themes from the data emerged, this researcher reflected upon the benefits to be gained for the entire school community, including the principal, as a result of the building principal having conducted this research. It was the intent of this researcher to add depth and perspective to the current body of literature as it related to teacher perception of principal practices that positively or negatively influence distributed leadership in a school, while further understanding the benefits and drawbacks of such principal
practices to support a distributed leadership model.

Limitations

As with any research methodology, the qualitative analysis approach has limitations with regard to internal validity, external validity, and reliability. As this researcher also serves as the principal of the school in which the research is being conducted, there is a potential threat to both the internal and external validity of the research. The threat to internal validity may result from my leadership position in the building, which could potentially influence teacher responses. Teachers provided the data regarding their perceptions of principal practices (this researcher’s practices) and the benefits and drawbacks of distributed leadership, a topic that is known by the faculty to be an interest of the researcher. Given this researcher’s role as principal at the school and thereby, the primary evaluator and supervisor of the teachers, they may have been hesitant to provide honest responses to the questions asked—in fear of being negatively impacted by the supervision and evaluation process in which they are contractually required to participate. If teachers were hesitant to share openly and honestly in fear that their thoughts and ideas would be held against them, accurate data may not be collected. Should this occur, the data may inaccurately portray their thoughts and feelings and instead reveal information that the teachers believe their supervisor (this researcher and principal of the school) wanted to hear. In order to minimize this to the best of my abilities, as noted previously, this researcher was certain to emphasize to teachers that they may speak candidly with no fear of reprisal. That said, teachers may have not been entirely honest. Themes that emerged from focus group data were then compared to data from the anonymous questionnaires in an effort to determine the extent to which focus group responses may have diverged from answers provided on questionnaires.
External validity may have been impacted and is therefore a potential limitation due to the researcher’s prior knowledge of the participants and their roles in the building. As the supervisor and evaluator of the participants, the findings of the study, as realized by me, may not be transferrable to or relevant in other situations. This threat involves “experimenter bias” where “the researcher affects participants’ behavior because of previous knowledge of the participants” (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 366). Due to the situation that is unique to LMS and the teaching faculty, the findings of the study may be less relevant to other situations. Much of this could be dependent on how well teacher perceptions coincided with the literature. Focus group participants were given an opportunity to review all notes and minutes taken of the sessions in order to ensure that the information collected closely matched their recollections of the discussions. This member-checking allowed participants to see how well they thought I captured what they had shared.

Caution with instrumentation needed to be taken as it related to “observer bias.” Gay and Airasian (2003) suggested, “[T]he situation may be ‘seen’ differently than it would have been through the eyes of a different researcher” (p. 213). Because this researcher had already formed a positive opinion regarding the role of distributed leadership in a school setting, prior to working with the focus groups and likely may not have been as open minded as she would have been had she never researched the concept before. This researcher had also established relationships with the participants prior to the research study, which may be considered a source of bias when thinking about the context used by the researcher to interpret the data.

Merriam (1998) suggested several strategies to improve the internal validity of a qualitative study, including: triangulation of multiple data sources; having the participants review the data for accuracy; spending an appropriate amount of time studying a phenomenon; and
clarifying the researcher’s biases at the outset of the study (pp. 202–205). This researcher utilized these strategies with the goal of reducing or eliminating the threats to internal validity described earlier.

Triangulation of data sources (anonymous questionnaires, focus group interviews, and reflective note-taking) was conducted in order to provide a multitude of ways to better understand the mindsets of the participants and provided the researcher with an opportunity to immediately reflect on discussions while they were fresh in my mind. This was an important strategy as this researcher consistently used this practice as a way to process information quietly and independently. When many sources of data are consistent and in agreement with one another, the level of confidence in the findings increases. Another strategy that was used to improve the internal validity included checking participants’ agreement with the collected data by allowing them to review transcripts for accuracy in portraying their perceptions and attitudes. This researcher was cognizant of her dual role as researcher and principal, and took steps to mitigate its effect.

Validity

Merriam (1998) discussed the extent to which the question of external validity in qualitative research is a bone of contention among social scientists. She explained that many see generalization as impossible with this methodology, and others promoted the use of sampling procedures or multiple cases in order to bring some measure of external validity and therefore she contends its somewhat complex and ambiguous nature, yet valid nonetheless. Member-checking was used to check participants’ agreement with the collected data by allowing them to review transcripts for accuracy in portraying their perceptions and attitudes. This research was focused on understanding the practices and structures used by principals to employ distributed
leadership in a middle school. Due to the unique conditions of this research study, the participants and their experiences may not be representative of the opinions of other teachers and other schools. However, the detailed description of the participants’ perspectives allowed others to decide whether or not the context of this study aligned with their own experiences and therefore offered the kind of reflective thinking that may inform their understanding of distributed leadership and possibly affect their professional work.

The selection of the study’s participants should also be considered as a factor in judging external validity. Because the teachers volunteered to take part in this research study, it is likely that they had an interest in learning about distributed leadership and sought to influence this research. The motivation teachers have for participating in such a project may have an effect on the findings, which poses a challenge for applying these findings to other situations. The detailed description that is representative of demonstrated, high quality, qualitative research however, helped alleviate this potential issue. Detailed description also alleviated this potential for selection-effect bias.

Reliability

The intent of this study included the triangulation of data to contribute to an accurate representation of the faculty participants’ thoughts and feelings about the questions raised regarding distributed leadership. This researcher compared and contrasted all data in order to better establish how closely the responses of the teachers corresponded with one another through inter-rater reliability. Inter-rater reliability is reliant on the ability of the participating individuals to be consistent. It ensured agreement between the participants and me. The agreement of multiple data sources ultimately strengthened the level of certainty in the findings.
During the past five years, since this researcher first became principal of Lydon Middle School, teachers had become accustomed to providing feedback regarding their experiences at LMS through anonymous surveys and in small group and individual settings. One example of this occurs each school year when this researcher conducts personal interviews at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year in order to listen to faculty concerns, questions, ideas, and accomplishments, with the goal of taking action to further support their work. Each year, anonymous mid- and end-of-year surveys are distributed via e-mail to all faculty and school families—the results of which are published in family and faculty memos. This researcher consistently works with teachers during small and large group curriculum meetings to discuss the inner workings of those teams, particularly during times of discord, when team members experience difficulty with decision making or consensus building. Finally, teacher representatives from the teachers’ union leadership team consistently bring questions and concerns to this researcher’s attention in order to dispel rumors, discuss teacher concerns, receive clarity on budget and other issues with the goal of responding to teacher concerns. Many of the interactions with teachers consisted of discussions that occurred in the hallways, teachers’ lounge, faculty meetings, and in this researcher’s office. For these reasons, this researcher remains hopeful that the faculty continued to provide honest feedback during and following the duration of this study, as they have consistently shared both “warm” and “cool” feedback over the past five years.

Reliability in research is concerned with the replication of results. Because this research study was performed in a particular setting with unique participants, it was not possible to attain the reliability that is commonly understood in experimental research. Merriam suggests that rather than consider qualitative research in this traditional way, its reliability should be more of
an internal measure whereby the findings of the study are judged as reasonable given the data: “The question then is not whether findings will be found again but whether the results are consistent with the data collected” (p. 206). It remains this researcher’s hope and expectation to supply educators and others with a complete description of the ways in which the study was conducted in order to provide the information necessary to initiate and execute a similar study in their own unique setting.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Participants were informed and reminded throughout the duration of the study that there would be no monetary or other incentives given to them for their participation. They were assured that while there were no incentives, there were also no repercussions as a result of not participating in the study. It was expected that the intrinsic satisfaction potentially gained that often motivates participation in a project such as this would be sufficient, given that this was a project that aimed to further educators’ understanding of effective school practices.

The data instruments used in the study included anonymous questionnaires, focus group interviews and my own reflective note-taking. The note-taking was completed by me in my office immediately following each of the focus group sessions and provided this researcher with an opportunity to reflect upon both individual contributions to the discussion, as well as general themes and questions that emerged from the entire group. So often people do not take the time to reflect on what we see and hear and therefore, struggle to make sense of the data. By embracing this opportunity, this researcher was better able to make sense of the data. The data received from the questionnaires was used to “triangulate” (Merriam, 1998, p. 204) the data by comparing responses to the data obtained through the focus groups and through secondary data.
that had been collected during the past seven months of the school year at curriculum, faculty, and department meetings.

Focus group participants agreed to participate by providing consent that provided permission for this researcher to use their comments, questions, and actions in the published research study. The participants were provided with a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. The data collected from the anonymous questionnaires, focus group interviews and secondary data sources remained confidential. This researcher did not, at any time, reveal participant identity in published sources and the research study remains absent of any kind of personally identifiable information. As a result, this researcher was the only person who will have the ability to use the personal and confidential information of the participants and their activity throughout the study. Audio-taped recordings, meeting minutes, and reflective notes have been stored in a secured cloud-based storage service. This researcher’s laptop and iPad served as the only means of technology used throughout the duration of the study. The participants were not in any kind of danger throughout the study as questionnaires, focus group discussions, and use of secondary data are understood to be acceptable school practice at a study site. Creswell (2009) stated that all participants will be offered access to a draft of any publication or communication that arises as a result of this research. Finally, this researcher has successfully completed the National Institute of Health’s (NIH) online course entitled, “Protecting Human Research Subjects” that is offered through the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This research project remains in full compliance with Northeastern University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) policies following an IRB review.
**Conclusion**

Little empirical research has been conducted regarding teachers’ perceptions of the practices of school principals that positively or negatively influence distributed leadership in a school. This researcher was interested in learning more about teachers’ perceptions of the ways in which those practices positively or negatively influence a distributed leadership model. Further, this study sought to identify the benefits and drawbacks of those principal practices, as perceived by the teachers. Data collected through an anonymous questionnaire, focus groups, and reflective note-taking informed this study and formed the foundation from which the study’s findings were generated and understood.

It was the hope and expectation of this researcher to better understand teachers’ perceptions of principal practices that positively or negatively influence distributed leadership in a school community, while also understanding the benefits and drawbacks of such practices. In doing so, educators are more likely to improve upon current practice. It is this researcher’s belief that principals need to provide teachers with leadership opportunities and resources to lead the way. In doing so, schools will be better equipped to meet the demands placed upon them. If schools secure the limitless possibilities inherent in distributed leadership, they will substantially increase the ability to meet their responsibilities to our children.

**Chapter IV: Research Findings**

**Reporting of the Findings and Analysis**

In this chapter, findings that emerged from the analysis of survey and focus group data are presented in response to each research question. The chapter begins with a description of the study’s context, and includes a description of the study’s participants. The findings are then organized and presented with the goal of answering the following two research questions:
1. What practices, in which the principal engages, do teachers perceive as having a positive or negative influence on distributed leadership?

2. What do teachers perceive as the benefits and drawbacks of the principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school?

Relevant survey responses and corresponding focus group data will be reported as they relate to each research question. Findings from focus group discussions will be demonstrated with comments illustrative of emergent themes that were generated from the data (Massey, 2011). Table 1 illustrates the relationship between the two research questions and the questions asked in both the anonymous questionnaire and the focus groups.
Table 1

*Relationship of survey questions and focus group questions to research question 1.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ1</th>
<th>What practices in which the principal engages do teachers perceive as having a positive or negative influence on distributed leadership?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Survey Question</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQ7</td>
<td>What can school administrators do to promote distributed leadership amongst teachers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQ5</td>
<td>Based on your experience and knowledge, what resources are needed in order for teachers to participate in distributed leadership?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQ6</td>
<td>Based on your experience and knowledge, what obstacles might exist that could interfere with teacher interest in practicing distributed leadership?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQ8</td>
<td>What obstacles may interfere with opportunities for teachers to participate in distributed leadership? Please be specific and where possible, provide one or more examples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Focus Group Question</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGQ4</td>
<td>What factors might encourage or support teachers in taking on leadership roles in their school? What additional supports, if any, would be helpful to teachers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGQ3</td>
<td>Why do you think teachers assume leadership roles in a school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGQ6</td>
<td>What obstacles might discourage or prevent teachers from taking on leadership roles in their school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGQ8</td>
<td>What difficulties do you think might result from having teachers participate in distributed leadership? What measures do you think could be taken to remove or minimize such obstacles?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGQ10</td>
<td>What do you think are the benefits of distributed leadership?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGQ11</td>
<td>What do you think are the drawbacks of distributed leadership?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ2</th>
<th>What do teachers perceive as the benefits and drawbacks of the principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Survey Question</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQ7</td>
<td>What can school administrators do to promote distributed leadership amongst teachers?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQ6</td>
<td>Based on your experience and knowledge, what obstacles might exist that could interfere with teacher interest in practicing distributed leadership?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQ8</td>
<td>What obstacles may interfere with opportunities for teachers to participate in distributed leadership? Please be specific and where possible, provide one or more examples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQ10</td>
<td>What do you believe are the drawbacks of distributed leadership? Please be specific and where possible, provide one or more examples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Focus Group Question</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGQ4</td>
<td>What factors might encourage or support teachers in taking on leadership roles in their school? What additional supports, if any, would be helpful to teachers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGQ3</td>
<td>Why do you think teachers assume leadership roles in a school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGQ10</td>
<td>What do you think are the benefits of distributed leadership?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FGQ11</td>
<td>Would you like to elaborate on anything that we’ve discussed, or are there other ideas on this topic that have occurred to you that you would like to share?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Study Context

The purpose of this research study was to develop an understanding of the ways in which a principal’s practices influence distributed leadership from the vantage point of teachers in a suburban middle school comprised of students in grades 5 and 6. The research examined specific administrative practices in which a principal engages that teachers perceive as having either a positive or negative influence on distributed leadership. In addition, this research investigated teacher perception of the benefits and drawbacks of the principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school. This researcher’s interest in distributed leadership has emerged over the last decade, as policies, mandates, and increased budget constraints have strained our school community, as administrators, teachers, and students are now required to do significantly more with fewer and fewer resources. Teachers are under significant pressure to perform, as student achievement has become a very public measure of teacher effectiveness. While this pressure in and of itself may not necessarily be a negative thing, it has an impact on the climate and culture of the school.

Data

Survey. The survey response rate was 75% of the total population of teachers at Lydon Middle School, or 57 out of 75 professional faculty members. Due to its anonymity, it is uncertain who among the faculty was represented in the survey. However, the response rate is indicative of a wide cross-section of faculty, as 36 teachers at Lydon Middle School are regular education team teachers, who either teach grade 5 or grade 6 English Language Arts and Social Studies, or Math and Science. The remaining faculty consists of special educators, special subject teachers (art, music, physical education, health), specialists (curriculum coordinators, speech and language pathologists, occupational and physical therapists, school nurse), and
administrators. The high response rate drawn from the total population suggests that the sample included a diverse representation of the school’s professional faculty.

**Focus groups.** Focus groups were formed following the dissemination of the survey and the collection of the survey results. Of the 57 survey respondents, 23 volunteered to serve as participants in one of three focus groups. Each of the faculty who expressed interest in participating in a focus group was given an opportunity to do so. Each of the focus groups was heterogeneous, representing a cross-section of team teachers, special education teachers, special subject teachers including physical education teachers and specialists consisting of the school’s speech and language pathologist and the school nurse.

Interested teachers’ responses resulted in the participation of 7 to 8 faculty members per focus group. The participant profile shown in Table 2 demonstrates that respondents’ demographics matched the school’s demographics in terms of gender (85% female), ethnicity (91% Caucasian), age (between 23 and 74) and years of teaching experience (average 20 years). The high response rate and the favorable comparison of the sample’s demographics to the population of potential participants decreased the potential for non-response bias (Cook, Health, & Thompson, 2000). Focus group participants included regular and special education teachers, adjustment counselors, assistant principals, one school nurse, and one speech and language pathologist. Participating faculty included two males and 21 females, ranging in age from 29 to 60 years of age. Their span of total years teaching ranged from six to forty years, while years teaching at Lydon Middle School ranged from three years to forty years. Among the participants, 22 held master’s degrees and one held a bachelor’s degree. Table 2 illustrates the study participant demographics.
Table 2
Study participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classroom Teacher</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education Teacher</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>22</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–20</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Teaching at LMS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 1: Findings and Analysis

The first research question sought to identify practices in which the principal engages that teachers perceived as having a positive or negative influence on distributed leadership in a school:

What practices in which the principal engages do teachers perceive as having a positive or negative influence on distributed leadership?

In an effort to address this question, the research utilized data from an anonymous questionnaire to create a springboard for the focus group discussions. These data provided a context for the discussions and served to further develop the ideas shared in the survey. Focus
group participants shared their perceptions regarding what they believed to be factors that helped or hindered distributed leadership in a school. Focus group questions were developed from the ideas shared in the survey data. Table 3 illustrates the relationship between the first research question and the questions asked in the survey and further developed in the focus groups.

Table 3

*Relationship of survey questions and focus group questions to research question 1.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ1 What practices, in which the principal engages do teachers perceive as having a positive or negative influence on distributed leadership?</th>
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<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>SQ8: What obstacles may interfere with opportunities for teachers to participate in distributed leadership? Please be specific and where possible, provide one or more examples.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The section that follows identifies the practices in which a principal engages that teachers perceived as having a positive or negative influence on distributed leadership in a school. Themes that emerged from the anonymous survey and focus groups will be presented first, followed by narrative comments that outline and further explain ways in which survey respondents and focus group participants identified and discussed those practices.
Teachers responding to the survey identified several key themes related to principal support that influenced their decisions to participate. Among the themes included the following: (1) recognizing and valuing teachers’ efforts, (2) providing compensation to teachers for leadership work beyond the contractual school day, (3) providing time, resources, and class scheduling support, (4) empowering teachers through the words and actions of school and district leaders, (5) providing open and honest communication, and (6) ensuring that the mission and vision of the school are well understood by all members of the school community. Teachers perceived that these practices made either a positive or negative difference when deciding whether or not to get involved in distributed leadership.

**Principal support.** The survey and focus group data demonstrated that teachers perceive principal support to be one of the most important factors in their decisions to participate in distributed leadership. Without this support, teachers reported that they were less likely to make commitments to lead their colleagues or engage in leadership initiatives, as they relied on the principal to provide opportunities for them. They reported that these opportunities resulted in them feeling increasingly connected to the school community. Comments including the following represented respondents’ overall reports of feeling that being involved in leadership opportunities strengthens teachers’ connections to a school community and therefore, benefits the entire school community:

- Administration needs to give people opportunity and space to take on leadership roles.
- Giving teachers the idea that they have power in a school to make decisions increases their connection and responsibility to reach goals.

Comments such as these demonstrate the need for administrators to trust and empower their faculty to assume leadership positions in a school. Along these lines, another focus group
participant stated,

…if the climate is one in which they know their decisions will be trusted and listened to, like Katherine with her Student Voice, the people that worked with her—it is a huge undertaking, but a great idea. She must have felt that the administration was supportive of her idea and she felt trusted and therefore she took those steps to put the Student Voice together and followed through with the idea.

Upon hearing this, another participant shared, “The benefits are leadership would not just be from the top of the organization. Everyone would have the opportunity to participate and it would be leadership from within. It would be empowering to individuals.” One survey respondent had a similar thought, “I think distributive leadership would empower the school community. People would take more ownership and get more actively involved.” The idea that the principal directly influences teachers’ feelings of self-worth was pervasive in participants’ responses.

**Recognizing and valuing teachers’ efforts.** Survey respondents and focus group participants shared ideas that focused on the belief that recognizing and valuing teachers’ efforts fosters teacher leadership. Comments focused on the importance of the leader knowing and recognizing the strengths of her/his teachers. One focus group participant noted,

I think if the leader knows the strengths of the person that is very important and they can tap into those strengths. It can be just letting the person know that they are really strong in this area and that you really need their help. A tap on the shoulder. I need your help and I see this as your strength. I’m having difficulty doing whatever it is or I need some input. Can you help me? And build on that person’s strength. It’s just like with our students. That builds up people’s self-esteem and confidence in themselves and then they
feel needed and valued. I think that people in general want to feel needed so I think that is an important piece.

This participant’s comment is illustrative of others like her, who provided specific examples of ways in which they were personally affected by the invitation of a leader to participate in a leadership activity. Another participant shared, “Sometimes just being asked is what makes the difference. Teachers need to be asked because they want to feel wanted and needed and accepted. They can always say no.” Focus group participants agreed that being recognized by leaders was very important to them and shared specific examples of ways in which they had been directly impacted by leaders who believed in them. An example of this was evident in the following comment:

Even with the faculty meetings this year, with the workshops, we were able to teach one another using our strengths. We were more productive because we could do more and we were able to choose one area we wanted to study. We were learning things and we were doing things that we needed to do.

Principals who recognize teachers in formal and informal ways, including publicly recognizing individual teachers and teams of teachers during faculty meetings, or through written notes left in teacher mailboxes, positively influence their teachers. These small, yet significant gestures encourage teacher leadership and confirm the work being accomplished by teachers. These notions that simple acts of kindness have an influence on distributed leadership were noted in the anonymous questionnaire and further discussed in the focus groups. One teacher respondent shared, “I think something that we already do are those little things…When you all [administrators] stop by our classrooms, and then sometimes we get a little note after your visit, it really feels good. The little drops in the bucket. It is nice to hear it.” Another suggested, “Just
like we do with students. We share their strengths with them.” It is also important that principals recognize that their support needs to come in the form of sometimes advising teachers not to get involved, whether due to personal situations, either at home or professionally. In other words, because principal support influences teachers’ decisions to become involved in teacher leadership in significant ways, when they acknowledge that teacher participation may need to wait, their actions are appreciated by teachers.

Further, participants communicated that they were more inclined to assume leadership roles when personally invited by school leaders to get involved, than they would have been if a large-scale invitation was sent either verbally or electronically to the entire school community. One participant stated, “Sometimes just being asked is what makes the difference. Teachers need to be asked because they want to feel wanted and needed and accepted. They can always say no.” Upon hearing this, another participant added, “I think it would help if administration reached out to staff members and approached them one-on-one. That personal touch goes a long way for boosting teacher confidence.” In other words, rather than sending an impersonal e-mail blast to the entire school community, these personal invitations were widely viewed by focus group participants as having an even greater impact on teachers’ decisions to get involved than being offered monetary compensation. One focus group participant shared, “Provide compensation—maybe in the form of Professional Development Points (PDPs). If that is not possible, a simple invitation by the principal to share my practice with my colleagues gives me the confidence I need to participate in a leadership capacity.”

Comments including the following in Table 4 are evidence that teachers at LMS felt that being valued made them more likely to share in the school’s leadership.
Table 4

**Recognizing and valuing teachers’ efforts.**

- That is a great word—being valued. Yes that's it. Being valued is so important. In some jobs you never get that. That is what’s so special about being a teacher.
- Gives the teacher a sense of pride in herself and therefore is motivated to lead because she is appreciated.
- Sometimes just being asked to lead is what makes the difference. Teachers need to be asked because they want to feel wanted and needed and accepted…
- Create a school culture where teachers feel like their ideas are valuable and can be shared…The Character Education Committee has been positively received and administration has been eager to hear progress and offer support when necessary.

This theme regarding teachers’ desire to be recognized for their work, positively influenced their decisions to assume leadership roles within the school community. The idea was initially introduced in the survey’s open-ended responses and included the following comment, “Administrators may recognize strengths that teachers have—they could ask the teacher to share this strength.” Another survey respondent noted, “In addition, we need administration (especially the principal) to encourage teachers and students alike. Everyone needs to be recognized for the amazing work!” This sentiment continued throughout the focus group discussions as participants consistently responded that teachers feel valued and appreciated when recognized by administrators and teaching colleagues. One focus group participant shared the idea that job satisfaction increases as a consequence of feeling valued and appreciated. Another teacher participant stated, “I believe benefits to distributed leadership are a boost in morale and people feeling valued by administration.” These opinions validated the notion that being recognized makes teachers feel valued and appreciated.

**Empowering teachers through the words and actions of school and district leaders.**

It became apparent in the focus groups that when teachers are empowered by administrators to
lead, they view themselves in a different light. One focus group participant noted, “When you empower a teacher to be a leader they see their role in the building very differently.” Survey comments included, “Let teachers know that you see something in them that would promote leadership.” Another suggested, “Invitations—open ended and individual—specific to acknowledge good work in the area needed. I think it would help if administration reached out to staff members and approached them one-on-one. That personal touch goes a long way for boosting teacher confidence.” When asked what school administrators can do to promote distributed leadership, teachers expressed thoughts including the following,

Create the framework and make sure everyone understands what distributive leadership is and everyone’s role in the process. Make goals and expectations very clear. Provide follow through and take a task to completion.

It seems evident that teachers need to have the requisite information to make well-informed decisions regarding whether or not to become involved, while keeping in mind the school and district goals towards which they are aiming. As one teacher noted, “I think we need to start out small with some very achievable goals that we can reach together. Perhaps a group of teachers working together to establish something for the new building and then move on to more complex tasks.” The idea of setting small, measurable goals, before moving on to larger goals, appeared to be feasible, according to this teacher. Another teacher stated, “Listen to the pulse of the community, understand staff and be able to solicit help from people with particular talents, follow up and follow through, keep goals simple and clear and limited, provide relevance to school improvement.” Considerable attention was placed on setting and attaining goals.

When asked what factors encourage or support leadership involvement, one participant described the leader’s influence on teachers, indicating that, “becom[ing] excited and energized
by the leader . . . [they] want to do more and more because of that.” One survey respondent shared that, “Let[ting] teachers know that you see something in them that would promote leadership,” while another cited the importance of mutual respect and the importance of leaders encouraging faculty to share professional strengths, saying, “[Principals] truly viewing faculty as colleagues and asking them to assist in solving problems [would promote leadership].”

**Providing time, resources, and scheduling support.** Among the ideas shared within the focus group discussions, were those that included providing teachers with the time, direction and opportunities needed to assume leadership roles in a school environment that is safe and encouraging of teacher efforts. Survey responses included the following, “Administration needs to give people opportunity and space to take on leadership roles. Giving teachers the idea that they have power in a school to make decisions increases their connection and responsibility to reach goals,” illustrative of the need for teacher autonomy. Other comments represented ways in which to get involved in short, one-time opportunities. This idea resonated in the following comment from one participant, “An administrator might begin by offering specific, one-time opportunities, such as chairing (or co-chairing) a meeting or presenting a workshop.” Indeed, respondents expressing the need for time far surpassed any other reported needs for support. Principals, keeping this in mind, need to be consistently aware that the leadership opportunities that they provide their teachers may be offered on either a large scale or a small scale, depending on the need.

Along these lines, another participant shared, “Give time during the school day when possible. [Teachers have] busy lives and work should not be expected after putting in a full day with students.” Teachers’ desire for time and collaborative opportunities built into the school day to participate in meaningful leadership work cannot be dismissed, as focus group participants and
survey respondents continued to emphatically support the need for more of it. In fact, 51% of the total number of survey responses cited the need for additional time to do this work. Similarly, focus group discussions confirmed the need for time, resources and opportunities. One survey respondent suggested,

Administration needs to give people time, opportunity and space to take on leadership roles. Giving teachers the idea that they have power in a school to make decisions increases their connection and responsibility to reach goals. We need an appropriate space to meet and time to have thoughtful discussions.

This comment was reiterated a few times in other survey comments.

Providing compensation to teachers for leadership work beyond the contractual school day. Discussion regarding compensation for leadership roles and responsibilities was minimal in the focus groups when compared to the number of responses related to the need for compensation reported in the survey. One participant noted, “If given the choice, I vote for recognition as opposed to stipends because I think sometimes if there is no money in the budget for stipends, recognition goes a long way. Appreciation for the work that educators do outside of the classroom. Things like that.” Collectively, these comments that were shared in the focus group discussions signaled an appreciation for non-monetary compensation.

Survey responses directly noted that teachers strongly consider whether or not they will get involved in leadership opportunities based on the availability of compensation. This may be due to the anonymity of the survey or the fact that focus groups provided participants with an opportunity to reflect further as they discussed it with their colleagues. On the other hand, it may signal the fact that this researcher serves as the principal of the school, and therefore, participants
are less likely to sound too demanding. Table 5 contains survey comments regarding recognition in the form of compensation.

Table 5

*Providing compensation to teachers for leadership work beyond the contractual school day.*

- Most definitely, a stipend must accompany this duty.
- Stipends for work, meetings, etc… taking place after or before school day.
- If done outside of the school day, they should be compensated for their service.
- Stipends would be appreciated. Administrators are compensated for their leadership. Even a token stipend for the extra work would go a long way to help morale/participation.
- Time is money. Extra duties equal more money. We are highly trained professionals and wanting to be compensated for our time is not wrong/greedy. You pay coaches, you pay band leaders, you pay stipends for high school clubs. Same should go for us.
- Any leadership role should get pay. Professional development points towards certification.
- Most definitely, a stipend must accompany this duty.
- Stipends for work, meetings, and tasks that take place after or before school day.
- If done outside of the school day they should be compensated for their service.

As noted in Table 5, respondents voiced the importance of and need for a stipend for any time involved with distributed leadership activities that occurred outside of the school day. This form of recognition for teacher leadership efforts was also noted in the focus groups, but to a lesser degree, as noted previously.

Focus group participants were more vocal regarding their preference for human resources including mentors and advisors who support new teachers in the school district, than they were for monetary compensation. One focus group participant discussed the importance of her first year mentor as her colleagues listened intently,
Teachers are leaders just by their nature. They don’t realize that—like when I first started here, Janet (grade 6 teacher mentor) was a great leader. She would give me things and ask me things and that wasn't her role, but she took it upon herself to do that for me, and many people do that. You see that when you come in as a new person, you see things that others don’t see. They do it naturally. I think a lot of them do it naturally.

Following this comment, others in the group discussed their personal experiences when they participated in distributed leadership practice by either being mentors themselves or by having mentors. One participant shared her perspective, Mentoring a new teacher and sharing your ideas helps both the mentor and mentee grow professionally. Some of this work is as simple as sharing how we do things in the building.” Another participant added, “It is the everyday interactions with my mentor and my grade level colleagues that make the difference.” During the discussions, teachers also referenced the influence of technology mentors. One noted the work of a Curriculum Coordinator:

[Anna] had done such great foundation work in setting up the binders. She’s facilitating and use of Google Docs, which has been the biggest asset because it allows you to be part of the meeting. It’s like a virtual meeting. You are getting issues out there before you attend the meeting and then you're able to be present for the meeting. When you get to the meeting, you actually have collaborative time. We can then get right to the agenda and be able to go through our meetings very effectively—even without a leader in our social studies meetings.

Each comment shared was favorable and reflected the viewpoint that this type of support and activity is extremely valuable to teachers who are either new to teaching or new to the district.

This study revealed many supports for distributed leadership, but also revealed several
impediments. Some of the impediments involved logistical concerns including having the time and opportunity to meet during the school day. Others included teachers’ personal feelings of inadequacy and unpreparedness to lead their colleagues. Regardless, obstacles existed that interfered with teacher interest and involvement in distributed leadership.

**Potential obstacles that may interfere with teacher interest and participation in distributed leadership.** Among focus group participants’ feedback related to obstacles of distributed leadership, included the following themes: (1) it’s not my job, (2) lacking confidence in the ability to lead, (3) finding the time needed to participate, and (4) frustration regarding past experiences. These themes were shared in the context of the daily struggle to balance the sheer number of activities that occur simultaneously in a school, while balancing time spent planning lessons, assessing student learning, collaborating with colleagues, and communicating with parents during the school day. Though teachers are interested to become involved in something that interests them, it can be difficult to do. As one group participant shared,

> There are so many things. It can be overwhelming. For me, I would like to sign up for something that means a lot to me. There is so much that is constantly swirling around in the school that it can be difficult to sort through.

This idea of navigating through all of these competing interests left some teachers feeling frustrated.

**It’s not my job.** One focus group participant added, “I don't know if this makes sense or not, but when you have a room of 80 people and the decision needs to be made, it needs be made by a leader.” As suggested by the previous comments, there existed a level of irritation voiced between the focus group participants as it related to meetings and agenda items that consumed a significant amount of processing time, when in the end, teachers felt it was the leader’s job to
make final decisions that s/he felt were the best decisions to make. Further, the idea that leaders were compensated for their time while assuming leadership for curriculum and other responsibilities added to teachers’ impatience, as teachers were often not compensated for their efforts.

**Lacking confidence in the ability to lead.** Survey comments indicated that teachers often lack the confidence needed to be effective in the role of leader. One respondent shared, “I think the most significant obstacles are confidence and time. I think teachers may not see themselves as a leader...” Another echoed this sentiment, “Some teachers are unsure about taking leadership roles. Once administration steps back and teachers see that they can have control in some decision making, they tend to be more positive and invested in school/district success.” One survey comment included, “…may think they are not qualified to participate or may be self-conscious.” Focus group discussions mirrored these survey comments. One participant shared, “Sometimes, it is a level of confidence that people may not be ready or may not know how to lead.” These sentiments signaled questions relative to ways in which principals can foster confidence in those teachers who lack it.

**Finding the time needed to participate.** The perennial issue of not having enough time during the day to participate in distributed leadership was noted in the survey data and focus group discussions. When asked about potential obstacles that interfered with teacher interest and participation in distributed leadership, one respondent queried,

Time! Increased class size places additional demands on a classroom teacher’s (already overloaded) schedule. How can you ask people to join committees, take on extra duties, complete coursework, and deal with a move at the same time they need to devote
additional time to planning lessons, preparing material, grading more assignments and communicating with a greater number of parents?

This sentiment of not having enough time to perform one’s daily teaching duties, and therefore lacking the time required for additional responsibilities was prevalent in the questionnaire and the focus groups. One respondent shared additional concerns related to past involvement that proved futile, “Personal issues, day care, family, already involved in another committee. Already taking a course for license renewal. Exhausted after 8 hours with 60 students. Feeling that ideas were shot down in the past, so why bother?” There appeared an overall feeling of frustration that no matter how much time was spent working on committees and leading school-related projects, little, if any, progress would likely be made when all was said and done.

**Frustration regarding past experiences.** This issue related to ideas being “shot down” or unwelcomed by those in formal leadership roles also emerged in the focus groups. Discussion regarding teacher efforts that either went unnoticed or were not in alignment or agreement with the principal’s ideas and therefore, were never implemented revealed feelings of disillusionment and frustration. One participant noted,

Lack of time inside and outside of school, lack of recognition and the climate in the school. When I first started teaching, I was given the advice to close my door and just wait for the administrators to come and find me because they were coming and going all the time. I think if that is the climate in the building, teachers figure what is the point. This will pass too. State initiatives too. We had many administrative changes within my first 10 years of teaching.

Upon hearing this, one participant shared, “They [Teachers unwilling to lead] don't think it will make a considerable difference.” Another added,
If they’re like the old guard, they need to see what is going to work—particularly if they have worked with many administrators with different ideas and they have put a lot of time and effort in and it didn't come to fruition so they decide to hang back and wait. The sentiments voiced regarding teachers’ unwillingness to assume leadership roles in a school due to past experiences that were viewed as futile because their efforts were either not accepted and/or went unnoticed by the principal were shared with conviction. No one wants to spend time, energy and effort on tasks and activities that will either never progress to the next level or will never be acknowledged by the building leaders. When teachers have negative recollections of past experience, it becomes increasingly challenging to risk personal pride to become further involved by volunteering to serve in a leadership capacity.

**Research question 1 summary.** Survey respondents cited specific ways in which principal practices either positively or negatively influenced distributed leadership in a school. Focus group participants expounded upon those ideas and further discussed their perceptions regarding ways in which these and other principal practices either positively or negatively influenced teacher participation in distributed leadership. Participants shared personal experiences in which they had witnessed and been influenced by practices that either helped or hindered their leadership involvement. Those practices used by principals that teachers perceived as having a positive influence on distributed leadership included recognizing and valuing teachers’ efforts, providing compensation to teachers for leadership work beyond the contractual school day, providing time, resources, and class scheduling support, empowering teachers through the words and actions of school and district leaders, providing open and honest communication, and ensuring that the mission and vision of the school are well understood by all members of the school community. Focus group participants shared thoughts and ideas
regarding obstacles that they perceived as being responsible for interfering with teacher interest and participation in distributed leadership. Among those obstacles included feelings by teachers that it [distributed leadership] is not their job, lacking confidence in the ability to lead, finding the time needed to participate, and frustration regarding past experiences.

**Research Question 2: Findings and Analysis**

What do teachers perceive as the benefits and drawbacks of the principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school?

The second research question sought to understand the benefits and drawbacks of the principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school. Survey data was analyzed and later used as talking points to guide three focus group discussions. The results of the discussions further identified ways in which a school principal endorses and supports a distributed leadership model in a school and provided insight into the benefits and drawbacks of such a model. Table 6 illustrates the relationship between the second research question, the survey questions and the focus group questions.
Table 6

*Relationship of survey questions and focus group questions to research question 2.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ2</th>
<th>What do teachers perceive as the benefits and drawbacks of the principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SQ7: What can school administrators do to promote distributed leadership amongst teachers?</td>
<td>FGQ4: What factors might encourage or support teachers in taking on leadership roles in their school? What additional supports, if any, would be helpful to teachers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQ5: Based on your experience and knowledge, what resources are needed in order for teachers to participate in distributed leadership?</td>
<td>FGQ8: What difficulties do you think might result from having teachers participate in distributed leadership? What measures do you think could be taken to remove or minimize such obstacles?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQ6: Based on your experience and knowledge, what obstacles might exist that could interfere with teacher interest in practicing distributed leadership?</td>
<td>FGQ7: What do you think are the benefits of distributed leadership?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQ9: What do you think are the benefits of distributed leadership?</td>
<td>FGQ10: What do you think are the drawbacks of distributed leadership?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQ10: What do you believe are the drawbacks of distributed leadership? Please be specific and where possible, provide one or more examples.</td>
<td>FGQ11: Would you like to elaborate on anything that we’ve discussed, or are there other ideas on this topic that have occurred to you that you would like to share?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The section that follows presents the benefits of a principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school. Themes that emerged from the anonymous survey and focus groups will be presented first, followed by narrative comments that outline and further explain ways in which survey respondents and focus group participants identified and discussed those benefits and drawbacks.

Teachers responding to the survey identified several key themes related to the benefits and drawbacks of a principal’s efforts to support a distributed leadership model. Among the themes related to benefits include the following: (1) distributed leadership empowers people, (2) distributed leadership improves collaboration, (3) distributed leadership positively impacts personal and professional growth, (4) distributed leadership empowers teachers to lead, and (5)
distributed leadership increases teachers’ feelings of connectedness to the school community. Teachers perceive that these benefits of a principal’s efforts significantly contribute to the success of a distributed leadership model.

**Benefits of the principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school.** Many of the messages communicated by the participants regarding the benefits of the principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model were clear and simple, yet each message signified the importance of distributed leadership, such as, “You cannot be everywhere all the time and this allows you to branch out more.” The benefits initially shared through the survey data were further explored through the focus group discussions.

**Distributed leadership empowers people.** Survey respondents and focus group participants noted the appreciation felt when principals and other building leaders delegated responsibilities to teachers. They expressed feelings of validation when asked for their input into curriculum and instruction initiatives, new supervision and evaluation protocols, and leadership initiatives. Teacher comments referenced the importance of feeling valued when given the permission and encouragement to lead. One focus group participant shared, “I think a major benefit is the teacher feeling valued and given the ability to accomplish more.” According to narrative extracted from both survey and focus group data, feeling validated contributed to teachers’ feelings of empowerment. Additionally, a benefit is the principal expanding her influence beyond what she can accomplish alone. As an illustration, one focus group participant shared the following:

> When you delegate, when you provide these leadership roles, you are able to reach further and further out into the community and therefore have the ability to do more—as
opposed to holding onto everything yourself and being one person or one administrative team.

No sooner had one participant finished sharing the perceived benefits when another followed suit, “By sharing strengths, we can tap into each other because we all have individual skills and strengths. Definitely connects everyone more. It makes the building seem smaller.” This led to a discussion regarding the appreciation felt by colleagues when they had the opportunity to collaborate and share lessons. Typically this collaboration happens in grade level and curriculum meetings when reviewing student work and assessments, and planning interventions for students who either need additional supports in the classroom or demonstrate that they are ready for extensions. It may be that when teachers believe that their contributions matter, they are more apt to contribute to collaborative opportunities in meaningful ways.

**Distributed leadership improves collaboration.** Participants in each of the focus groups enthusiastically endorsed the benefits of the principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school. Many of the messages shared between the participants were clear and simple, yet each message signified the importance of shared leadership, “You cannot be everywhere all the time and this allows you to branch out more.” Participants in one focus group promoted the idea that people working together increases efficiency and productivity, and articulated the need to set goals and assess progress toward those goals. According to the participants engaged in two of the three conversations, once learning goals were identified and time spent during curriculum and other meetings became focused on achieving those goals and establishing new goals, team members felt more connected with one another and believed that their work was more purposeful than it had been before the meetings.
were structured and facilitation was shared. When asked how the schedule impacts professional practice, one member stated,

The most amazing thing that I can think of would be to reserve one period out of our six-day cycle that is devoted to this work. Therefore, no out of school time would be necessary, and students would not need to remember meeting days/times, and would not need to arrange for rides home. This way everyone could potentially be a part of this amazing organization.

Survey responses coincided with ideas shared in the focus group discussions, as survey respondents shared specific examples of ways in which they had either directly been impacted by or witness to some of the benefits of distributed leadership. Focus group participants believed that distributing leadership across teams throughout the school resulted in effective, widespread, collaboration. One teacher stated,

Even with the faculty meetings this year, with the workshops, we were able to teach one another using our strengths. We were more productive because we could do more and we were able to choose one area we wanted to study. We were learning things and we were doing things that we needed to do.

This idea of distributed leadership as evidenced by sharing facilitation at meetings and contributing to agendas by using Google Docs, and other online means of communication, provided additional ways to influence the work being accomplished.

**Distributed leadership positively impacts personal and professional growth.** Another benefit included the idea that leadership opportunities lead to personal and professional growth. One teacher noted, “Benefits include a chance for teachers to make change and have your voice heard. Chance for leadership opportunities contributes to personal and professional growth.” In
other words, when teachers are invited to be leaders in a school, they benefit from the personal satisfaction and confidence that are gained from assuming a leadership role, while also having an opportunity to effect change. Teachers grow professionally when they lead their colleagues. The experiences gained by planning and preparing for meetings and by using the leadership skills necessary to facilitate effectively contribute to an incredible learning process.

Participants voiced appreciation for being part of an organization where leadership is shared and realized by many members of the school community. When asked to share the benefits of a principal’s practice to support a distributed leadership model, one teacher noted,

The benefits are leadership would not just be from the top of the organization. Everyone would have the opportunity to participate and it would be leadership from within. It would be empowering to individuals. And the leadership would be structured with more of a level playing field.

Leadership opportunities that span a variety of venues and interests contribute to teacher involvement and increase the likelihood that shared leadership will be sustained over time.

**Distributed leadership empowers teachers to lead.** Survey respondents expressed the view that empowerment leads to long-range teacher investment and focused determination to take action. Participants shared this belief with the premise that when all members of a community are invited and encouraged to become involved in the community, there exist no reasons why some members of the community are in leadership roles and others are not. One teacher explained, “Teachers have a wide range of strengths and areas of expertise. When asked to share these strengths, they feel more invested—particularly when their work influences change.” It appeared evident that when people have opportunities to be involved and they realize
the effects that their work has on influencing change, their investment in the school community increases.

Once given the opportunity to lead, it becomes the teacher’s decision whether or not he/she is willing to assume a leadership role. According to focus group participants, if teachers make the decision not to participate in a leadership capacity, that is their choice. It is the principal’s responsibility to offer leadership opportunities to all teachers. However, if some choose not to participate, they cannot complain that they were never given the option to do so.

Fullan (2001) contended that cultivating leadership in teachers plays a significant role in creating effective change and supporting progress over time. He states that “cultivating leaders at many levels” is crucial if principals aim to create effective change in a school:

An organization cannot flourish—at least, not for long—on the actions of the top leader alone…To a certain extent, a school leader’s effectiveness in creating a culture of sustained change will be determined by the leaders he or she leaves behind. (Fullan, 2002, p. 20)

Teachers respond positively when school leaders cultivate a culture that breeds teacher leaders. One participant’s personal investment with the process of making the change from a traditional grading system to a standards-based reporting system was viewed positively,

If done properly, everyone has a voice and more gets accomplished because everyone is working together to achieve a common goal. The move to standards-based assessment was an example of successful distributed leadership. Although this was a mandate, people were given an opportunity to shape how it would look in our schools.

Having the freedom to effect change was a benefit voiced by the participants as they felt their efforts were being validated by the principal and other leaders in the school.
Distributed leadership increases teachers’ feelings of connectedness to the school community. Comments shared in the survey indicated that teachers sought to share knowledge with their colleagues, particularly when they were observed to possess a particular strength.

When asked how principals can facilitate distributed leadership practices, one teacher indicated, “Tapping into areas of expertise of teachers and providing support and encouragement of the teacher.” Being noticed by an administrator for demonstrating an area of strength was repeatedly mentioned by focus group participants and survey respondents. In addition, the desire to make a difference in the school community was noted by teachers as having influenced their decisions to extend themselves beyond the walls of the classroom and influenced their decisions to become further invested in the school community. One participant pondered,

It could give teachers the feeling of being able to make more of a difference. Would likely make people more invested in the school community beyond their classrooms. It would draw on the strengths and talents of a wider pool of potential leaders.

The idea that one teacher has the potential to influence a cadre of teachers was a powerful one and one that was recognized by other members of the focus groups as being critically important. Upon hearing this participant’s insight, another teacher added, “It seems that distributed leadership allows the school to thrive under the guidance of many individuals, each with unique strengths to contribute.” Conversation continued regarding the need for faculty to connect with others in the school community, while playing a role in the building of the community. Table 7 contains comments from focus group participants regarding resources needed to participate in distributed leadership.
Table 7

*Resources needed to participate in distributed leadership.*

- I think it would help the school feel more like a community rather than specific teams or teachers or administrators with individual agendas.
- I think that distributed leadership allows for everyone to feel more connected within Lydon, and to have more of a vital role in building our community.
- I believe teachers have more of a vested interest in the school community/culture if they are part of the ‘building’ of it. They feel valued.
- I think it is an excellent learning opportunity to be more involved in the school and to work closely with colleagues that you often do not have much contact.

The sentiments expressed previously indicated a strong level of support for a community that values teacher involvement, teacher leadership, and teacher collaboration, several of which were considered to be the direct result of a principal’s practices to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school.

The section that follows outlines the drawbacks of a principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school. Themes that emerged from the anonymous questionnaire and focus group data will be presented, followed by narrative that extends and further identifies ways in which survey respondents and focus group participants discussed those drawbacks.

**Drawbacks of the principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school.** The number of drawbacks of a principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school were significantly less than the number of benefits, according to the survey and focus group data. The degree to which survey respondents and focus group participants identified and discussed the benefits of principal practices was notably more extensive than any of the discussions involving the drawbacks of such practices. However, comments made on the anonymous questionnaire and discussions that followed in the focus
groups identified some concerns. Dominant themes that emerged from the survey data included (1) teacher frustration, (2) delayed decision making, (3) interpersonal dynamics, and (4) a sense of futility.

**Teacher frustration.** While it is undoubtedly true that teachers enter into the field of education because they enjoy working with children and seek to have a positive impact on their lives, it may also be true that teachers are more comfortable and confident in front of their students than they are in front of their colleagues.

When asked to identify the drawbacks of a distributed leadership model in a school, one survey respondent shared concerns including the idea that teachers feel overwhelmed by increasing responsibilities and the degree to which their efforts to fulfill those responsibilities impact them and the way in which they regard their colleagues. Concerns regarding the idea of not being on the “same level anymore” were similarly presented by survey respondents and focus group participants. One survey comment included, “People feel spent. We have large class sizes. Too many hands in the pot. Teachers may feel that their co-workers who are now teacher leaders are not on same level anymore.” Other comments emerged from focus group discussions and consisted of the following:

I think sometimes people may feel discouraged by it [Distributed Leadership] because I think sometimes people have tried to take on leadership roles and then it doesn’t work out the way they planned and so they’re like, ‘Oh forget it’ or ‘I'll never do that again.’ Those are pieces that are tough to get those people back into it if they have worked really hard on something and it did not work out the way they had thought it would. Sometimes, if the ideas of workers are vetoed for some reason then people feel what was the point. I spent all my time doing this and the principal said no, so now they ask, ‘Why bother?’
You’re really not heard or listened to. You try to make change and it doesn’t work. The person is then saying I’m done. That can be another reason why someone is hesitant because you don’t know what that past has been like in another building or in other districts when they have taken these chances.

There is peer pressure that’s hard to ignore. I am not sure why that is. I have heard people say that, but there still is the rumor that if you do not have professional status [tenure], you should not be a mover or a shaker because it will reflect poorly on you. These related sentiments signal feelings of unease on the part of those teachers who would otherwise make the decision to get involved, but lack confidence taking that step due to past and present experiences that contribute to feelings of unease.

Frustration that included working with people who have challenging personalities was also identified as a drawback, though the degree to which participants’ viewed this obstacle differed. One participant’s comments was illustrative of a respectful understanding of personalities and other characteristics of colleagues,

I think people are very passionate about what they believe in and there are people who have very specific ideas and sometimes can be inflexible with others’ ideas. It is not that they are wrong but they like things the way they like them and they see no need to change and that is not wrong, but it can be difficult if you want to move forward.

Another noted,

Too many people involved in the process can make it harder to complete. Yet, if you don’t offer an open invitation, some people may not accept any decisions made because they were not part of the process. It can be difficult working with some dominating/negative personalities.
Similar comments were shared in another focus group and included the following:

I hate to say it but there is also the difficult personalities that you need to take into consideration; those people who pushed back at you because you want to try something new and you want to be creative and take something on in addition to the daily duties… It may look poorly on you because you want to get involved. There are some challenges. I hate to sound negative.

Following this statement, the focus group discussion became increasingly emotional, as colleagues shared experiences with colleagues who were unwilling to listen to others’ ideas and who were resistant to taking risks, or questioned the need to change, no matter what that change entailed. When one comment surfaced in the group, several others followed and were consequently discussed between the group members. Other participants appeared to be less tolerant of domineering colleagues and showed a level of impatience, as evident in this comment, “I think sometimes louder voices overcome the unsung heroes and those quieter voices are not heard, yet they have a great deal to offer.” Survey responses revealed similar levels of reluctance to involve too many people in leadership opportunities. One respondent shared,

Too many people involved in the process can make it harder to complete. Yet, if you don’t offer an open invitation, some people may not accept any decisions made because they were not part of the process. It can be difficult working with some dominating/negative personalities.

The notion of working with people who display challenging personalities was a challenge that was referenced repeatedly in both the survey data and focus group discussions.

**Delayed decision-making.** Among the drawbacks identified in the survey data and focus group discussions included feelings of ambiguity regarding the idea that no one person would
ultimately be responsible for making the final decision and progress would come to a halt.

Survey comments revealed, “Sometimes with so many hands in the pot, there can be a sense that no one is in charge. Progress can take a lot longer if final decisions are not made.” One survey respondent shared,

In order for there to be one fluid vision, there does sometimes need to be an identifiable ‘head.’ ‘Too many cooks in the kitchen’ can lead to difficulty in effective timely decision making. When difficult decisions need to be made, sometimes they are best made by one expert source. It definitely will take more time and effort to work with everyone to find a better way.

One focus group participant similarly shared, “I don't know if this makes sense or not, but when you have a room of 80 people and the decision needs to be made, it needs to be made by a leader.” Another stated, “Too much conversation, not enough action. Committees act independently without regard for overlapping schedules or duties.” The concern raised that independent teams and committees could unknowingly make decisions that were in conflict with one another due to the fact that they had not appropriately communicated with one another was articulated as another drawback. These concerns were voiced by several focus group participants. Another participant shared, “People ask, ‘Where can I learn? What can I do next to help? How can I contribute to my school community?’—there is a great deal of uncertainty.” Not only did participants share concerns regarding the unknown, as it related to distributed leadership, they also referred to past experiences that proved frustrating.

**Interpersonal dynamics.** Focus group participants shared specific examples of personal experiences working in schools or in the corporate world and recalling times when they were asked for their opinions, only to realize that their opinions did not seem to matter. When one
participant reflected on a past experience and shared, “I decided that I was not going to contribute my ideas because no one seems to be listening to them,” several others nodded their heads in agreement and extended the conversation, while sharing personal stories of their own, including times when they had been invited to be part of the decision making process, yet the invitation appeared to be made in vain, as their decision was never validated. This drawback clearly made several participants feel hesitant about the value of distributed leadership.

Research question 2 summary. Teachers revealed several benefits and drawbacks of a principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school, as evident in the survey responses and focus group discussions. According to teacher participants, among the greatest benefit for teachers included the idea that distributed leadership empowers people. Other benefits included the ideas that distributed leadership improves collaboration; distributed leadership positively impacts personal and professional growth; distributed leadership empowers teachers to lead; and distributed leadership increases teachers’ feelings of connectedness to the school community.

According to some focus group participants, benefits also include feelings of validation when principals are well-informed regarding the involvement of the faculty. Teachers shared that they seek to be involved with initiatives and activities that interest and motivate them, and they appreciate when administrators are familiar with that involvement and show interest in the work being accomplished. One teacher explained:

For me, I would like to sign up for something that means a lot to me. There is so much that is constantly swirling around in the school that it can be difficult to navigate through. I think that is important in terms of the administration's leadership to know what teachers are doing during the school day and after the school day. Sometimes I feel as though
administrators do not know all the outside work that I'm doing. As busy as we are, we need to try to get that information from the teachers. I just think if I'm doing all these things after school and supporting the mission of the school, then I think it is really important for administration to know about it.

Several participants in the focus group agreed with this comment and shared ways in which building leaders have acknowledged their work, including placing handwritten notes in their mailboxes at school and leaving flowers on their desks following a School Committee or other presentation. Having knowledge of and appreciation for the leadership efforts of the faculty was a clear benefit of distributed leadership in a school.

Among the greatest drawbacks included the concern that too many leaders delays the decision making process and interferes with meaningful progress. Some teachers shared their discomfort with many individual groups within the school making decisions that have a long-lasting impact on the community. Comments revealed that these types of decisions are best made by school leaders who formally hold these positions (i.e., principal or assistant principal), because they were hired to make important decisions that influence the entire school community. Other drawbacks included the idea that teachers become frustrated when they feel their opinions don’t make a difference, and when the interpersonal dynamics of a group are negative or strained, and the idea that too many leaders have the potential to send conflicting messages to their teams and this may lead to indecisiveness and the fragmentation of the school’s mission.

Obstacles shared by survey respondents and focus group participants also included frustration caused by a lack of time to get involved – both during and after the school day, as family and other personal commitments, along with professional responsibilities including coursework and requirements related to teacher licensing, conflict with their ability to be
involved outside of the classroom. Some participants commented on the scope of possible activities in which to be involved and shared that they become overwhelmed when trying to “sort through” the number of clubs and activities. Others noted that their efforts appear to be wasted because their involvement does not always seem “to make any kind of considerable difference.” When this occurs, faculty take a back seat and become less inclined to volunteer again.

Summary of Findings

The findings of this study indicate that it is important for principals to consider teachers’ perception of principal practices, which they believe to have a positive or negative influence on distributed leadership. Teacher perception as it relates to the benefits and drawbacks of a principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school is important when considering ways in which to strengthen distributed leadership in a school community. Survey data indicated that the majority of faculty (95%) who responded to the survey overwhelmingly believe that it is important for a principal to support teacher participation in distributed leadership and feel that distributed leadership supports teachers’ professional growth. The data additionally revealed that teachers strongly support the idea that a school’s culture needs to include the opportunity for the growth of distributed leadership practices and that these leadership practices should align with the school’s mission, vision, and goals.

The two research questions were explored through survey and focus group data. The first research question, “What practices in which the principal engages do teachers perceive as having a positive or negative influence on distributed leadership?” revealed that teachers appreciate being recognized by the school principal; seek compensation for their work; need time, resources and organizational support in order to lead; seek to be empowered by leaders in the building; seek open and honest communication; and want to understand the mission and vision of the
school. Focus group participants shared that principals’ recognition of teachers’ efforts is paramount and contributes to their decisions to get involved. Other themes that arose from focus group discussions revealed that teachers learn from effective administrators; teachers need time to collaborate and lead; and shared leadership is prevalent in a strong school culture.

Themes revealed in the survey and focus group data revealed, as they related to the second research question included the belief that distributed leadership empowers people; distributed leadership improves collaboration; distributed leadership positively impacts personal and professional growth; distributed leadership empowers teachers to lead; and distributed leadership increases teachers’ feelings of connectedness to the school community. Among the drawbacks shared in the data included teacher frustration, delayed decision-making, interpersonal dynamics, and a sense of futility. Obstacles shared that could potentially interfere with this work included a lack of time both during the school day and outside of the school day, as scheduling conflicts and family commitments interfere with opportunities to be more involved; a lack of acknowledgement of teacher participation by administrators; and a lack of interest in activities and initiatives that faculty deem to be unmotivating.

As evidenced by this study, distributed leadership in a school community contributes to feelings of appreciation, empowerment, affirmation, and ownership, as faculty members seek to be part of the decision-making process. Additionally, this leadership model increases a sense of belonging and connectedness, which allows a large middle school to feel smaller. The drawbacks include work beyond contractual duties for little to no compensation; feelings of guilt when faculty are unable to or are uncertain of how to get involved; the time needed to be involved; and the uncertainty that results from having many leaders in the building.
The benefits and drawbacks of a principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school were initially explored through conducting a survey and further examined through focus group discussions. Themes that came out in the survey data related to the benefits and drawbacks of such efforts included perspectives regarding a sense of ownership within the school; the role that trust and confidence play when deciding whether or not to lead; the implications of working with colleagues who display challenging personalities; the idea that more is accomplished when leadership is shared; and the question of whether or not progress is actually made when many people are involved in the decision-making process. Themes elicited from survey data were further explored in focus group discussions. These discussions illustrated participants’ points of view in greater depth and detail than would have occurred through conducting the survey alone. The conversation that developed as a result of having an opportunity to listen to colleagues and contribute ideas, provided additional perspective to the respondents’ survey responses. While focus group participants confirmed survey findings, several additional facets of these themes were revealed in the group discussions. Specifically, focus group participants placed greater emphasis on time and collegial collaboration than on monetary compensation when speaking about resources needed to support distributed leadership. Focus group participants also expressed a greater degree of certainty when discussing the effects of the principal’s actions when personally inviting faculty to become involved in specific leadership opportunities. Participants provided specific examples of interactions between principal and faculty, noting this encouragement as having a lasting impact on their decisions to become involved in leadership. Finally, respondents and participants shared the drawbacks and obstacles that sometimes interfered with their decisions to become further involved in the
community, specifically personal and professional obligations that take priority at various times throughout their careers.

**Chapter V: Discussion of the Research Findings**

In this final chapter, this researcher provides a summary of the study including a recap of the problem of practice, the statement of significance, the methodology utilized, the findings of the research, an examination of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework, the review of the literature, potential limitations, and implications for practice. The goal of this research included developing an understanding of teachers’ perceptions of principal practices that teachers believe influence distributed leadership in a middle school, and to examine the benefits and drawbacks of principal efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school. Following a brief overview of the rationale, methodology and summary of key results, findings are discussed through the lens of distributed leadership theory and relevant scholarly research. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the practical aspects of the study, including its limitations and its significance of study in the field, next steps, and concludes with personal reflections.

**Summary of the Problem**

Schools throughout the United States face significant challenges to respond swiftly and appropriately to the demands associated with preparing students for a 21st century education in a standards-based environment (Elmore, 2004). In order for schools to meet local, state and national mandates for improved student achievement, school and district personnel are called upon to work together to ensure that rigorous mandates are met. In order for this task to be accomplished, leadership roles and responsibilities must be purposefully and consistently distributed between and among faculty. Elmore described this distribution of leadership in the
following way: “Distributed leadership…derivates from the fact that large-scale improvement requires concerted action among people with different areas of expertise and a mutual respect that stems from an appreciation of the knowledge and skill requirements of different roles” (p. 87). The problem of practice explored in this research is the gap between the concept of distributed leadership and teachers’ perceptions of this concept when a principal enacts a distributed leadership model in a school. This research investigated the experiences and insights of teachers to determine some of the ways in which the practices of a school principal can foster and support positive outcomes through distributed leadership and sought to identify the benefits and drawbacks of such efforts.

Questions remain regarding the specific practices in which principals engage that positively influence teachers and other faculty to assume leadership roles in a school. Further, there continues to be uncertainty regarding the perceived benefits and drawbacks of the principals’ efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model. In an effort to address these questions, this study explored teachers’ perceptions regarding resources needed for participation in distributed leadership; obstacles that interfered with teacher interest and participation in distributed leadership; principal practices that promoted distributed leadership; and the benefits and drawbacks associated with principal practices that influence distributed leadership in a school.

Distributed leadership is nonexclusive and can be realized through the social interactions between leaders and followers (Spillane, 2005). Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001) contend, “In our distributed view, leadership practice is constituted in the interaction of leaders and their social and material situations” (p. 27). These interactions and situations pave the way for reflective practice. As referenced earlier, some of the principal practices perceived by
teachers to have had a positive influence on distributed leadership, along with the associated benefits of distributed leadership, have been noted.

A distributed leadership model, as explained by educational researchers, is in response to the idea that no one person can successfully lead a school, but rather schools should be led using a collaborative model that involves the participation of school faculty through shared decision-making (Gronn, 2008). It is this shared decision-making that contributes to a collective effort aimed at addressing the needs of the school community. Schools are expected to be increasingly diligent in ensuring that all students learn at high levels and that students’ rate of growth, in relation to their academic peers, is strong. In order for students to achieve academic success, principals are called upon to cultivate professional learning communities. As DuFour and Eaker (1998) contended, “The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities (p. xi).” Professional learning communities promote the idea that schools consist of communities of learners where teachers are actively involved in all aspects of school improvement and where the belief that professional growth leads to student success is widespread.

Student achievement is assessed in several different ways, and though some of these assessments are school based, others including MCAS, are created at the state level and are common in public schools across the state of Massachusetts. In several districts, central office administrators, principals, and teachers review these academic achievement data [MCAS] collaboratively and work together to ensure that students’ academic performance is strong and that their student growth levels are consistent with pre-determined benchmarks. School principals are called upon to review these assessment data with faculty; discuss instructional implications; and set goals for improvement. This work requires a team effort shared by many
individuals in the school, including teachers, instructional coaches, curriculum coordinators, and administrators. When people are given a say in policy and responsibility for implementing it, he/she is more likely to have a vested interest in its success. Teachers seek collaboration and teacher leadership opportunities, which ultimately result in personal and professional growth. This distribution of leadership is just one of several ways in which sharing responsibilities has the potential to inform and strengthen teaching and learning, as teachers share best practices while working collaboratively to reach individual and team goals. However, teachers, like many professionals around the world, struggle to work collaboratively with some of their colleagues. It can also be stated with relative confidence that the roles and responsibilities of the classroom teacher have dramatically increased over the past several years due to the social, emotional, behavioral, and academic needs of their students.

Teachers’ perceptions of principal practices at Lydon Middle School were obtained through the use of an anonymous survey and focus group discussions. These forums for feedback were created to answer the following research questions:

1. What practices in which the principal engages, do teachers perceive as having a positive or negative influence on distributed leadership?

2. What do teachers perceive as the benefits and drawbacks of the principals’ efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school?

Survey and focus group questions were organized under each of the two research questions. The goal of this research involved contributing to the body of literature that currently exists, while identifying principal practices that positively or negatively impact distributed leadership in a school and examines the benefits and drawbacks of these efforts.
Review of the Methodology

This qualitative analysis included the use of anonymous questionnaires and focus groups that were designed to elicit teacher input regarding distributed leadership. Data from the questionnaires were analyzed. Focus group data was recorded, transcribed by this researcher, and reviewed by all focus group participants for the purpose of member checking. Themes that emerged from the data were coded and measured in relation to each of the research questions.

The online anonymous questionnaire was provided to 57 interested faculty members using SurveyMonkey, a web-based company that enables users to create their own web-based surveys (see Appendix A). Results were obtained using data collection and analysis tools available through the website. Following the analysis of the survey data, focus group questions were developed using the data results. These questions guided the three focus group discussions, providing talking points throughout. Focus groups were designed to expand upon the ideas and opinions shared in the anonymous survey. The small group format provided an environment that was conducive to high participation levels, with a maximum of eight of faculty members in each group. The questionnaire data was summarized during the introductory segment of the discussions. Two iPads were placed at either end of the table at which the participants were seated to aptly record all comments. Member-checking was used to verify participants’ agreement with the collected data and allowed them to review the transcripts for accuracy.

Triangulation of data sources (anonymous questionnaires, focus group interviews, and reflective note-taking) ensured validity and reliability as it cross-checked the data, which allowed the researcher to be more confident in the findings to the extent that each data source corroborated the other. Triangulation also shed light upon common themes found in different sources (Creswell, 2007) and strengthened dependability and credibility (Merriam, 1998). Data
from each data source were compared and contrasted in order to better establish how teachers’ responses corresponded across the different sources.

**Summary of the Findings**

The first research question inquired about the specific practices in which the principal engages that have had either a positive or negative impact on distributed leadership. Teachers responding to the survey and participating in the focus group discussions identified six themes that impact their decisions to participate: (1) recognizing and valuing teachers’ efforts, (2) providing compensation to teachers for leadership work beyond the contractual school day, (3) providing time, resources, and scheduling support, (4) empowering teachers through the words and actions of school and district leaders, (5) providing open and honest communication, and (6) ensuring that the mission and vision of the school are well understood by all members of the school community. Teachers perceive that these practices make a significant difference when deciding whether or not to get involved in distributed leadership. As discussed in Chapter 2, research indicates that when leadership is cultivated in teachers and teachers become involved in the life of the school, teacher investment increases and learning improves. The themes that emerged from the survey served as the umbrella from which the focus group discussions occurred.

**Recognizing and valuing teachers’ efforts.** Understandably, recognition of teacher efforts served as a resounding theme throughout the study. Teacher comments revealed through the survey and confirmed by comments made in each of the three focus groups included the importance of teachers being recognized by district leaders, building administrators, and teaching colleagues, for the work they do both in and out of the classroom. One focus group participant commented, “Teachers assume leadership roles in their schools because they become excited and
energized by the leader, and want to do more and more because of that.” Another opinion that was shared by several others included the following,

I think one positive aspect of distributed leadership is it is the principal's job to lead, but to lead the teachers to take other responsibilities and use their strengths in order to benefit the whole school and not just within their classrooms. If a principal sees someone's strength, they are able to lead them and encourage them to take that chance. Sometimes people may not feel they are ready or they do not know how to go about doing these kinds of things, and if the principal sees the potential, then he or she should encourage them to take that chance.

Comments such as this indicated that teachers appreciate being recognized for their work and seek validation, along with an invitation by administrators to share their expertise with others. Focus group discussions consistently revealed a strong connection between teacher involvement in decision-making and positive school culture, as indicated in the following,

I think it is the climate of your building that will improve with more opportunities for teachers to be involved. Teachers want to be part of the decision-making. If everybody is on board, then you have a better climate because people have made decisions. It is that skill piece. We can tap into each other because we all have individual skills and strengths.

Though the term “distributed leadership” was not referenced specifically, remarks regarding this type of leadership including teacher involvement, shared decision-making, shared facilitation, and shared leadership responsibility, were referenced throughout the focus group conversations.

Providing compensation. Study participants considered factors that influenced their decisions to become further involved in the school community and considered ways in which to
balance personal and professional commitments. Study participants shared ways in which compensation contributed to the decision making process when deciding whether or not they were willing and able to become involved in teacher leadership opportunities. Comments including the following indicated that some teachers feel compensation through stipends is a necessary ingredient for the “extra work” that leadership entails, “Stipends would be appreciated. Administrators are compensated for their leadership. Even a token stipend for the extra work would go a long way to help morale/participation.” Other participants stated that compensation should be provided to faculty involved in leadership that requires time spent beyond the school day, “Time—if meetings are held after school, then teachers should be compensated. We shouldn’t have school leaders who are being paid to lead and then have others who are doing their work and not being compensated. This is not good for school culture.” While compensation was on the forefront of several respondents to the questionnaire, the need for recognition trumped the need for compensation in the minds of focus group participants, “I put recognition as opposed to stipends because I think sometimes if there is no money in the budget for stipends, recognition goes a long way. Appreciation for the work that educators do outside of the classroom—things like that, is so important to me.” It is this researcher’s assumption that this kind of sentiment may have been due to the fact that the teachers who volunteered to participate in the focus groups were active and engaged members of the school community and sought to be involved, regardless of whether or not pay is attached to their commitments. One of the overarching findings is that teachers feel a very basic human need to be appreciated for their work.

**Providing time, resources, and scheduling support.** Inherent in several of the references made regarding critical supports for teachers included several that do not cost money,
but do require creative thinking and problem solving. Among those needs were time, resources and organizational support. Study participants communicated repeatedly that time was an essential component to effective distributed leadership. Survey comments coupled with focus group statements described the importance of time. In fact, when responding to the survey question, “Based on your experience and knowledge, what resources are needed in order for teachers to participate in distributed leadership?” Interestingly, 26 of the 57 respondents shared that time was necessary. One participant stated: “Time. Teachers should have time during their workday when they are not with students and do not have to provide coverage and lessons for their classes when they participate. If done outside of the school day they should be compensated for their service.”

Resources in the form of training, professional development, and team building was the next most prevalent viewpoint shared; as evident in the following survey response: “Teachers need collaboration time, access to new educational ideas, and frequent professional development in order to participate in distributed leadership. I also think it is important for teachers to have an understanding of who their colleagues are (e.g., teaching philosophies, strengths, etc.), as well as a clear idea of the strengths and challenges of the school.” Study participants noted that this work cannot happen effectively without open lines of communication and a solid understanding of the mission and vision of the school.

Empowering teachers through the words and actions of school and district leaders. Study participants were clear that open and honest communication was paramount to involvement in leadership opportunities within a school. When asked to respond to the survey question, “What can school administrators do to promote distributed leadership among teachers?” Among teachers, one respondent commented, “Good communication between
teachers and the principal is the most important resource for teachers to participate in distributed leadership.” Another responded with caution:

It’s good to communicate issues and ask for feedback, but it’s also important to know that there comes a point where the dialogue ends, a decision is made, and action taken. Sometimes the dialogue goes on way too long and nothing gets done—we just move on to the next issue and it too is unresolved. Meetings are long and unproductive. I constantly think about how my time could be better spent, but those things have to wait until later—after the school day, after late day meetings, long into the night teachers are still doing the ‘real’ school work: planning, preparing, grading, communicating with parents. These tasks result in easily 20–25 hours beyond a 40-hour work week.

When all is said and done, communication needs to be clear and concise. Expectations regarding next steps need to be decisive, with a comprehensive system of checks and balances that are communicated by the appropriate leader.

**Ensuring that the mission and vision of the school are well understood.** Perhaps nothing is more important than involving teachers and faculty members in the process of creating the mission and vision of the school. Without a genuine understanding of the direction in which the school community is heading, teacher frustration will set in. Teachers seek an understanding of the goals and priorities of the school and this can only be attained if the mission and vision of the school are clear. One survey respondent shared an example of recent work that had been accomplished for the Lydon Writing Project, a district priority,

To promote distributed leadership, school administrators should make the teachers part of the vision. They need to feel part of the goal in order to lead their peers to attain the goal. For example, in a pod meeting we discussed possible projects to be used for a science
writing initiative. As a group we chose a topic, discussed the desired outcome, and how it would be implemented. Teachers then decided what leadership role they would take to implement the change. Teachers take pride in this work and know that work such as this is not accomplished alone. It requires a significant commitment on the part of all involved; several of whom assume leadership roles in order to move the project forward.

Overall it is apparent that teachers were forthcoming regarding what they believe may be necessary resources in order for them to participate in distributed leadership. In addition, they were equally forthcoming regarding what they perceived to be the benefits and drawbacks of the principals’ efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school.

**Discussion of the Findings in Relationship to the Theoretical Framework of Distributed Leadership**

Distributed leadership theory provided the theoretical lens through which to conduct this research study. Distributed leadership theory advises that a principal develops leadership within a school community in order to provide a collegial and collaborative model from which to work. This study aimed to further understand teacher perception of principal practices that positively or negatively influence distributed leadership within an organization, while also developing an understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of distributed leadership.

The teachers and faculty involved in this study informed the research questions by providing personal insight into the ways in which they have personally experienced leadership opportunities within a school and what prompted them to get involved in this way. They were forthcoming with their insights and made connections between past and present experiences.
When asked, “What factors might encourage or support teachers in taking on leadership roles in their school?” one focus group participant shared,

School climate. It will depend on the climate of the building. I remember working in a building where it was very top-down so when people contributed ideas and other things, they were shot down, so I decided not to put anything out there because even when people were asked for their ideas, they were shot down. I think in a climate like that, people don’t make decisions, but if the climate is one in which they know their decisions will be trusted and listened to, like Anna with her Student Voice, the people that worked with her—it is a huge undertaking, but a great idea. She must have felt that the administration was supportive of her idea and she felt trusted and therefore she took those steps to put the Student Voice together and followed through with the idea. I think that climate in the building is huge.

Positive school climates are indicative of environments that encourage members to become involved in leadership roles. The distributed leadership framework is one in which leadership practice within the organization is developed and organized in a way that is all inclusive of its members and promotes interactions between individuals. Copland (2001) suggested that this model eases the burden on the principal by distributing leadership throughout the organization, and therefore does not promote the principal as “superhead,” but rather the facilitator of leadership opportunities (p. 6).

Due to the increasing demands of local, state, and federal educational mandates, policies, and measures that call for continuous improvement, it has become incumbent upon all members of a school community to work together to meet those demands. Study participants shared the toll that this pressure takes on teachers who increasingly feel as though the spotlight is on them,
and that expectations are too cumbersome. One participant noted that she feels as though she is living in “a fish bowl,” because of the transparency of standardized testing and student growth data that is now available for public perusal. Another referenced the impact that increased expectations for strong student performance has had on teacher fatigue, despite ongoing budget cuts,

With oversized classes, additional requirements from the district and state, and the incredibly high expectations of the staff, many will not feel they have adequate time to devote to anything other than their teaching.

While it may appear to be an understatement that one leader cannot do this work alone, it appears that this type of leadership benefits the entire school community, as reported by this survey respondent:

The benefits are leadership would not just be from the top of the organization. Everyone would have the opportunity to participate and it would be leadership from within. It would be empowering to individuals. And the leadership would be structured with more of a level playing field.

This collective leadership approach opens the door for any and all interested members of the community to lead.

In order for this to happen effectively, individuals within the organization are called upon to work together to improve their practice. Sergiovanni (1984) described this work as a participative approach to leadership. This type of leadership does not imply that everyone in a group is a leader, but makes available the opportunity for a more collective leadership approach that is fluid, not static. His idea rang true with one focus group participant who shared, “We can tap into each other because we all have individual skills and strengths. By sharing the load, it
definitely connects everyone more. It makes the building seem smaller.” This comment was illustrative of other comments including, I think it [Distributed Leadership] is also using people's strengths to the school's advantage and being able to play those out. Giving people an opportunity to do things they enjoy.” Distributing leadership throughout an organization is one model that encourages a shared collaboration that is focused on and committed to the mission and vision of the school.

Elmore (2000) wrote with specificity as he described issues facing both policy makers and school leaders as they seek to improve their work: “Schools are being asked by elected officials—policy leaders, if you will—to do things they are largely unequipped to do. School leaders are being asked to assume responsibilities they are largely unequipped to assume” (p. 2). Much of Elmore’s response is a plea for distributed leadership: This shift must begin with a redefinition of leadership, which moves away from the idea of a role-based perspective toward one that is distributed. He writes, “Distributed leadership…emerges from an understanding that large scale improvement requires purposeful action between people with varied areas of expertise and a mutual respect and understanding that materialize from an appreciation of the knowledge and skill requirements of different roles and responsibilities” (pp. 35–36).

The framework that is inherent within distributed leadership theory is one in which leadership practice is viewed as a stream of interactions and activities in which members find themselves intertwined. Study participants expressed ways in which this participatory form of leadership has contributed to personal and professional growth, while benefitting the entire school community. When asked what school administrators can do to promote distributed leadership among teachers, one survey respondent suggested, “Create the framework and make sure everyone understands what distributive leadership is and what everyone’s role is in the
process. Make goals and expectations very clear. Provide follow through and take a task to completion.” Another teacher drew on personal observations and experience and advised,

Create a school culture where teachers feel like their ideas are valuable and can be shared. In my opinion, I feel we have had this with our Student Voice Crews. Teachers were given the opportunity to organize their crews the way they wanted and collaborate with colleagues. The Character Education Committee has been positively received and administration has been eager to hear progress and offer support when necessary.

A great deal of this success could be attributed to the positive interactions between and among faculty. Through these interactions, teachers have gained the confidence to take the risks necessary to strengthen and benefit the school community. This type of participatory leadership encourages interactions between faculty members who seek to share their individual talents to strengthen the community.

Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, and Myers (2007) furthered the conversation on distributed leadership and teacher collaboration by revisiting the theory of distributed leadership and offered, “the distributed leadership perspective helps us to understand how…teacher teams are embedded in an interactive network of interdependent school activities that collectively constitute leadership” (p. 68). They promoted the idea that collaboration should be utilized as a vehicle for principal control, rather than a vehicle used to solve problems by the collective power of the group: “Collaboration does not necessarily equate with workers becoming more creative and innovative. In fact the opposite can occur…team performance may also be constrained when collaborative activity is too tightly bound through standardized organizational expectations and monitoring” (p. 95). This resembles continued discussion found in the literature about the very nature of collaboration and warns against the possibility that it may be used for hierarchical
purposes. The interactions between leaders, teachers, and all members of the school community are of significant importance and must remain the focus of distributed leadership.

Focus group participants indicated that teachers perceive that the requisite social interactions for distributed leadership to work according to distributed leadership theory strongly influence teachers to either assume or not assume leadership roles. When responding to the question, “What factors might encourage or support teachers in taking on leadership roles in their school?” one participant shared,

I think if the leader knows the strengths of the person that is very important and they can tap into those strengths. It can be just letting the person know that they are really strong in this area and that you really need their help. A tap on the shoulder. I need your help and I see this as your strength. I’m having difficulty doing whatever it is or I need some input. Can you help me? And build on that person’s strength. It’s just like with our students. That builds up people’s self-esteem and confidence in themselves and then they feel needed and valued. I think that people in general want to feel needed so I think that is an important piece.

Another simply noted, “Just being asked by the administration gives you confidence. Sometimes that is what people need. It is reassurance.” These personal interactions were referenced repeatedly as positively contributing to a teacher’s decision to lead.

When asked to share obstacles and drawbacks that teachers perceive could interfere with teacher interest and participation in distributed leadership opportunities through the anonymous questionnaire, teacher responses varied. Many of the drawbacks articulated in the survey and discussed in the focus groups included concerns regarding relative to time and the idea that too many leaders would result in too few decisions being made. Focus group participants were
initially tentative to share, yet when one participant voiced a perceived preference for one leader making the final decision, others contributed to the conversation. The teacher participant stated, “I'm sure there are some people that would prefer to have a leader and clear guidelines on what their jobs are rather than being one of the decision makers.” Another cautioned that teachers may “doubt that administrators will really consider what they are suggesting…fear of whatever they say being held against them even though it is said that it will not be… the never ending issue of too many things to do and not enough time…Time to participate.” These real-life obstacles were further exacerbated by personal uncertainty that is felt by professionals who find themselves far more confident in their abilities when in the presence of children than when they are with their adult colleagues. One respondent discussed the reality of fear and self-doubt,

The first obstacle that I think of is facing the temptation to abandon the work. Sometimes when teachers try new initiatives, they are so quick to declare: ‘well, that didn’t work…..that was a disaster….forget it….I don’t have time for that……’ In our classroom, when a lesson doesn't go well, we don't abandon the standard. We reflect on what we can improve about the lesson. Teachers need to hear that they can try new initiatives, make mistakes, and that we want them not to give up. Trying something once is not really enough. I think the biggest obstacle is developing a “stick-to-it-ness” so that teachers can find new ways of leadership.

Other respondents cited teachers with negative attitudes, a lack of trust and underlying feeling of not being valued by the community, as obstacles. Additionally, the stress of everyday realities including personal issues, day care and family commitments, and professional pressures including taking courses for license renewal, were noted as drawbacks. An example of this sentiment can be noted here, “If you don't volunteer, then it may reflect in your summative
evaluation. Thus, teachers may feel obligated when their heart is not really into it. Some people don't like to take on leadership because they’re not that kind of person; otherwise they would go for administration roles.” Finally, the opinion that “leadership is not my job” was expressed by a few respondents.

Though distributed leadership theory was not presented to survey respondents or focus group participants as a vehicle through which to gain information about distributed leadership, it did provide a lens through which this researcher conducted this research study. It allowed for an exploration of interactions believed by teachers and faculty to be instrumental to their work in the classroom and throughout the school community. The principal practices perceived by teachers to have had either a positive or negative impact on their participation in distributed leadership, along with the associated benefits and drawbacks, were explored using the lens of Distributed Leadership Theory. This was accomplished in order to gain a better understanding of distributed leadership in a school, an understanding that undoubtedly informed this research study.

The findings of the study are in alignment with distributed leadership theory, the fundamental principle of which is a participative approach to leadership. This type of leadership promotes the sharing of leadership functions and roles between and among individual members of an organization. The study explored teacher perception of principal practices that positively or negatively influence teachers and other faculty to assume leadership roles in a school. Additionally, the study investigated the perceived benefits and drawbacks of the principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in a school. Distributed Leadership Theory contends that this distribution of leadership can be successfully accomplished after the identification of clear, observable, and measurable goals. Once these goals are established,
distributed leadership can occur, as this type of leadership promotes the interactions between individuals in an organization. Distributed Leadership Theory, a theory of practice that is viewed by social and situational aspects, offered the lens through which to reflect upon leadership, as it related to the experiences of teachers and faculty at Lydon Middle School.

Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Literature Review

As outlined in Chapter II, the growing demands of public policy and the ever-changing directives of the educational reform movement have led to numerous scholarly proposals outlining ways in which to manage these increased pressures, each of which has brought forth ideas that seek to assist school leaders. The journey from the instructional leadership movement of the 1980s to the transformational leadership movement that began in the late 1980s and continued into the early 1990s was followed by teacher leadership initiatives that commenced in the 1990s and continue to be refined today. These scholarly areas of focus were followed by research related to distributing leadership in schools, whereby teachers were provided with opportunities for meaningful collaborative practices through shared leadership. To this effort, which continues into the present day, has been added research related to organizational learning and support for professional community in schools. Though these leadership frameworks vary, the main ingredient of each is shared collaborative leadership: a leadership that is distributive in nature, and has great potential to positively influence teaching and learning in schools. It is this distributed leadership approach that served as the foundation of this research study, as it is one that requires further investigation, particularly as it relates to teacher perception of distributed leadership in a middle school community.

The most recent research on distributed leadership developed over decades of scholarly thinking that emerged in the early 1980s and comprises a range of research topics, from a focus
on organizational and institutional characteristics as they related to teacher training and teacher quality to the idea that schools’ goals should be to build upon their community of learners by working to become a community of teacher leaders (Barth, 2001). Research on teacher leadership set the groundwork for subsequent studies related to distributed leadership, which promoted the idea that leadership practice was not to be understood as the product of a leader’s knowledge and skill, but rather viewed as the interactions between people and their situation. This research study examined teacher perception of principal practices that positively or negatively influence distributed leadership, as well as teacher perception of the benefits and drawbacks of distributed leadership in a school.

Research on organizational leadership, transformational leadership, shared leadership, teacher leadership, and distributed leadership was reviewed for this study and was organized by themes that have emerged chronologically. These themes, which have provided another lens through which to better understand the results of this study, will be discussed in the following paragraphs as they relate to the study’s findings.

The work of researchers including Judith Warren Little (1882, 1990), Peter Senge (1990, 1993, 2006), Kenneth Leithwood and Doris Jantzi (1990, 1999), Roland Barth (2001), and James Spillane (2005, 2006) significantly contributed to the body of literature on school leadership. Little discussed indicators of collaboration that she believed to serve as the foundation of a successful organization. She noted, “in all schools that staff characterize as highly collegial, teachers view the principal as an active endorser and participant in collegial work” (p. 337). Little also noted:

By virtue first of office and then of performance, principals are in a unique position to establish and maintain the important norms of collegiality and experimentation, and to
promote and foster critical practices of talk about practice, observation of practice, joint work on materials, and teaching each other about teaching. (p. 338)

Survey respondents and focus group participants in this study similarly indicated that the principal’s actions significantly contributed to their sense of empowerment, confidence and willingness to get involved in distributed leadership opportunities by sharing their instructional practices and areas of expertise with one another. In response to the survey question asking what school administrators can do to promote distributed leadership amongst teachers, one teacher shared, “Listen to the pulse of the community; understand staff and be able to solicit help from people with particular talents; follow up and follow through; keep goals simple and clear and limited; and provide relevance to school improvement.” Principal practices including listening, seeking to understand, clarifying, tapping into the expertise of teachers, and maintaining focus on the goals of the school, served as common threads of participants’ discussion throughout the study.

Peter Senge’s (1990, 1993, 2006) research influenced schools of thought regarding the building of learning organizations. Senge’s work concentrated on decentralizing the role of leadership in organizations in order to strengthen the capacity of all people to work productively toward common goals. In his book, The Fifth Discipline, Senge explained that the ideas presented “are for destroying the illusion that the world is created of separate, unrelated forces” (p. 3). He shared the idea that when we can rid ourselves of this illusion, learning organizations can be built “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (p. 3). In other words, the interconnectedness of humanity needs to be maximized if we are to continue to improve upon
what we do and accomplish our goals. Throughout this study, teachers and other faculty communicated their desire to collaborate with one another, while working toward common goals. When asked on the survey to share the perceived benefits of distributed leadership, one respondent shared,

To promote distributed leadership, school administrators should make the teachers part of the vision. They need to feel part of the goal in order to lead their peers to attain the goal. For example, in a pod meeting we discussed possible projects to be used for a science writing initiative. As a group we chose a topic, discussed the desired outcome, and how it would be implemented. Teachers, then decided what leadership role they would take to implement the change.

Another noted,

If done properly, everyone has a voice and more gets accomplished because everyone is working together to achieve a common goal. The move to standards based assessment was an example of successful distributed leadership. Although this was a mandate, people were given an opportunity to shape how it would look in our schools.

Senge’s notion of decentralizing the role of leadership in order to build the capacity of those in the organization came to fruition for this teacher whose experience with one district initiative proved to be positive and productive, as she believed that the teachers directly influenced the process and outcome, which was illustrative of a theme that emerged throughout the discussion whereby teachers seek to be part of the decision making process and appreciate being valued members of a team theme that emerged throughout the discussions.

Leithwood and Jantzi (1990) continued the leadership conversation as it related to
transformational leadership and the development of professional communities in schools. Leithwood and Jantzi contended that principals play a significant role in shaping the culture of a school. They believed that cultural change is the most critical element of school reform, that part of this cultural change is the growth of collegial relationships and further suggested that principals play a central role, if not a critical role, in shaping this culture. One survey respondent shared that the benefit of this type of collaboration included, “Creating a community climate all focused on the same goals: opportunities to meet professional goals and growth; whole school involvement; and a clear vision.” However, in order for there to be clarity for all members of a school community, Leithwood and Jantzi advised that school leaders identify and remove those things in a school culture that may act as obstacles to collaboration. Focus group participants discussed many of these obstacles, which largely comprised reasons as to why teachers may choose not to take on leadership roles. As discussed previously, reasons included lack of time due to planning and preparation of instruction, lack of recognition and compensation, lack of confidence, family responsibilities including caring for young children and/or elderly parents, too many goals resulting in too little action and challenging personalities of colleagues. As one focus group participant shared, “With oversized classes, additional requirements from the district and state, and the incredibly high expectations of the staff, many faculty will not feel they have adequate time to devote to anything other than their teaching.” These feeling were widespread among both survey respondents and focus group participants.

Research on transformational leadership gave way to discussions regarding school reform, including the work of Michael Fullan (1996, 2000, 2001) and Andy Hargreaves (1991, 1996), each of whom thoughtfully and purposefully discussed the importance of collaborative cultures in schools, while advocating for effective collaboration within the larger context of
school reform by empowering teachers to become involved in this significant effort. They discussed specific principal leadership behaviors that require collaboration including establishing a vision for the school; acquiring and providing the necessary resources that support the opportunities for collaboration; and sharing control and leadership with all by modeling collaboration (p. 90). This study’s findings align with the thinking of Fullan and Hargreaves, as they relate to collaboration and shared leadership, as evident in this focus group participant’s comment, who notes, “It is important to join together and share what it is that we are doing.” This comment was representative of several others who discussed the importance of working together with a common purpose to accomplish clear goals that have been established in collaboration with others. The literature on distributed leadership reveals that teachers who collaborate under the guidelines of a clear mission, vision, and goals, are more likely to accomplish those goals and discover the fulfillment that accompanies that success than those who are unsure and/or lack clarity regarding the mission, vision, and goals.

In the 1990s, Roland Barth (2001) joined the conversation through his focus on teacher leadership, in which the teacher is viewed as one leader in a community of leaders. This conversation continues today, the basic tenets of which include the transformation from a community of learners to a community of leaders. This sharing of leadership as contributing to a positive school culture was recognized by study participants, as one teacher reflected upon factors that support distributed leadership in a school:

If the climate is one in which [teachers] know their decisions will be trusted and listened to, like Anna with her Student Voice, the people that worked with her [teachers]—it is a huge undertaking, but a great idea. She must have felt that the administration was supportive of her idea and she felt trusted and therefore she took those steps to put the
student voice together and followed through with the idea. I think that climate in the building is huge.

As this participant’s comment, which is illustrative of a more general theme, demonstrates the power and influence of school climate on shared leadership. Shared leadership recognizes the work of all individuals who contribute to leadership practice, regardless of whether or not they assume formal leadership roles. This view of leadership coincided with distributed leadership that promotes the fluidity of leadership and moves away from the idea that leadership is individually fixed and where people within the organization are assigned specific roles that do not change (Gronn, 2003).

Central to distributed leadership is the capacity to work together to provide leadership using collaborative measures. This study demonstrated that teachers appreciate principal efforts to provide opportunities for collaboration and value the outcomes that are realized when teachers collaborate to set, maintain, and assess common goals that are inherent in a shared vision. Both survey responses and focus group discussions revealed that teachers need time and resources to collaborate with colleagues, and appreciate being recognized for their efforts by leaders in the school and district. Study findings demonstrated that high levels of teacher involvement are a direct result of a strong school culture, a culture in which trust and positive relationships pave the way for teacher innovation, creativity, and investment.

Distributed leadership is not viewed as a product of a leader’s knowledge and skill, but is viewed as the interactions between people and their situation. Findings from the current study are in line with evidence from the literature reviewed for this study, as research participants communicated similar messages regarding principal practices that positively and negatively influence distributed leadership in a school, and discussed common themes related to the benefits
and drawbacks associated with those practices. These practices include personal interactions between building leaders and faculty that are viewed as supportive and empowering.

Faculty reported their appreciation for the opportunity to get involved in the school community when invited to do so by building leaders. Recognition in the form of compensation, professional development points, and hand-written notes and verbal acknowledgement at the building and district levels, provide teachers with the confidence and trust needed to maintain the strong relationships needed to reach common school goals, while working toward a common vision. Spillane (2005) explained that distributed leadership practice is viewed as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situation. These interactions inform, influence, and construct leadership practice. It is through these interactions that building leaders have the greatest influence upon those they lead.

**Validity and Limitations**

This research study was limited to one school in one suburban community in Central Massachusetts, where 57 out of 75 total professional faculty members participated in the collection of survey data, from which 23 of the 75 members participated in one of the three focus groups. As a result, specific descriptions regarding the kinds of situations and the types of interactions in which the principal and building leaders engage with teachers need to be explored more fully in other settings in order to better understand teacher perception of principal practices that either positively or negatively impact distributed leadership in a school.

This researcher was specifically interested in exploring practices in which principals participate that influence teachers’ decisions to engage in distributed leadership opportunities. Though data were undoubtedly useful in obtaining an understanding of teacher perception, findings did not generate specific ways in which this could be done. Fullan (2000) discussed the
limitations of the research on teacher leadership, shared leadership and distributed leadership in this way, “The research does not tell educators how to change their own situation to produce greater collaboration. They can get ideas, directions, insights, but they can never know exactly how to go about it because such a path is exceedingly complex” (p. 582). The absence of time-tested approaches leads to continued uncertainty for principals and teacher leaders who seek to participate in distributed leadership.

The most significant threat to the internal validity of this study is that this researcher also serves as the principal of the school where the study took place, and serves as the primary evaluator of the participants in the study. Because of this, the potential for observer effect is significant. Observer effect or response bias includes the possibility of study participants to alter their responses in order to provide their supervisor with information they believe their supervisor hopes to hear. It also signifies that observer bias must be taken into consideration as the researcher’s personal beliefs regarding the possibilities of distributed leadership in a school may have altered the data and therefore produced findings that differ from those obtained by a neutral researcher (Gay & Airasian, 2003).

This researcher used strategies to decrease the possibility of these limitations by triangulating survey and focus group data, and inviting and encouraging participants to review the focus group transcripts for accuracy. This researcher also used verbal and written communication to study participants in order to communicate this researcher’s efforts to obtain clear, accurate and honest feedback from the survey respondents and focus group participants. These tasks were accomplished in an effort to maintain focus on the topic of distributed leadership, while not being affected by the role of the principal as researcher in a study.
Conclusion

The findings of this study indicated that a significant number of teacher participants perceived that distributed leadership positively impacts collegial relationships, teacher collaboration and school culture. Findings also suggested that when teachers believe that their contributions matter, they are more apt to contribute to collaborative opportunities in meaningful ways. Findings indicated that teachers collectively perceived that there are many benefits to distributed leadership including those mentioned earlier, and acknowledged that while there are drawbacks, those drawbacks can be remedied by providing teachers with the appropriate resources needed to participate in distributed leadership; allowing teachers time within the school day to collaborate with colleagues; and providing teachers with compensation and professional development points for their work. Though the benefits appeared to outweigh the drawbacks, principals need to carefully consider ways in which distributed leadership practices are developed, assessed, and sustained over time. Collective views indicated that principal practices positively influence distributed leadership when actions include personally inviting individuals to share areas of expertise; recognizing and celebrating the efforts and accomplishments of faculty; providing resources including time and compensation for teachers who participate in distributed leadership; and trusting teachers to make school-wide decisions.

The findings also revealed that teachers realized a strong sense of investment in the mission and goals of the school when principals invited them to be part of the process and listened to and acted upon their ideas. Negative impacts of principal practices as they relate to distributed leadership included teachers feeling conflicted with family responsibilities; concern regarding having time for professional commitments including coursework required for teacher licensure; lack of clarity regarding leadership expectations; and working with other teachers who
are not committed to working together to achieve a common goal. The findings indicated that teacher involvement in a school community leads to the development of strong school cultures and effective collaborative practices. In addition, teachers communicated that pursuing a distributed leadership model in a school is a worthwhile endeavor. Despite the merit of Fullan’s (2001) arguments that collaboration is heavily context-bound and cannot simply be lifted from one setting and repeated successfully in another, it is nonetheless important to investigate principal practices that teachers perceive to have a positive and/or negative impact on distributed leadership in a school, while teasing out the benefits and drawbacks that such efforts have on distributed leadership.

**Significance of the Study**

Continued research on principal practices that positively and negatively influence distributed leadership in a school will further validate the findings of this study and contribute to the understanding of the topic. Furthermore, teacher perception, as it relates to the benefits and drawbacks of such practices on distributing leadership in a school community also needs to be further explored. It is recommended that studies similar to this one be conducted in schools with varied demographics where distributed leadership is in its initial development and is being used as a strategy influencing change in a school community. Such studies would further advance the understanding of the conditions and circumstances under which distributed leadership is proving to be either effective or ineffective.

**Implications for Principals’ Practice**

Results noted above indicate that teachers were directly influenced by leaders who believed in them and entrusted them to lead meaningful efforts. One focus group participant shared, “I don't know if people [administrators] recognize their strengths, but where you might
see a strength, it is important to mention that to a teacher. They might need that little boost and be able to say no if they cannot do something.” This particular perspective confirmed the belief that recognition goes a long way toward providing people with the confidence they need to lead an effort, or demonstrate and understanding when teachers are unable to commit to a leadership effort—for whatever reason.

Participants also shared that they were more inclined to assume leadership roles when personally invited by building leaders to get involved, than they would have been if a large-scale invitation was sent electronically. One participant stated, “Just being asked by the administration gives you confidence. Sometimes that is what people need. It is reassuring.” Similarly, a survey respondent shared, “Administrators may recognize strengths…they could ask the teacher to share this strength.” When asked what school administrators can do to promote distributed leadership in a school, another respondent shared, “Let teachers know that you see something in them that would promote leadership.” In other words, rather than receive an impersonal e-mail blast to the entire school community, these personal invitations and commendations for good work were widely viewed by focus group participants as having an even greater impact on teachers’ decisions to get involved than being offered monetary compensation.

Teacher participation in shared decision making and distributed leadership practices requires that a school be purposefully and systematically designed to support authentic collaboration. In order for authentic collaboration to be successful, additional research is needed to better understand the characteristics of principals and the strategies used by them to engage teachers in distributed leadership opportunities. Elmore (2004) stated, “The problem, then, is how to construct relatively orderly ways for people to engage in activities that have as their consequence the learning of new ways to think about and do their jobs, and how to put these
activities in the context of reward structures that stimulate them to do more of what leads to large-scale improvement and less of what reinforces the pathologies of the existing structure” (p. 87).

There is little explicit, empirical research that has been conducted to better understand ways in which principals influence teacher motivation, or what strategies they use when this motivation is absent. Leithwood and Jantzi (1990) described, “While evidence about the positive effects of shared, technical, school culture is growing rapidly, very little is known about how they develop. Furthermore, there has been very little empirical research inquiring directly into what principals might do to assist such development” (p. 2). Teacher motivation is necessary for program improvement and principals play a pivotal role in finding ways for teachers to distribute leadership and participate in meaningful collaboration, which will ultimately shape the school’s culture.

On June 28, 2011, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education adopted new regulations for the evaluation of all Massachusetts educators. The regulations apply to both administrators and teachers throughout the state, as they consist of swift consequences when the expectations are not met. The stakes are high for principals and teachers to embrace distributed leadership with the adoption of this new educator evaluation system, which will be in full implementation in 2014, since the criteria for an exemplary rating carries the expectation of leadership activities for all educators. Included in the standards is one entitled Professional Culture (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011). The Professional Culture Standard is based on the premise that building leaders and teachers promote the learning and growth of all students through ethical, culturally proficient, skilled, and
collaborative practice. Among the six indicators embedded within this standard include the following indicators:

- **Professional Growth**: [Teacher] actively pursues professional development and learning opportunities to improve quality of practice or build the expertise and experience to assume different instructional and leadership roles.

- **Collaboration**: [Teacher] collaborates effectively with colleagues on a wide range of tasks.”

- **Decision-making**: Becomes involved in school-wide decision making.

- **Shared responsibility**: [Teacher] shares responsibility for the performance of all students within the school (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education).

Further investigation is needed to determine how principals can influence the practice of distributed leadership, as the research base seems to agree that distributed leadership is beneficial. Research is needed to determine how principals can effectively implement distributed leadership model, particularly now that it is being mandated in Massachusetts.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Further research related to the concept and practice of distributed leadership will support the findings of this study and strengthen the understanding of this concept. It is recommended that educators, scholars, and researchers continue to study teachers’ perceptions of principal and building leaders’ practices that influence distributed leadership in a school, and further the understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of such practices. Additional research would continue to advance the understanding of the environments and situations under which distributed leadership is effective or ineffective as an instrument to effect change. Elmore (2004) stated, “The problem, then, is how to construct relatively orderly ways for people to engage in
activities that have as their consequence the learning of new ways to think about and do their jobs, and how to put these activities in the context of reward structures that stimulate them to do more of what leads to large-scale improvement and less of what reinforces the pathologies of the existing structure” (p. 87). Teacher participation in shared decision-making and distributed leadership requires that a school be purposefully and systematically designed to support authentic collaboration.

In order for authentic collaboration to be successful, additional research is needed to better understand the practices used by principals to engage teachers in distributed leadership, as there are a multitude of dimensions of distributed leadership that warrant further exploration. The following questions focus on some of these aspects that this researcher believes would be beneficial:

- What are the specific kinds of situations and types of interactions between leaders and followers that should be explored in other settings in order to better understand the influence of distributed leadership on a school community?
- Does the practice of distributed leadership improve the quality of teachers’ classroom performance?
- Do teachers who exercise distributed leadership have greater job satisfaction?
- How do colleagues respond when teacher leaders initiate change in a school community?
- How do teachers who attempt to lead respond when they perceive that their efforts are not effective?
- Do principals who share leadership with teachers have greater job satisfaction?
- How do school reform policies affect the development of distributed leadership practices in schools?
• How does the practice of distributed leadership impact the retention of teachers?
• Does the practice of teacher leadership lead to improved student outcomes?

In addition to the suggestions listed earlier, it is desirable that longitudinal research is conducted to determine the influence of distributed leadership on student learning when it is practiced over time as a function of a school’s culture. While it is important to assume good intentions as those intentions relate to the work of policy makers who are responsible for establishing educational mandates, it appears that they have neglected to include the voice of the teacher and understand teachers’ perceptions of principal practices. Additional research on distributed leadership will help educators and policymakers determine how to promote distributed leadership with the goal of improving teaching and learning in schools across the country.

**Personal Reflections**

My interest in leadership began when I was a young girl growing up in a large, Irish Catholic family in a suburban community in Central Massachusetts. In fact, I serve as principal of the middle school that I attended as a student over three decades ago. I am the seventh of ten children. My mother and father raised each of us to believe that anything is possible when we persevere and work together to achieve our goals. Conversations at the O’Connor dinner table were lively and interesting, as my father served as a Justice on the Worcester Superior Court and on the Massachusetts Supreme Court, while my mother not only cared for the ten of us each day, but also served as the town social worker, family counselor, foster parent, and prayer partner to many in the community. My siblings and I were very involved in our school and local communities; serving as captains of our tennis, football, baseball, soccer, and hockey teams, and participating in student government throughout our middle and high school years. While I was
growing up, I assumed that our family’s involvement in school, church, sports, clubs, activities, and service organizations was no different than any other family’s involvement. It was not until I graduated from high school that I realized my upbringing was quite unusual and that many people never get involved in their communities, for many and varied reasons.

My father often reminded my siblings and me that you can tell a lot more about a person from the kitchen he or she grew up in, than any school attended or degree received. He really believed that and made sure his influence was felt throughout each week in our home, in our community, and on the court. He and my mother stressed the importance of sharing responsibilities with those around us. The Japanese proverb, “None of us is as smart as all of us” held true in our home and continues to serve as a mantra in my family. Because of this, I have become increasingly interested in studying how leadership can be shared, as each one of my siblings engages in leadership opportunities in their various communities. After all, we were told when we were young that this was our “calling,” our “responsibility.”

As I reflect on my role as principal of a Lydon Middle School, I realize that I have learned from my colleagues that perhaps my greatest attribute is that of a listener. I am told that I listen carefully to those around me and that this listening demonstrates that I care about those with whom I work and for the students I serve. Some of the examples of ways in which I “bring people on board,” according to results from mid and end of year faculty and family surveys, is that I model kind, respectful and responsible behavior when I interact with students, families, teachers, and community members. According to their comments, I acknowledge people in public and private ways by genuinely thanking them for their efforts. I care for people, as is evident when I provide faculty with snacks at faculty meetings, send cards to faculty in times of joy and sadness, and invite people into my office to relax for a few moments when they are in the
midst of (personal or professional) unrest. I ask questions regarding a sick child, an aging parent, or a college acceptance. I consistently and compassionately reach out to others to offer support. I have learned throughout my life that by leading through example, others will notice and many will ultimately follow that lead. I have also learned that by working in collaboration with others, amazing things happen! Distributed leadership is one vehicle that encourages people to work together in ways that allow them to share their expertise and feel a sense of renewed accomplishment. It is critical that principals become actively involved in encouraging teachers to share leadership in collaborative ways.

The findings of this study indicate that distributed leadership has the potential to significantly influence teacher leadership practice in a school and positively contribute to school improvement. The scholarly literature supports the findings and suggests that there are many benefits to practicing distributed leadership in a school as a strategy for advancement. Teachers and faculty members who participated in this research study aptly articulated their perceptions of the ways in which principal practices positively and negatively influence distributed leadership, and shared the benefits and drawbacks that result from those practices. Data gathered from the anonymous questionnaire and the focus groups revealed that teachers’ perceptions of distributed leadership were overwhelmingly positive, and they alleged that both they and the school benefit from opportunities to practice teacher leadership in a school.

I strongly believe that I greatly benefited from conducting this study. One of the benefits experienced included the knowledge gained from studying the concept of distributed leadership, while having the unique opportunity to interact with colleagues regarding a topic that has gained increasing attention at Lydon Middle School over the past few years. Conversations that emerged in the focus groups, along with data collected through the anonymous questionnaire
provided me with significant insight into teachers’ perceptions regarding the practice and
importance of distributed leadership. In my dual role as principal, I received wonderful
perspective from faculty with whom I interact daily, but with whom I rarely have an opportunity
to discuss leadership to any significant degree. Conducting this study confirmed my beliefs
regarding the importance of distributing leadership in a school community and confirmed my
commitment to cultivating a school environment that encourages teachers to assume leadership
roles and improves the professional culture that exists within the school.
References


Skills, University of Nottingham.


Appendix A

Confidential Questionnaire—Survey Monkey

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your input will provide me with an opportunity to learn more about your perceptions and ideas regarding distributed leadership at SMS. Please read each question carefully and respond openly and honestly.

Thank you for your time!

____________________________________

___________________________________

What is distributed leadership?

Distributing leadership in a school community provides an opportunity for teachers to influence meaningful collaborative practices through shared leadership. Spillane (2005) explains that distributed leadership is a perspective - a conceptual or diagnostic tool for thinking about school leadership. It is not a detailed outline for effective leadership, nor a description for how school leadership should be exercised. This type of leadership focuses on what people do and how and why they do it. Using a distributed leadership framework, leadership practice is viewed as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers, and their situation. Leadership practice is not viewed as a product of a leader's knowledge and skill, but is rather viewed as the interactions between people and their situation. It is through these interactions, rather than actions, that leadership practice is understood, as these interactions inform, influence, and construct leadership practice.

1. The building principal supports teachers’ participation in distributed leadership practices at SMS.  
   ___ Strongly agree 
   ___ Agree 
   ___ Somewhat agree 
   ___ Disagree 
   ___ Strongly disagree

2. Distributed leadership supports teachers’ professional growth.  
   a) Strongly agree b) Agree c) Somewhat agree d) Disagree e) Strongly disagree

3. The school’s culture is conducive for the growth of distributed leadership practices.  
   a) Strongly agree b) Agree c) Somewhat agree d) Disagree e) Strongly disagree

4. Distributed leadership practices align with our school goals.  
   a) Strongly agree b) Agree c) Somewhat agree d) Disagree e) Strongly disagree
Please answer the following and where possible, provide specific examples.

1. Based on your experience and knowledge, what resources are in place at SMS for teachers to participate in distributed leadership?

2. Based on your experience and knowledge, what obstacles exist at SMS that interfere with teachers who may be interested in practicing distributed leadership?

3. What does the principal do to promote distributed leadership amongst teachers? Please be specific and where possible, provide one or more examples.

4. What does the principal do to impede distributed leadership among teachers? Please be specific and where possible, provide one or more examples.

5. What do you believe are the benefits of distributed leadership? Please be specific and where possible, provide one or more examples.

6. What do you believe are the drawbacks of distributed leadership? Please be specific and where possible, provide one or more examples.
Appendix B

Focus Group Discussion Questions and Protocol

Introduction:

- This is a conversation to discuss some of your ideas about the topic of distributed leadership.

- I’d like to remind you that what we discuss is totally confidential and will not be used for any other purpose than to inform this study. I am interested in learning about what teachers think and feel about principal practices that influence distributed leadership, and I encourage you to be as open and honest as possible. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers, and there is no expectation regarding “how much” you should know or say about this topic.

- Throughout our conversation, please feel free to refer back to questions in order to elaborate upon or revise your comments.

- Do you have any questions before we begin?

1) If someone asked you what distributed leadership means, what would you tell them?

2) How would you respond to someone who said to you “It’s the principal’s job to lead, and the teachers’ job to teach?”

3) Why do you think teachers assume leadership roles in their school?

4) What factors might encourage or support teachers in taking on leadership roles in their school? What additional supports, if any, would be helpful to teachers?

5) Why do you think teachers choose not to take on leadership roles in their school?

6) What obstacles might discourage or prevent teachers from taking on leadership roles in their school?

7) What benefits do you think might come from teacher participation in distributed leadership practices?

8) What difficulties do you think might result from having teachers participate in distributed leadership? What measures do you think could be taken to remove or minimize such obstacles?

9) What do you think are the benefits of distributed leadership?
10) What do you think are the drawbacks of distributed leadership?

11) Would you like to elaborate on anything that we’ve discussed, or are there other ideas on this topic that have occurred to you that you would like to share?
Appendix C

Letter of Consent

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Primary Investigator: Dr. Nena Stracuzzi
Doctoral Candidate: Jane O. Lizotte
Title of Project: A Qualitative Analysis of Distributed Leadership and Teacher Perspective on Principal Leadership Effectiveness

Dear Colleagues:

You are invited to participate in a research study because you are currently teaching at Sherwood Middle School. Jane O. Lizotte, a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University, is responsible for this study, which is designed to investigate ways in which teachers perceive the school principal’s actions on distributed leadership at Sherwood Middle School. Jane is available in person, by phone (508-841-8675), and via e-mail (jlizotte@shrewsbury.k12.ma.us) at any time if you would like to further discuss the details of this study. If you have any concerns that you are not comfortable addressing with Jane, you may contact the chairman of the researcher’s study, Dr. Nena Stracuzzi, at Northeastern University via e-mail at n.stracuzzi@neu.edu or by telephone (617-435-6189). Superintendent of Shrewsbury Public Schools, Dr. Joseph Sawyer, has given Jane permission to conduct this study at Sherwood Middle School.

You have the option to participate in either an online anonymous questionnaire or in both an online anonymous questionnaire and in a focus group interview. Teachers will complete the online survey either at home or at school; whichever is preferable to you. However, the survey may not be completed during teaching times of the day. Jane will be available by phone, through e-mail, or in person to offer technical or other support in the event you have a question. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The focus group discussion will consist of one, one-hour session and will occur primarily during the school day. The session will run from 7:30 a.m. – 8:30 a.m. Each of the sessions will be recorded on audiotape and minutes will be taken by one of the assistant principals at Sherwood Middle School. A laptop or iPAD will be used to take comprehensive notes during the sessions. Each of the two assistant principals who currently serve in leadership positions at the school has expressed interest in participating in the focus groups. One assistant principal will take thorough minutes of the sessions. This form of recording is a common practice at Sherwood Middle School. Though the minutes from the sessions will not be used as data for the study, the minutes will be given to each of the participants for member checking and inter-rater reliability. Neither assistant principal will serve as a participant in the focus groups. Each of these administrators has recently moved from the classroom and into administration and therefore, has current and relevant teaching experiences at the middle level. By involving them in this way, I will be better able to gauge the clarity of the questions, as well as their effectiveness in eliciting faculty responses that will include information on the preferred themes drawn from the initial questionnaire. Interested faculty will be served breakfast before the start of each of the focus group sessions. The notes and audio-
tapes taken from the focus group discussions will be kept in a locked safe in my home office for five years, after which time they will be destroyed.

Please know that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and there will be no remuneration provided to the volunteer participants. Your decision to participate or not participate will not influence Jane’s evaluation and/or perception of your performance in any way, per the supervision and evaluation practices outlined in the collective bargaining agreement. Teacher responses will be kept in confidence and individual teachers’ roles at Middle School will not be changed as a result of the comments you share during the focus group discussions. You will not be asked to identify your colleagues by name or provide descriptions of them that would indicate their identity in any way. In addition, if for any reason you would like to withdraw from the focus group, you may do so at any time and without penalty. If there are questions on the anonymous questionnaire that you cannot or would prefer not to answer, that is perfectly fine.

It is important to understand there is sometimes risk involved when participating in research studies, including this one. Although minimal and unanticipated, there may be a slight risk for emotional or psychological discomfort that may arise when being interviewed and having those interviews recorded by audiotape and/or by being observed and having those observations noted and/or recorded by audiotape. Please know that Jane will make a concerted effort to minimize any anxiety or distress by providing opportunities to review the meeting minutes and the transcripts of focus group interviews in order to ensure that your responses were accurately captured and your intent was understood by Jane throughout the study.

If you choose to participate in this study, you are asked to sign a form of consent indicating your interest and your understanding of the purpose of the study, along with your understanding of the voluntary nature of the survey and focus group discussions, and the expectations of you as a participant. The consent form is attached for your reference.

Results of this study will be readily available to all participants and will be shared by Jane O. Lizotte in her doctoral dissertation under the title noted above.

Please sign and return this letter indicating your interest in participating in one or both portions of the study. In order to participate in a focus group, you must also complete the anonymous survey.

I am interested in participating in the following:

☐ anonymous survey only

☐ survey and focus group

☐ I am not interested in participating in this study

Name (please print): _______________________________ Date: __________
Teacher signature: _________________________________________

Return to the Sherwood Middle School Main Office or mail to:

Jane O. Lizotte at Sherwood Middle School, 30 Sherwood Avenue, Shrewsbury, MA 01545.
Email: jlizotte@shrewsbury.k12.ma.us
Phone: 508-841-8675
Appendix D

Focus Group Discussion Guide

Project Title: A Qualitative Analysis of Distributed Leadership and Teacher Perspective on Principal Leadership Effectiveness

- Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group discussion. Your contribution is truly appreciated.
- I am conducting a research study that focuses on distributed leadership practices in a middle school. The results of this study will be used in my final report to my advisors at Northeastern University.
- We are meeting together to discuss principal practices that you perceive as having a positive and/or negative impact on distributed leadership, as well as your perception of the benefits and drawbacks of a distributed leadership model.
- As I wrote in the confidential questionnaire, distributing leadership in a school community provides an opportunity for teachers to influence meaningful collaborative practices through shared leadership. This type of leadership focuses on what people do and how and why they do it. Leadership practice is not viewed as a product of a leader's knowledge and skill, but is rather viewed as the interactions between people and their situation. It is through these interactions, rather than through actions, that leadership practice is understood, as these interactions inform, influence, and construct leadership practice.
- I will serve as the facilitator for the discussion. I encourage each of you to actively participate in the discussion and be open and honest with your comments and questions.
- Our discussion will be 60 minutes in length.
- We will meet in the Media Center from 7:30 a.m.–8:30 a.m. for the next session as well.
- Before we begin our conversation this morning, kindly refer to the consent form that is in front of you. We will read the consent form together before we begin. If you are in agreement with the terms and conditions provided on the form, we will continue with our discussion. If you are not in agreement, you do not have to participate and you will be excused with no consequence to you. (The consent form will be read aloud. Questions can be asked at this time.)
- Teacher participants will be provided with the consent form at the focus group session.
- You may also stop your participation and be excused at any time. Please indicate your intent by saying, “I need to return to my classroom.”
- Today’s session will begin with a review of the data received from the confidential questionnaire. I will continue by asking theme-based questions and comments that arose from the survey. Please stop me at any time during our discussion if you need clarification.
- During the final 10 minutes of the session, I will summarize what has been discussed and you will be encouraged to make additional comments.
- Agenda
  - Welcome
o Describe purpose of the focus group
o Identify goals of the group
o Discuss scheduled meeting timeline
o Define distributed leadership
o Share research questions
o Discuss group norms
o Share survey results.
o Ask questions based on survey results (i.e. How would you respond to someone who said to you, “The administration is looking to relinquish some of their responsibilities by suggesting that teachers participate in distributed leadership opportunities?” and “Based on your experience with assuming leadership responsibilities, would you recommend that other teachers take on leadership roles within a school? Why or why not?”)
o Questions will include:
  - Open-ended questions
  - Follow-up questions
  - Probing questions
  - Prompted questions
o Summarize comments
o Invite participants to share final thoughts
o Thank participants for their participation and conclude session.
Appendix E

Northeastern University, Department of: College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Nena Stracuzzi, Jane O. Lizotte
Title of Project: A Qualitative Analysis of Distributed Leadership and Teacher Perspective on Principal Leadership Effectiveness

Request to Participate in Research
We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this research is to develop an understanding of teacher perspectives of principal practices that teachers believe contribute to distributed leadership in a middle school. This research will also examine the benefits and drawbacks of distributed leadership.

We are asking you to take part in this second part of the study because you are a middle school teacher and you completed the Part I online questionnaire. You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project.

The focus group will take place in the school’s Media Center and will take about one hour. During this time, you will be answering questions and commenting on distributed leadership. The focus group will be audio-recorded for transcription and analysis purposes only. You will also be invited to review the transcript of the focus group to help ensure accuracy and clarification of content.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study. As it is a research study, there will be no effect on your standing as a faculty member nor will any information collected in the study affect your personal performance review.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. However, your answers may help us to learn more about ways in which teachers believe a principal influences distributed leadership in a middle school community.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you, the school or any individual as being of this project. All audio-recordings will be destroyed following transcription and analysis.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee of the school.
You will not be paid for your participation in this study. Light breakfast refreshments will be provided.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Jane O. Lizotte, the person mainly responsible for the research at 774-275-4038 or lizotte.j@husky.neu.edu. You can also contact Dr. Nena Stracuzzi, the Principal Investigator overseeing the research n.stracuzzi@neu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

You may keep this form for yourself.

Thank you.

Jane O. Lizotte
Appendix F

Dr. Joseph M. Sawyer
Superintendent of Schools
100 Maple Avenue

April 8, 2012

Dear Dr. Sawyer:

As I continue my doctoral program at Northeastern University, I am looking for your permission to conduct a research study with the faculty at Sherwood Middle School. This study is an important part of the research process and is scheduled to be conducted during the months of May and June, 2012. Your permission to complete this study is essential to obtaining the approval I need from the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board.

The research study is entitled, “A Qualitative Analysis of Distributed Leadership and Teacher Perspective on Principal Leadership Effectiveness.” The problem of practice being investigated includes analyzing the practices, actions, and structures that cultivate the practice of distributed leadership in a large middle school community in order to better understand how a principal can best engage teachers using a distributed leadership model. As you know, expectations for schools have increased in recent years - to the point where schools are expected to ensure that all students are learning at high levels. This is a complex task that requires leadership beyond that provided by the principal. At Sherwood Middle School, a distributed leadership model is emerging, yet it is uncertain what is influencing and sustaining the development of this model. This study hopes to answer the questions, “What principal practices do teachers perceive as having a positive or negative impact on distributed leadership at Sherwood Middle School?” and “What do teachers perceive as the benefits and drawbacks of the principal’s efforts to enact and support a distributed leadership model in her school?”

Data collection will begin with an anonymous, online survey that will be given to the teaching faculty at Sherwood Middle School. This will be accomplished through Survey Monkey, the online survey tool that is often used in our school district. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete and faculty will be asked to do this during a preparation period or outside of the school day. This will not be done when teachers are scheduled to be teaching students. The survey results will be analyzed by me and will be used as a springboard for further discussion. This discussion will take place in the form of two focus groups. These groups will consist of 5-6 teachers per group; each of whom will have volunteered to participate in the study.

Focus group discussions will follow the collection and analysis of the survey data. Focus group participants will be selected according to the content area and/or special subject they teach, as I believe it is important to have a cross-section of faculty represented in each of the groups. I will balance the number of team content teachers with art, music, physical education, and foreign language teachers. If the interest level is high and more than 12 teachers of varying content
levels volunteer to participate, I will select teachers who represent different age groups, levels of experience teaching in the public schools, and specialty content area. Focus group discussions will occur during a two week time frame from 7:30 a.m. – 8:30 a.m. and will occur in the Media Center at [Redacted]. Breakfast consisting of bagels, fresh fruit, juice and coffee will be served just prior to the focus group sessions. A focus group discussion guide will be used during each session—the content of which will include themes and questions that emerge from the survey data. These questions will focus primarily on teachers’ perspectives of distributed leadership practices at [Redacted] Middle School. The focus group discussions will be recorded by hand and audiotape by me. The assistant principals are not serving as focus group participants, yet each will serve in an advisory capacity for one of the two focus groups. Meeting minutes will be sent to all participants following the sessions for purposes of member checking. Member-checking will be used to verify participants’ agreement with the collected data by allowing them to review transcripts for accuracy in portraying their perceptions and attitudes. Participant names and the name of the school will be coded for confidentiality. Audiotapes and notes will be kept in locked storage in my home and destroyed after five years.

Although minimal and unanticipated, there may be a slight risk for emotional or psychological discomfort for the teacher participants. This could potentially arise as a result of being interviewed and having those interviews recorded by audiotape and/or by being observed and having those observations noted and/or recorded by audiotape. I will make a concerted effort to minimize any anxiety or discomfort by providing opportunities to review the minutes and the transcripts of focus group discussions in order to ensure that responses are accurately captured and participant intent is understood by me throughout the study. Participants will also be reminded before each session begins that their comments and questions will remain confidential at all times and they will remain anonymous. Teachers will be assured that they can withdraw from the study at any time with no recourse and will be told that information gained from the study will not be used in any way that could negatively impact their role in the school or in their professional evaluations. The voluntary and confidential nature of participation will be emphasized in order to alleviate any concerns the faculty may experience because of the dual role of the researcher and as the principal of the school (and therefore the supervisor of the faculty). Teachers will be provided with instructions directing them to a consent form that will allow them to express their interest in the questionnaire and the focus groups (see attachment). This will be accomplished via e-mail. Interested participants will sign the attached consent form signifying their awareness and approval of the study.

Attached please find a draft of the informed consent form for your review. Teachers will only be allowed to participate if they sign the consent form. I am also attaching certification granted to me from the National Institutes of Health that I have completed the necessary training in “Protecting Human Research Participants.”

Please contact me if you would like additional information regarding my research study. I look forward to sharing my learning with you in the weeks and months ahead.

Respectfully,
Jane O. Lizotte
Appendix G

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Jane Lizotte successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 03/24/2010

Certification Number: 422119
Appendix H

May, 2012

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your time and attention during today’s faculty meeting. We accomplished many important tasks and this could not have been done without your ongoing commitment to improving our school community. This message serves as a reminder to those of you in attendance at the meeting, and an invitation to those of you who were unable to attend today’s meeting, to participate in an on-line anonymous questionnaire that focuses on distributed leadership practices at [insert school name]. The link to the survey is provided here: (post Survey Monkey link here). Included at the beginning of the questionnaire is a definition of distributed leadership as well as a rationale for the study being conducted. Please read this information carefully before taking the survey.

As I explained during our faculty meeting and through conversations with you over the past couple of years, I am in the process of participating in a research study at Northeastern University and am seeking your help. The first portion of the study includes the completion of an anonymous questionnaire. The second portion of the study involves participating in one of two focus groups. I am hoping that 5-6 teachers will participate in each of the focus groups. You do NOT need to commit to participating in a focus group in order to complete the questionnaire, but you do need to complete the questionnaire in order to participate in a focus group.

Please know that you have the right not to participate and if you choose to participate, you may stop your participation at any time and without penalty. I also want you to know that whether or not you choose to participate in this study will have no impact on your school-standing or in any future evaluation of your performance, per the supervision and evaluation practices outlined in the collective bargaining agreement. In other words, you will not be adversely affected as a result of choosing not to participate, nor will there be any consequences for speaking your mind should you choose to participate in the study. In fact, it is my expectation that participants will speak openly and candidly, and this expectation will be reinforced through all verbal and/or written communication that is provided to the participants. Given the researcher’s dual role of building principal and primary researcher of the study, it is imperative that you know and understand this information.

Please let me know if I can answer any questions for you.

Thank you for your continued understanding as I make my way through this exciting, yet challenging, process!

Respectfully,

Jane
Appendix I

May, 2012

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your time and attention during today’s faculty meeting. We accomplished many important tasks and this could not have been done without your ongoing commitment to improving our school community. This message serves as a reminder to those of you in attendance at the meeting, and an invitation to those of you who were unable to attend today’s meeting, to participate in an on-line questionnaire that focuses on distributed leadership practices. The link to the survey is provided here: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/distributedleadership. Included at the beginning of the questionnaire is a definition of distributed leadership as well as a rationale for the study being conducted. Please read this information carefully before taking the survey.

As I explained during our faculty meeting and through conversations with you over the past couple of years, I am in the process of completing the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University and I am conducting a research study. The first portion of the study includes the completion of an on-line questionnaire. The second portion of the study involves participating in one of two focus groups. I am hoping that 5-6 teachers will participate in each of the focus groups. You do NOT need to commit to participating in a focus group in order to complete the questionnaire, but you do need to complete the questionnaire in order to participate in a focus group. If you are interested in participating in the focus group, please send me an e-mail at jlizotte@shrewsbury.k12.ma.us by June ___.

Please know that you have the right not to participate and if you choose to participate, you may stop your participation at any time and without penalty. I also want you to know that whether or not you choose to participate in this study will have no impact on your school-standing or in any future evaluation of your performance, per the supervision and evaluation practices outlined in the collective bargaining agreement. In other words, you will not be adversely affected as a result of choosing not to participate, nor will there be any consequences for sharing your thoughts and ideas should you choose to participate in the study. Given the researcher’s dual role of building principal and primary researcher of the study, it is imperative that you know and understand this information.

Please let me know if I can answer any questions for you.

Thank you for your continued understanding as I make my way through this exciting, yet challenging, process!

Respectfully,

Jane
Appendix J

June, 2012

Dear Colleagues,

This serves as a reminder of our recent conversation regarding the questionnaire that I have invited you to complete as part of the research study that I am conducting for the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University in which I am currently involved. The survey link that you can use if you are interested in completing the questionnaire can be accessed at http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/distributedleadership. If you are interested in participating in the study by completing the questionnaire, please do so by June __________. Kindly read and review the initial portion of the questionnaire carefully, as this includes some important information regarding the study.

The second portion of the study includes a request for participation in one of two focus groups. This involvement will require one hour of your participation in a focus group discussion on distributed leadership. If this is of interest to you, please e-mail me at Jlizotte@shrewsbury.k12.ma.us by June __________. Some of you have previously communicated your interest to me, but please confirm through e-mail. If I receive more than 12 responses indicating interest in participating in a focus group, a lottery system will be used to select participants. This would be a good news story for me! If this is the case, I will contact you by June ______ to update you on the selection process and inform you whether or not you were chosen for a focus group.

Thank you for your time and attention. I look forward to working with you on this project.

Respectfully,

Jane
Appendix K

June 8, 2012

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your interest and involvement in the research study that I am conducting as part of the requirements for the Doctor of Education program at Northeastern University! As of today, I have received 34 returned surveys. Your participation is truly appreciated. I value your insight regarding distributed leadership in a middle school and I know that I will learn from you throughout this important process. As a reminder, the link to the questionnaire can be accessed at http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/distributedleadership. You will notice that an unsigned consent form will appear as the first page of the online questionnaire. Completion of the online survey questionnaire will imply consent. Additionally, if you have indicated an interest in participating in one of two focus groups, a separate unsigned consent form will be used to confirm consent for participation in the Focus Group. I will provide copies of the focus group consent form for participants and will review the form and answer all questions prior to beginning the focus group sessions. Thank you to Deb R., Erin H., Cathy B., Janet D., Gloria D., Lorry D., and Lucy M. for participating in this morning’s focus group!

Please know that I am extremely grateful to you for taking time out of your busy work and home schedules to assist me with this study.

Respectfully,

Jane