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School Leadership and the Development of a Collaborative Culture in Public Education: A Theoretical Perspective

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ABSTRACT: This theoretical study examines the relationship between school leadership and the development of a collaborative culture in public education. The starting point of this paper is the position that teacher collaboration is not formed automatically, but depends on the organizational climate, relations of trust, leadership practices, and participatory decision-making structures developed within the school unit. School leadership is approached not merely as an administrative function, but as a pedagogical and organizational process that influences how teachers communicate, collaborate, reflect, and assume collective responsibility for school improvement.

Through the theoretical utilization of approaches such as transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership, the paper highlights that the principal can act as a catalyst for cultivating a shared vision, professional trust, and collective learning. At the same time, it is noted that a collaborative culture is not equated with mere coexistence or formal cooperation, but presupposes meaningful professional dialogue, mutual support, participation, and a shared commitment to pedagogical improvement. The study argues that in public education, where school units often operate within institutional constraints and bureaucratic pressures, the development of a collaborative culture is a critical factor for school effectiveness, teacher professional empowerment, and sustainable educational change.

KEYWORDS: school leadership, collaborative culture, public education, distributed leadership, professional learning communities, teachers.

1. INTRODUCTION

The school unit constitutes a complex social, pedagogical, and organizational space within which teachers, students, administration, and the broader school community interact on a daily basis. The functioning of a school does not solely depend on curricula, institutional regulations, or the individual capacities of teachers, but also on the quality of relationships, the climate of trust, modes of communication, and the collective practices developed within the organization. According to Hoy and Miskel (2013), the school can be approached as a social system in which relationships, structures, and values directly influence the behavior of its members and the effectiveness of the educational process.

In this context, the concept of school culture acquires particular significance. The culture of a school encompasses the shared values, perceptions, expectations, behavioral patterns, and informal norms that shape how members of the school community think and act (Schein, 2010). Deal and Peterson (2016) argue that school culture decisively influences the daily work of teachers, as it forms the framework within which relationships, collaboration, professional identity, and commitment to school goals are developed.

A collaborative culture is not limited to the mere existence of good interpersonal relationships among teachers. On the contrary, it is linked to deeper organizational and pedagogical processes, such as shared responsibility for student learning, professional dialogue, the exchange of experiences, collective problem-solving, and participation in shaping the school vision. Stoll et al. (2006) point out that professional learning communities are based on a shared mission, collaborative inquiry, and continuous teacher reflection. Similarly, DuFour and Eaker (1998) emphasize that meaningful collaboration does not simply concern frequent communication among educators, but rather systematic work around shared learning goals.

School leadership plays a central role in shaping a collaborative culture. The principal does not merely perform administrative duties; they decisively influence the climate, relationships, values, and collective practices developed within the school unit. Contemporary literature highlights that effective school leadership is linked to the formulation of a shared vision, teacher empowerment, the creation of conditions of trust, and the enhancement of participatory decision-making (Bush, 2020; Fullan, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2004). In particular, leadership influences learning and organizational improvement primarily indirectly, through its impact on school conditions, professional relationships, and the organizational culture (Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Sun, 2012).

Approaches to transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership are of particular importance. Transformational leadership emphasizes vision, motivation, professional development, and teacher commitment to shared goals (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Instructional leadership focuses more on the improvement of teaching and learning, highlighting the pedagogical role of the principal (Hallinger, 2003, 2011). On the other hand, distributed leadership underscores that leadership is not confined to a single individual, but can develop through

collective practices, participatory processes, and the assumption of responsibility by multiple members of the school community (Harris, 2008, 2014; Spillane, 2006).

In public education, developing a collaborative culture becomes even more critical, as school units operate within institutionally defined frameworks, often with limited resources, increased administrative demands, and diverse student population needs. Teachers are called upon to respond to complex pedagogical and social challenges, such as inclusion, social inequalities, differentiated instruction, curriculum changes, and the integration of new technologies. In this environment, collaboration among teachers is not a luxury but a necessary condition for school improvement and professional empowerment (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; OECD, 2016).

However, collaboration cannot simply be imposed through administrative directives or formal meetings. Hargreaves (2019) points out that teacher collaboration takes different forms and is not always meaningful or effective. To function pedagogically and organizationally, it needs to be grounded in trust, shared purpose, professional dialogue, and collective responsibility. Trust, in particular, constitutes a fundamental element of school improvement, as it influences teachers' willingness to collaborate, share practices, express concerns, and participate in change processes (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

This paper is theoretical in nature and attempts to examine the relationship between school leadership and the development of a collaborative culture in public education. Specifically, it explores how school leadership can contribute to shaping a school environment that fosters trust, participation, professional dialogue, and collective responsibility. At the same time, it highlights that a collaborative culture is not merely a desirable organizational state, but a critical prerequisite for sustainable educational change, professional learning, and improving the quality of public education.

The purpose of this study is to highlight the importance of school leadership as a factor in shaping a collaborative culture and to argue that the sustainable improvement of public schools requires a transition from individual and fragmented practices to collective, participatory, and reflective forms of professional action. Through a theoretical synthesis of the relevant literature, this paper attempts to contribute to the discussion on the role of the principal as a pedagogical leader, coordinator, and agent of change within the school community.

Theoretical Question of the Paper

Based on the above, the core theoretical question underpinning this study is:

- How can school leadership contribute to the development of a collaborative culture in public education?

The specific sub-questions are:

- What are the key characteristics of a collaborative culture within the school environment?
- Which styles of school leadership are most closely linked to enhancing collaboration among teachers?
- In what ways can the principal foster trust, participation, and collective responsibility within the school unit?
- What difficulties and limitations affect the development of a collaborative culture in public schools?

2. THE CONCEPT OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

School leadership constitutes one of the most significant parameters for understanding the functioning, quality, and improvement of the school unit. In contemporary educational theory, leadership is not exclusively equated with administrative oversight, compliance with regulations, or the management of daily procedures. On the contrary, it is approached as a complex pedagogical, organizational, and social process through which the goals, values, relationships, and professional practices of the school are formed (Bush, 2020; Hoy & Miskel, 2013). In this sense, the principal functions not only as an administrative head but also as a figure who influences the school climate, professional culture, teacher participation, and the collective trajectory of the school community.

The distinction between management and leadership is critical to understanding the role of the principal in public education. Management is primarily associated with resource management, the implementation of regulations, the organization of the school schedule, and ensuring smooth daily operations. Leadership, conversely, is more concerned with articulating a vision, motivating teachers, enhancing collaboration, developing trust, and creating conditions for professional learning (Fullan, 2014; Hallinger, 2011). Therefore, while management ensures the stability and functionality of the school, leadership is linked to change, improvement, and collective growth.

In public schools, the role of school leadership is particularly complex, as the principal is required to function within an institutionally defined and often bureaucratic framework. Decisions, procedures, responsibilities, and available resources are largely determined by educational policy and the administrative hierarchy. This means that school leadership within the public educational system is not exercised in conditions of complete autonomy, but within specific constraints, obligations, and institutional requirements (Bush, 2020; OECD, 2016). Nevertheless, the relevant literature demonstrates that even within restrictive frameworks, school leaders can significantly influence the culture, climate, and relationships of the school (Leithwood et al., 2004; Day et al., 2016).

Effective school leadership is not confined to the individual capacity of the principal but relates to how collective action is organized within the school unit. Leithwood et al. (2004) argue that school leadership constitutes the second most important school-level factor influencing student learning, preceded only by classroom instruction. This impact, however, is primarily indirect: leadership influences learning by shaping appropriate conditions, such as the school climate, professional collaboration, expectations, teacher support, and collective commitment to school goals (Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Sun, 2012).

A vital dimension of school leadership is the ability to formulate a shared vision. A public school cannot function effectively when teachers work in isolation, without a common direction and a sense of collective purpose. Leadership must contribute to the formation of a pedagogical framework within which members of the school community perceive school goals as shared, rather than as externally imposed obligations (Fullan, 2001; Fullan, 2014). The vision, therefore, is not merely a declaratory statement, but a process of making sense of school life, through which teachers connect their daily practice with broader pedagogical aims.

School leadership is also linked to the development of professional trust. Trust is a fundamental prerequisite for collaboration because it allows teachers to express concerns, share practices, acknowledge difficulties, and participate in change processes without fear of evaluation or deprecation (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). In school units dominated by suspicion, competition, or formal compliance, collaboration remains superficial. Conversely, when leadership fosters relationships of respect, transparency, and mutual support, the prerequisites for meaningful professional dialogue and collective learning are established.

Another major dimension of school leadership concerns providing pedagogical support to teachers. Instructional or pedagogical leadership emphasizes the improvement of teaching and learning, monitoring educational needs, creating opportunities for professional development, and linking school practices to students' learning progress (Hallinger, 2003, 2011). In this context, the principal is not limited to administrative coordination but acts as a pedagogical guide, supporter, and coordinator of teachers' professional learning.

Transformational leadership also offers an important theoretical background for understanding school leadership. According to this approach, the leader seeks to inspire, motivate, and empower organization members to commit to shared goals and transcend the mere execution of duties (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In the school environment, transformational leadership is linked to enhancing professional commitment, collaboration, innovation, and readiness for change (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood & Sun, 2012). For public education, where changes are frequently perceived as external pressures, the transformational dimension of leadership can contribute to the internal meaning-making of change by the teachers themselves.

At the same time, distributed leadership broadens the understanding of school leadership beyond the person of the principal. According to Spillane (2006), leadership does not reside solely in one individual or in an institutional role, but develops through the interactions among persons, practices, and the organizational context. This approach is particularly important for a collaborative culture, as it argues that responsibility for school improvement can be shared among multiple members of the school community. Harris (2008, 2014) asserts that distributed leadership enhances participation, initiative-taking, and the utilization of teachers' professional knowledge.

In public education, distributed leadership does not imply a lack of coordination or a weakening of the principal's role. On the contrary, it means that the principal creates conditions within which teachers can meaningfully participate in decision-making, action planning, problem-solving, and the improvement of school practice. In this way, leadership is transformed from individual authority into a collective capacity of the school to learn, adapt, and improve (Harris, 2014; OECD, 2016).

However, exercising school leadership in public schools is accompanied by significant challenges. Bureaucracy, limited resources, a lack of time for meaningful collaboration, frequent changes in educational policy, and a culture of formal compliance can restrict the transformational and collaborative role of leadership. Furthermore, when the principal is excessively burdened with administrative responsibilities, the available time for pedagogical guidance, teacher support, and the development of collaborative processes is reduced (Bush, 2020; OECD, 2016). Consequently, school leadership in public education must be understood within the dialectical relationship between institutional commitments and the potential for localized pedagogical action.

Overall, the concept of school leadership in public education transcends the traditional perception of the principal as an administrative manager. The contemporary theoretical approach highlights school leadership as a process of formulating a vision, supporting instruction, fostering trust, cultivating participation, and developing collective responsibility. Therefore, school leadership constitutes a basic prerequisite for shaping a collaborative culture, as it influences how teachers perceive their role, collaborate with one another, and participate in school improvement.

3. SCHOOL CULTURE AND COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

School culture constitutes a fundamental concept for understanding the internal functioning of a school unit. It does not solely concern the formal rules, administrative procedures, or institutional obligations of the school, but primarily the shared values, perceptions, assumptions, relationships, and informal behavioral patterns that shape daily school life. According to Schein (2010), organizational culture encompasses the deeper patterns of thinking and action that develop within an organization and influence how its members perceive their problems, relationships, and goals. In the school environment, culture affects how teachers collaborate, communicate, face difficulties, and make sense of their professional role.

Deal and Peterson (2016) argue that school culture is one of the most powerful, yet often invisible, elements of school life. Through values, symbols, stories, traditions, and daily practices, culture determines what is considered important, acceptable, or desirable in a school unit. Thus, two schools operating under the exact same institutional framework may exhibit vastly different internal dynamics, depending on the climate of trust, attitudes toward collaboration, relationship with innovation, and the degree of teacher participation in collective processes.

A collaborative culture constitutes a more specific dimension of school culture and refers to the way members of the school community build relationships of cooperation, shared responsibility, and professional learning. It is not equated with the mere coexistence of teachers in the same space, nor with formal participation in meetings or working groups. On the contrary, it presupposes meaningful communication, trust, a common orientation, knowledge sharing, and a collective search for solutions to the problems of school practice (Stoll et al., 2006). In this sense, a collaborative culture transforms the school from a site of individual professional action into a community of collective learning.

The significance of a collaborative culture becomes particularly evident when examining the traditional isolation of teaching work. Hargreaves (1994) points out that teachers' work is often characterized by individualism, as instruction takes place primarily inside the classroom, isolated from systematic observation and professional dialogue with colleagues. This isolation can restrict the exchange of experiences, feedback, and the collective processing of pedagogical issues. Conversely, a collaborative culture creates conditions under which teachers can discuss openly, reflect upon their practices, and develop shared improvement strategies.

However, collaboration is not inherently positive or effective. Hargreaves (2019) emphasizes that teacher collaboration takes different forms, qualities, and outcomes. It can be meaningful, when grounded in shared pedagogical responsibility and a genuine exchange of practices, but it can also be superficial, formalistic, or contrived. In many cases, teachers participate in meetings or group processes without these leading to any

substantial change in instruction or school functioning. Therefore, the development of a collaborative culture does not merely concern the frequency of collaboration, but primarily its quality, content, and pedagogical orientation.

A meaningful collaborative culture is closely linked to the concept of the professional learning community. Hord (1997, 2004) describes professional learning communities as school environments in which teachers systematically collaborate, investigate their practice, share responsibility for student learning, and engage in continuous professional development. Similarly, DuFour and Eaker (1998) argue that professional learning communities rest on three core principles: a focus on learning, a collaborative culture, and a results orientation. Based on this approach, collaboration gains meaning when it is connected to the improvement of teaching and the learning experience.

Stoll et al. (2006) highlight that professional learning communities are characterized by shared values and vision, collective responsibility, reflective professional inquiry, collaboration, and an orientation toward continuous improvement. These elements demonstrate that a collaborative culture is not merely "a good atmosphere" at school, but an organizational condition that supports the learning of both students and teachers. Collaboration, therefore, acquires pedagogical depth when it is not limited to information sharing, but leads to the collective analysis of data, the design of instructional interventions, reflection, and the evaluation of school practice.

Trust constitutes the foundation of a collaborative culture. Without trust, teachers are less likely to share difficulties, seek help, accept feedback, or participate in change processes. Bryk and Schneider (2002) argue that trust in schools constitutes a core resource for school improvement, as it influences the quality of relationships among teachers, administration, students, and parents. Trust is not created automatically; rather, it is built through consistency, transparency, respect, fairness, and the ability of school community members to feel heard and supported.

An important element of a collaborative culture is also the existence of a shared purpose. When teachers perceive that they are working toward a common pedagogical goal, collaboration gains content and direction. Conversely, when a shared vision is absent, collaboration is often confined to technical or procedural matters, without touching the core of teaching and learning. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) link a collaborative professional culture with the concept of professional capital, arguing that the quality of education improves when teachers develop collective knowledge, shared responsibility, and professional judgment.

A collaborative culture is also connected to teachers' professional identity. In a school dominated by an individualistic logic, the teacher views instruction as a personal affair and often manages classroom difficulties alone. In contrast, in a collaborative school, professional identity is formed through collective participation, the exchange of experiences, and the sense that school quality is a shared responsibility. Louis and Marks (1998) showed that professional communities can positively influence teachers' work and students' learning experiences, as they enhance cohesion, shared orientation, and collective commitment.

A collaborative culture holds particular significance in public education, where school units are called upon to respond to complex social and pedagogical needs. The diversification of the student population, demands for inclusion, social inequalities, technological changes, and increased administrative obligations necessitate the collective processing of the problems of school practice. No single teacher can respond effectively to these challenges completely isolated. A collaborative culture allows the school to utilize the collective experience, knowledge, and creativity of its members, thereby enhancing its capacity to respond to the needs of students and the community (OECD, 2016).

Despite its advantages, developing a collaborative culture is not an easy process. It can be impeded by a lack of time, the absence of stable structures for collaboration, relationships of suspicion, a culture of individual responsibility, excessive bureaucracy, or the formalistic implementation of collaborative practices without meaningful content. Kruse et al. (1995) point out that a professional community in school requires appropriate structures, shared values, opportunities for dialogue, and conditions that allow teachers to learn from one another. Therefore, a collaborative culture is not simply the result of good intentions, but requires systematic support and organizational cultivation.

At this point, the role of school leadership emerges once again. A collaborative culture cannot develop without leadership practices that enhance participation, trust, fairness, and collective responsibility. The principal can contribute to creating time and space for collaboration, encouraging professional dialogue, recognizing teachers' contributions, and linking collaboration with the pedagogical goals of the school. As Fullan (2001) points out, educational change is not achieved solely through plans and policies, but through changing the culture, relationships, and ways in which people work together for a shared purpose.

Overall, school culture and collaborative culture constitute critical dimensions of the functioning and improvement of public schools. Collaboration should not be treated as a superficial or occasional practice, but as a deeper organizational and pedagogical condition linked to trust, a shared vision, professional learning, and collective responsibility. Its development requires time, stability, leadership support, and a conscious effort to change the daily practices of the school. Therefore, a collaborative culture serves as a vital bridge between school leadership and the sustainable improvement of public education.

4. THE ROLE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN DEVELOPING A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE

The development of a collaborative culture within the school unit is not an automatic or self-evident process. Although teachers work within the same organization and share common institutional obligations, meaningful collaboration requires appropriate conditions, a shared orientation, trust, and leadership support. In this context, school leadership functions as a key factor in shaping the organizational and pedagogical prerequisites that allow collaboration to acquire duration, meaning, and pedagogical substance. The impact of leadership on school improvement is primarily indirect, as it is exercised through the formation of a climate, relationships, expectations, and collective practices (Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Sun, 2012).

The first critical dimension of the role of school leadership is the formulation of a shared vision. Collaboration cannot rely solely on the good intentions of teachers; rather, it needs a common pedagogical purpose that connects individual practices with the overall mission of the school. The principal can contribute to shaping this orientation by encouraging teachers to perceive issues of teaching, learning, and school life as a shared responsibility rather than an individual matter. Leadership practices focusing on vision, commitment, and making sense of change are particularly associated with transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

The second important dimension is the cultivation of trust. A collaborative culture presupposes that teachers feel safe to express concerns, share difficulties, seek support, and participate in processes of reflection. Trust constitutes core social capital for the school and directly influences the quality of professional relationships (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). School leadership can enhance trust through transparency, consistency, fairness, the recognition of teachers' efforts, and the creation of a climate where feedback is not experienced as control but as an opportunity for improvement.

The third dimension is the creation of structures and time for collaboration. A collaborative culture cannot rely exclusively on informal or occasional initiatives. It requires systematic opportunities for professional dialogue, joint planning, the exchange of practices, and collective problem-solving. Professional learning communities highlight precisely this need for stable collaborative processes linked to student learning and the improvement of teaching (Hord, 1997; Stoll et al., 2006). The principal can function as a coordinator of these processes, ensuring that collaboration is not limited to administrative discussions but fundamentally touches upon pedagogical matters.

The fourth dimension concerns teacher empowerment and participatory decision-making. A collaborative culture is reinforced when teachers are not treated merely as executors of decisions, but as professionals with knowledge, experience, and the capacity to contribute to school improvement. Distributed leadership asserts that leadership is not confined to the person of the principal, but develops through the interactions and initiatives of multiple members of the school community (Spillane, 2006). Harris (2008, 2014) emphasizes that distributed leadership can enhance participation, the assumption of responsibility, and the utilization of teachers' professional knowledge. In public schools, this does not mean abolishing the institutional role of the principal, but rather shifting from individual authority toward collective coordination.

The fifth dimension is linking collaboration to teaching and learning. A collaborative culture holds substantial value when it is not restricted to managing daily matters but is connected to the core of the educational work. Instructional leadership emphasizes the improvement of the learning process, supporting teachers, and developing a shared pedagogical direction (Hallinger, 2003, 2011). Therefore, the principal can reinforce a collaborative culture when helping the staff discuss issues of learning, differentiation, assessment, inclusion, and the pedagogical support of students.

However, the leadership contribution to developing a collaborative culture is not free from limitations. In public education, school leaders often function within bureaucratic frameworks, with limited time, multiple administrative obligations, and narrow margins for institutional flexibility. These factors can restrict the pedagogical dimension of leadership and shift the daily operation of the school toward management and compliance (Bush, 2020; OECD, 2016). At the same time, the existence of deeply entrenched individual practices, a lack of trust, or previous experiences with superficial collaborations can hinder the development of a deeper collaborative culture (Hargreaves, 2019).

Despite the limitations, school leadership retains a critical role because it can influence how members of the school community perceive collaboration. When collaboration is presented as an administrative obligation, it frequently remains formalistic. However, when it is connected to professional learning, pedagogical improvement, and shared responsibility for students, it can transform the functioning of the school. Leadership and collaborative culture, therefore, are not two independent concepts, but intertwined dimensions of school improvement. Leadership creates the conditions under which collaboration can flourish, while a collaborative culture enhances the collective capacity of the school to respond to its pedagogical and social challenges.

Consequently, the role of school leadership in developing a collaborative culture is multifaceted: it shapes a shared vision, fosters trust, organizes structures for collaboration, empowers teachers, and links collaboration to learning. In public schools, where institutional constraints are very real, this contribution acquires particular significance, as it allows the school unit to move beyond mere administrative functionality and evolve into a community of professional learning and collective responsibility.

5. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS IN DEVELOPING A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Although a collaborative culture is recognized as a fundamental prerequisite for school improvement, its development within public schools is neither an easy nor a linear process. The public education system operates within specific institutional, administrative, and organizational frameworks, which influence how teachers collaborate, participate in decision-making, and develop shared pedagogical practices. Consequently, a collaborative culture should not be treated as a mere choice of goodwill, but as a complex process influenced by time, structures, relationships of trust, administrative culture, and teachers' professional identity.

One of the most fundamental difficulties is the lack of time for meaningful collaboration. In public schools, teachers are frequently burdened with teaching, administrative, and extracurricular duties, which restricts the potential for systematic pedagogical dialogue. When collaboration is not organically integrated into the operation of the school, it risks being confined to brief, fragmented, or predominantly procedural discussions. Professional learning communities, however, presuppose stable opportunities for collaboration, collective reflection, and the continuous investigation of teaching practice (Hord, 1997; Stoll et al., 2006). Without institutionalized or organized time, collaboration often remains peripheral and dependent on the personal disposition of individual teachers.

A second major challenge is the bureaucratic operation of the public school. The principal is often called upon to respond to a large volume of administrative demands, which limits the time available for instructional leadership, teacher support, and the cultivation of collaborative processes. Under such conditions, school leadership risks becoming trapped in daily management and procedural compliance, rather than functioning as a force for pedagogical transformation (Bush, 2020; OECD, 2016). This is particularly important because developing a collaborative culture requires leadership that inspires, coordinates, facilitates, and creates conditions of trust.

Another limitation concerns the traditional individuality of educational work. Teaching takes place largely within the classroom, where the teacher often operates autonomously and manages pedagogical difficulties alone. Hargreaves (1994) has pointed out that the professional culture of teachers is frequently characterized by isolation, which limits collective learning and the exchange of practices. Even when formal types of collaboration exist, they do not always lead to meaningful professional dialogue. Hargreaves (2019) emphasizes that collaboration can be deep and pedagogically substantive, but it can also be superficial, contrived, or merely formalistic.

The lack of trust also constitutes a critical barrier. It is difficult for teachers to collaborate meaningfully when they fear criticism, exposure, or deprecation by colleagues and administration. Trust is essential for them to be able to share difficulties, seek help, receive feedback, and undertake collective initiatives. Bryk and Schneider (2002) demonstrate that trust is a key resource for school improvement, as it affects the quality of relationships and the willingness of school community members to participate in processes of change. Without trust, collaboration remains formal and does not touch the core of instructional practice.

A significant difficulty can also arise from ambiguity regarding the content of collaboration. In several cases, collaboration is equated with coordination on practical or administrative matters, without being linked to student learning, differentiated instruction, assessment, or pedagogical support. However, the literature on professional learning communities emphasizes that collaboration acquires substantial meaning when it is connected to a shared responsibility for learning and the systematic improvement of teaching (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Louis & Marks, 1998). Therefore, a collaborative culture must not be limited to good communication, but should be organized around specific pedagogical goals. Particularly in the Greek public school, the development of a collaborative culture is also influenced by a centralized administrative framework, which often restricts the autonomy of the school unit. Distributed leadership presupposes opportunities for participation, taking initiatives, and utilizing teachers' professional knowledge (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2014). However, when teachers feel that decisions are made primarily externally or hierarchically, their participation can be limited. Relevant studies in the Greek context show that distributed leadership in public schools encounters institutional and organizational boundaries, even though it can be an important prerequisite for greater participation and collaboration (Gkoros, 2021).

At the same time, a collaborative culture can falter when there is no shared vision or common pedagogical direction. The absence of a shared purpose often leads to fragmented practices, where each teacher operates based on their own perception of the school and learning. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) link the professional quality of a school to the development of collective professional capital—namely, the ability of teachers to think, decide, and act together. Without a shared direction, collaboration risks remaining at the level of simple information exchange.

Finally, it must be emphasized that developing a collaborative culture requires time and consistency. It cannot be achieved instantly through isolated actions, nor can it be imposed administratively. It requires a gradual change in relationships, perceptions, and daily practices. Educational change, as Fullan (2001) argues, is not just about implementing new policies or technical solutions, but primarily about altering the culture and relationships within the organization. Therefore, school leadership needs to treat collaborative culture as a long-term process rather than an immediate administrative result.

Overall, the challenges to developing a collaborative culture in public schools are linked to institutional constraints, bureaucratic demands, a lack of time, individual professional practices, limited trust, and the absence of stable structures for collaboration. However, these difficulties do not negate the importance of a collaborative culture. On the contrary, they highlight the need for school leadership that can function supportively, coordinatively, and transformatively, creating the prerequisites for the public school to evolve into a community of professional learning and collective responsibility.

6. DISCUSSION: THEORETICAL SYNTHESIS

The preceding theoretical analysis demonstrates that school leadership and a collaborative culture constitute interconnected dimensions of school improvement. Teacher collaboration cannot be regarded merely as the outcome of personal relationships or individual disposition, but rather as an organizational condition requiring leadership support, a shared vision, trust, and stable structures for professional dialogue. School leadership, therefore, functions as a mechanism for shaping the environment within which collaboration can develop meaningfully and connect with student learning and the professional development of teachers.

The first key finding is that school leadership influences collaborative culture primarily indirectly. It does not merely impose collaboration, but rather shapes the conditions that render it possible. Leithwood et al. (2004) and Leithwood and Sun (2012) argue that the impact of leadership on school effectiveness is realized through the improvement of organizational conditions, expectations, climate, and professional commitment. Based on this approach, the principal does not simply need to organize processes, but must strengthen relationships, cultivate meaning, and forge a collective direction.

The second finding concerns the significance of trust. A collaborative culture presupposes an environment where teachers can share difficulties, discuss their practices openly, and participate in reflective processes without fear of exposure or deprecation. Trust constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for school improvement, as it affects the quality of relationships and the willingness of teachers to engage in collective practices (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Similarly, Barth (2006) emphasizes that the quality of relationships within the school is a critical factor for change and the improvement of school life.

The third finding is that collaboration requires pedagogical content. It is not sufficient for teachers to collaborate on practical or administrative matters. Collaboration acquires substantial value when it is linked to teaching, learning, assessment, inclusion, and student support. The literature on professional learning communities shows that collaboration is effective when it focuses on shared inquiry, collective responsibility, and the continuous improvement of educational practice (Bolam et al., 2005; DuFour et al., 2016; Stoll et al., 2006). Consequently, a collaborative culture is not merely a social characteristic of the school, but a pedagogical mechanism for improvement.

The fourth finding relates to the importance of distributed leadership. Developing a collaborative culture requires a transition from the logic of the principal as the sole agent of leadership toward a more participatory conception, where teachers take initiatives, participate in decision-making, and contribute to the school's direction. Distributed leadership offers a useful theoretical framework, as it highlights leadership as a collective and interactive practice (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2014). Contemporary studies also indicate that distributed leadership can be linked to school effectiveness and teachers' professional learning when it is supported by trust, motivation, and clear collaborative structures (Bektaş et al., 2022; Galdames-Calderón, 2023).

The fifth finding concerns the public school as a specific field of application. Public education is frequently characterized by institutional constraints, limited autonomy, administrative burdens, and increased social demands. These conditions can restrict the development of a collaborative culture, but at the same time, they render it even more necessary. The findings of the OECD (2016, 2025) highlight the importance of professional relationships, collaboration, and leadership support for the functioning of school communities. In the Greek context, studies such as those by Gkoros (2021) and Tsipa et al. (2025) show that collaboration and distributed leadership can support school functionality, yet they remain affected by institutional and organizational limitations.

Consequently, the development of a collaborative culture in public education cannot be treated as a simple technical intervention. It requires a transformation of perceptions, relationships, and daily practices. The principal needs to function simultaneously as an instructional leader, a coordinator, a facilitator, and an agent of trust. A collaborative culture, on the other hand, enhances the capacity of the school to operate as a learning community rather than a collection of isolated professionals. Thus, school leadership and a collaborative culture constitute a common theoretical field, in which the improvement of the public school is inextricably linked to collective responsibility, professional learning, and participatory action.

7. CONCLUSION

The present theoretical study has demonstrated that school leadership is a determining factor in developing a collaborative culture within public education. Teacher collaboration cannot be considered a self-evident consequence of their shared work in the same school environment. On the contrary, it constitutes a complex organizational and pedagogical process that presupposes trust, a shared vision, participation, professional dialogue, and stable structures for collective action. In this context, the principal plays a critical role, not only as an administrative head, but as an instructional leader, a coordinator, and a shaper of school culture.

The analysis has shown that school leadership influences collaborative culture primarily through indirect yet substantial pathways. It shapes the school climate, fosters trust, creates opportunities for collaboration, supports professional learning, and helps teachers perceive their work as a collective responsibility. The relevant literature supports that effective leadership is not restricted to enforcing rules or managing daily procedures, but is linked to the school's capacity to learn, adapt, and improve collectively (Fullan, 2001; Leithwood et al., 2004; Hallinger, 2011).

Of particular importance is the distinction between formal collaboration and a substantive collaborative culture. Mere participation in staff meetings, working groups, or administrative procedures is insufficient to transform school practice. Collaboration acquires pedagogical value when it is linked to student learning, the improvement of teaching, reflection, and the professional development of teachers (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Stoll et al., 2006). Therefore, a collaborative culture is not merely a positive feature of the school climate, but a fundamental prerequisite for sustainable school improvement.

At the same time, public education presents distinct challenges. Bureaucracy, limited autonomy, a lack of time, institutional constraints, and the traditional individuality of educational work can hinder the development of collaborative practices. However, these limitations do not diminish the importance of a collaborative culture. On the contrary, they highlight the need for leadership that can function supportively, participatorily, and transformatively, even within restrictive institutional frameworks (Bush, 2020; OECD, 2016).

Distributed leadership offers a particularly useful theoretical framework for public education, as it shifts the emphasis from the principal as the sole decision-maker toward collective participation and the utilization of teachers' professional knowledge (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2014). This does not imply a weakening of the principal's role, but rather its enhancement: the principal is called upon to create the conditions under which teachers can assume responsibility, collaborate meaningfully, and contribute to shaping the school's trajectory.

In conclusion, developing a collaborative culture in public schools is not a simple organizational choice, but a deeper pedagogical and leadership challenge. School leadership can contribute substantially to this process when it reinforces trust, participation, shared purpose, and collective professional learning. A public school that cultivates a collaborative culture does not function as a set of isolated teachers, but as a community of learning, responsibility, and continuous improvement. In this sense, a collaborative culture is not merely an outcome of school leadership, but also a core condition for the transformation of public education itself.

8. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest related to this manuscript.

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10. AI ASSISTANCE STATEMENT

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