

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

**VOICES OF SECONDARY SCHOOL LEADERS: PERCEPTIONS OF  
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP AND  
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

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ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

**ABSTRACT**

FACULTY OF HEALTH, SOCIAL CARE AND EDUCATION

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP AND STUDENT  
ACHIEVEMENT

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Strong and successful leadership remains a key feature of Government policy on schools and academies and the literature suggests that effective leadership is vital for effective schools. There is an implicit assumption that student achievement is at the core of a successful school (Earley, 2012) and yet there is a relative lack of research exploring the relationship between leadership and student achievement. This research explores distributed leadership through school leadership participation and considers how participants think distributed leadership influences student achievement. Set within an interpretative paradigm, this research adopted Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005) as a methodological approach to explore the views of a purposive sample of 19 academy leaders from three secondary academies in the southeast of England. These academies range from the Ofsted categories of 'outstanding' to 'good' and 'requires improvement'. The research powerfully illuminates practice by focusing on participant voice. Within this small-scale qualitative study, participants were encouraged to explore and recount their own perceptions of experiences relating to student achievement. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and member checking was through

participant feedback. The research findings are summarised through a set of possibility statements in line with Appreciative Inquiry.

The ultimate aim of this research is to determine the effective elements and qualities of distributed leadership that influence student achievement, through the perceptions of leaders, so that success can be repeated in the future, which is a central aim of conducting an Appreciative Inquiry. Participants perceived that together, the key elements of distributed leadership of trust, collaboration, shared accountability and moral purpose are significant. Combined, these elements result in creating the qualities of increased agency and leadership capability within distributed leadership teams, leading to influencing a broad range of student achievement. The set of possibility statements from this study provide significant insight for educational professionals.

Key words: Participant voice, Appreciative Inquiry, Secondary Academies, Distributed Leadership, Leadership elements, Agency, Student Achievement.

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis in loving memory of my parents Frank and Hilda Hall, who supported me in so many ways and were a part of my earlier experience of this journey.

## List of Abbreviations

A levels	Advanced level
ALPs	A level performance system
ARU	Anglia Ruskin University
BA	Bachelor of Arts
BERA	British Educational Research Association
CEO	Chief executive officer
COVID	Coronavirus disease
CPD	Continued professional development
DfE	Department for Education
EE	External Expert
EIF	Education Inspection Framework
EPA	End point assessment
FQ	Facilitator question
FSQ	Facilitator supplementary question
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GDPR	General data protection regulations
GOV	Government
ITT	Initial teacher training

LSM	Local Schools Management
MAT	Multi-academy trust
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MEG	Minimum expected grade
NCSL	National College for School Leadership
NCTL	National College for teaching and leadership
NUT	National Union of Teachers
OECD	Office for economic co-operation and development
OFQUAL	Office of qualifications and examinations regulation
OFSTED	Office for standards in education
P	Participant
PIF	Participatory inquiry forum
PIN	Professional independent network
PISA	Programme for international student assessment
PSHE	Personal, social, health education
QR	Quality requirements
QTS	Qualified teacher status
RI	Requires improvement
RSHE	Relationship, sex and health education

SEAL	Social and emotional aspects of learning
SEND	Special educational needs and disabilities
SMSC	Social, moral, spiritual and cultural
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America

**Disclaimer:**

Throughout the thesis, I will be using the terms academy, academies, school and schools. I will mostly refer to academies, but note that authors use both terms to mean a secondary school or academy.

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# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Preamble

This doctorate in education study over the past six years has given me a unique opportunity to explore distributed leadership, combining research with my professional development, without the personal attachment and inherent bias of looking at my own secondary academy as a Headteacher. From personal reflection, I would suggest that I have been a successful Headteacher and consultant Headteacher, with a passion for helping schools and academies to improve; however, I would not have considered myself to be an expert in the field of leadership in education. My journey and development on the doctorate in education programme have enabled me to develop to a position of some expertise in the field of distributed leadership in secondary education and the completion of this thesis is a part of that defining journey.

The research seeks to answer the question, 'What do participants think is the influence of distributed leadership on student achievement?' through the research methodology of Appreciative Inquiry. The aim of this study is to explore the perceptions of Senior leaders from three English secondary academies to understand better how elements of distributed leadership contribute to student achievement. The concept of the research has emerged from my curiosity as a school and academy leader in considering successful leadership and my passion for school improvement. I believe that children deserve the best during their school years and however difficult to achieve, this has always been at the heart of my

headship experience. As a Senior leader, I experienced both a hierarchical model of leadership and distributed leadership models. As a Headteacher, I found that distributed leadership enabled me to work with a team of professional colleagues to cover all of the areas of a busy academy effectively, to the best of our ability. The purpose of the research is therefore to identify elements of distributed leadership, from the perceptions of leaders that influence student achievement in a way that I would not have been able to do if I researched my own academy as a Headteacher.

The research will explore the perceptions of secondary leaders from three academies in the southeast of England to answer the main research question:

‘What do participants think is the influence of distributed leadership on student achievement?’ and three subsidiary research questions:

What do participants think are the leadership characteristics that influence student achievement?

What are the perceptions of distributed leadership held by the leaders of three secondary academies?

How do secondary academy leaders perceive that distributed leadership influences student achievement?

The research question and subsidiary questions develop from Hammond’s (2013) set of eight assumptions, which are long-held beliefs and behaviours held by people in organisations. Therefore in order to challenge assumptions, the research question

and subsidiary questions and also the semi-structured interview questions, are intended to allow participants to explore their perceptions which may also challenge assumptions.

## **1.2 Gap in knowledge**

From the literature review, I identified a gap in research that demonstrates a strong relationship between school leadership and achievement. Briggs, Coleman and Morrison (2012) state that research into leadership and management related to student learning has only evidenced weak or indirect links. Furthermore, Bush (2020) highlights that educational leadership and management are integral to each other, arguing that while educational management should principally focus on the purpose of education, there is disagreement on this and ongoing debate with no single definition of leadership. There is also debate concerning student achievement, where similarly to the definition of leadership, there is no one definition of student achievement, but rather, various interpretations of student achievement.

Ball (2013) offers the view that student achievement varies from subject to subject and uses different performance data to compare UK student achievement by race, class and gender; however, there is a lack of literature linking student achievement to leadership. Achievement is defined by Jefferson and Anderson (2021, p.192) as 'reimagining success beyond results'; they argue that student learning and success should respond to society's fast- changing landscape. Therefore, although Bush (2020) comments that there are many studies on distributed leadership, presenting a mixed picture of its success, it appears that there is a gap in empirical evidence of

the perception of distributed leadership from English secondary academy leaders.

This gap includes secondary leaders' views of the influence of elements of leadership relating to student achievement, however it is defined.

### **1.3 Rationale for the study**

The rationale for this qualitative small-scale study is to contribute to the understanding and practice of distributed leadership in secondary academies and the possible influence that it may have upon student achievement. The likely original contribution to knowledge from the research may be new knowledge and useful insights for secondary academy leaders into current, distributed leadership practice that influences student achievement. This is important given that there appears to be a gap in the literature that specifically links distributed leadership to student achievement in English schools and academies. There is also the potential that useful insights from the research may be transferable to primary school and academy leaders, 4-18 all-through academy leaders and sixth form leaders. The value and usefulness of the study may be beneficial to other secondary school and academy leaders and educational professionals in sharing and developing distributed leadership practice (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). For example, these leaders may include Senior leaders, Headteachers and CEOs of academy trusts.

Kirsch (1999) suggests that lived experiences are 'unique', and therefore, the research is likely to be part of an original contribution to knowledge because the

participants in the research are living out their own unique professional experience as academy leaders. Justification for the originality of the research is also argued by the fact that the research will take place in three separate social settings, which are secondary academies. Hatch (2002) describes each social setting as unique. The uniqueness and authenticity of the human voices of academy leaders in the research strengthen its originality (Silverman, 2013).

#### **1.4 The research landscape**

In providing a clear context for the research, it is important to consider the current changing educational landscape. Bush (2020) acknowledges that there has been a shift towards greater autonomy in the leadership and management of schools over the last decade. He states that through the academisation of schools into academies and the birth of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) following the 2010 Education Act, the field of education has developed through transferring and adopting industry models and practices, resulting in academies as businesses with greater autonomy.

Similarly, Earley, Higham, Allen, Howson, Nelson, Rawal, Lynch, Morton, Mehta and Sims (2012) acknowledge that within this changing educational context there may also be opportunities for increased autonomy in schools.

In 2010 Baker (2010) described the current educational landscape as experiencing rapid contemporary policy change, and these changes are ongoing. Hargreaves (2014a) states that the challenges faced by school leaders are unprecedented and are expected to be resolved at the school level, and that barriers such as increased

workload may impact student and staff performance negatively. Recent educational reforms, for example, changes to accountability through the academies programme; reform to the funding of schools in England; reform of the curriculum and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations and changes to the Ofsted inspection framework have presented challenges to the profession. These challenges include increased workloads and added complexities to the professional job of school and academy leadership which are most prevalent at senior leadership and headship level.

The Government policy 'Reforming qualifications and the curriculum to better prepare pupils for life after school' (DfE, 2013) applying to all English schools, prevents students from taking their GCSEs early unless it is going to be their absolute best result. The argument presented suggests that 42% of school or college leavers undergo further training that has to be provided by employers. Focusing on English, maths and science, the policy states the belief that students would be prepared 'properly' for life after school if the examination system was more rigorous. Other changes from the reforming qualifications and curriculum policy (DfE, 2013) within the education sector focus on slimming down the national curriculum; introducing statutory phonics screening; key stage 2 grammar, punctuation and spelling tests and the removal of national curriculum levels. Furthermore, the principle of school financial autonomy, best value and reducing spending for schools has been outlined in a guidance document from the Department of Education (DfE, 2013). This document relates to the policy 'Making schools and colleges more accountable and funding them fairly' (DfE, 2013). These policy changes relate to the

development of the accountability framework which is now a part of the professional context of the workplace of school leaders.

Former Education Secretary Morgan (DfE, 2016b) comments that effective school leadership has a profound impact on children's education. She states that great schools, leaders and teachers would continue to be given autonomy in developing their work of helping children to achieve their full potential. Furthermore, the Department for Education's 'Educational Excellence Everywhere' policy (DfE, 2016b) set out the vision for schools in England for the next five years from 2016. It intends to build on recent educational reforms to achieve excellence. The recent educational reforms add to the accountability of secondary school leadership. These reforms include: changes in the Office for Standards in Education Inspection from 2015 to 2021 (Ofsted, 2015; Ofsted, 2019; Ofsted, 2021) and the addition of qualifications such as the educational baccalaureate suite of qualifications (Gibb, 2015) which exist alongside new performance measures. Further changes to GCSE qualifications included a revision of the early entry policy and changes to the GCSE grading system effective in 2017 so that the A\* to G grade range is replaced with a grading system from 9 to 1 (Ofqual, 2016). Therefore in considering perceptions of distributed leadership and the influence on student achievement, it is important to acknowledge the pace and extent of educational reform in the UK and this context of the changing landscape.

## **1.5 Overview of the methodology**

The methodology will be explained fully in Chapter 3. My ontological position is social constructivism. Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) define the constructivist principle as human knowledge and organisational destiny being interrelated because we are constantly making sense of the world and the people that are around us. The study is set within an interpretative paradigm and will adopt a qualitative methodology. Bateson (1972) suggests that the researcher is bound by the relationship between ontology, epistemology and self, meaning that this inter-relationship between the researcher's ontological and epistemological position is in part self-validating. Furthermore, Guba (1990) suggests that the relationship between the set of beliefs and feelings held by the researcher would translate into action, for example, in how the world should be understood and studied.

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) suggest that for some researchers, this inter-relationship between values, self and action may lead to the inclusion of a mandate for social action. They imply that social action relating to researchers as inquirers is characterising a new paradigm in inquiry work while acknowledging that social action related to researchers is still controversial. They state one reason for this controversy as being that many researchers as inquirers, whether positivist or post-positivist, expect social action to be action taken by communities or political officials and not by researchers or research participants. In conducting my research, I will be aware that my position as a researcher could contribute to a mandate for social action; however, it is not an expectation of the research study.

The research utilises the Appreciative Inquiry methodology. Grape (2003) viewed the Appreciative Inquiry methodology as a relatively new method for the analysis of organisations based on a positive and strengths- oriented focus; while the Appreciative Inquiry methodology is no longer a new methodological approach, it may be the case that it has been less used in educational settings. Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) define the Appreciative Inquiry methodology as a cooperative search for the best in people, their organisation and the world around them. Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2010) state that the Appreciative Inquiry methodological approach provides the opportunity to interview people within an organisation and allow them to consider their perceived success. This approach enables participants to consider modifying or adapting their practices, using what has worked in the past as a template for positive change. Reed (2006) describes this process as finding what is valuable and what can be built upon. This is significant because the Appreciative Inquiry methodology is grounded in real experience and history, meaning that there may be the potential to share good practice so that it can be dispersed more widely across the education community, which is a principle of the Appreciative Inquiry methodology (Hammond, 2013). Other important factors in the research are participants drawing on their experience and the use of the 'voice' to elicit participant perceptions (Briggs, et al., 2012). Therefore, an Appreciative Inquiry methodology has been selected as the most appropriate methodological approach because of its predominantly positive intent (Hammond, 2013). Broadly considered as action research in both theory and methodology (McNiff, 2013), an Appreciative Inquiry methodological approach will illustrate features such as dialogue with participants; acceptance of the views of participants; speaking with participants rather than for them and collaborating with participants.

## **1.6 The research setting**

The research setting is three English secondary academies. The scope of the work within the settings is three separate distributed leadership teams, consisting of those who agree to take part voluntarily. The total number of participants is 19 school leaders. In the broadest sense, a multiple case study approach will broadly supplement the Appreciative Inquiry methodology (Yin, 2013). Each academy has been selected by purposive sampling (Silverman, 2013), firstly because the academy considers it has implemented a distributed leadership model and secondly with consideration given to its Ofsted rating. Therefore there will be a range consisting of an academy school rated as 'outstanding', one rated as 'good' and one rated as 'requires improvement' (Roberts and Abreu, 2018). Table 1, Appendix 1, sets out a summary of the main Ofsted criteria from the Ofsted evaluation schedule and grade descriptors presented in the school inspection handbook for inspecting schools in England under the Education Act of 2005 (Ofsted, 2018). Ofsted uses these criteria to judge a school or academy to be 'outstanding', 'good', or 'requires improvement'. Furthermore, the academies are selected from academies that I am able to gain access to as a researcher, based on current networking.

For this small-scale study, students will not be interviewed as part of the process as this is outside of the scope of this research, where the focus is on the voice of the academy leaders within distributed leadership teams. However, it should be acknowledged that student leaders increasingly form a part of a democratic leadership process as a collaborative and shared leadership that is consultative and

inclusive (Woods, 2020). It is important to note that the study included some views of Middle leaders as participants of distributed leadership teams, but this was according to the members of each individual distributed leadership team. The study did not include all Middle leaders as this was considered to be outside of the scope of the research.

### **1.7 Research methods**

In selecting the most appropriate research method, consideration was given to privileging the voices of secondary school leaders. Therefore a qualitative method, semi-structured interviews, was selected. The researcher conducted the semi-structured interviews as an Appreciative Inquiry research facilitator, in alignment with the principle of facilitating the Appreciative Inquiry methodology (Breslow, Crowell, Francis, Gordon, 2015). The original intention was that group fora were planned at each academy as a co-constructed element of the research, to present the emerging themes and initial findings, providing participants with an opportunity to consider the initial findings and to allow member checking by participants. This plan had to be changed, due to a limitation at this point in the data collection and this is addressed more fully in later chapters of this thesis.

The research is inductive because the data was derived from the individual semi-structured interview process (Cohen, et al., 2011), building from the participants' responses to open-ended questions, allowing the researcher to then identify broad themes (Creswell, 2014). In considering data collection, I decided that collecting rich data (Briggs, et al., 2012), specifically non-numeric data, was of more value than

numerical data in obtaining the fullest detail from the participants (Creswell, 2014). I chose semi-structured interviews as the specific method of data collection because this allowed each participant's voice, their views and their perceptions to be heard, with each participant's contribution being unique (Briggs, et al., 2012).

According to Briggs, et al., (2012, p. 78) while structured interviews may be considered methods within the positive tradition, similar for example, to the use of questionnaires, semi-structured interviews 'assume greater diversity in both design and use of the research instrument and in the nature of responses from participants'. As such, semi-structured interviews allow participants to contribute and respond in their own way and to shape the conversation (Briggs et al. 2012) in a way that structured interviews would not afford. Furthermore, Atkins and Duckworth (2019) suggest that informal, semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to elicit the most data from participants, prompting as required. Therefore, in justifying the choice of semi-structured interviews, in accordance with Briggs, et al. (2012) and Atkins and Duckworth (2019), I viewed semi-structured interviews as the most likely form of interview to enable me to elicit the most data allowing participants to shape the conversation and prompting individuals as necessary. In gaining the most valuable insight into each leadership team's work, open-ended questions formed the basis of the semi-structured interviews with individual participants. Part of the plan was not to provide participants with a definition of student achievement, but to allow participants to define the term for themselves, drawing from their own experience. According to Tierney-Moore and MacNeill (2014) the interview questions need to be specific enough to the topic being explored and generic enough for the participants to be able to engage with them. Furthermore, Reed (2006) suggests, even though the

researcher may have a focus for the research, the interviews need to be flexible enough for participants to communicate their thoughts, ideas and actions.

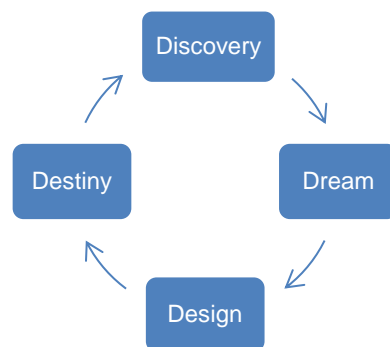
## **1.8 Data analysis and findings**

The semi-structured interviews were analysed inductively to identify the main themes and findings by utilising the first two parts of the 4D cycle of the Appreciative Inquiry methodology. During this stage of the data collection process, after the initial analysis of the transcripts, the main themes and emerging themes were identified through manual coding and thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Creswell, 2014; Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012). It was an important part of the analysis for me to conduct this manually in order to gain the most connection with the data.

Following the identification of the main themes, the next stage of the data collection process, described more fully in Chapter 3, was to ascertain the views of each of the participants through a group forum in each academy, as a co-construction and member checking activity to follow up on the initial findings of the research.

Through the completion of group fora I hoped to determine the secondary academy leaders' views relating to the priority order of the identified main themes, while also giving participants the option to offer other comments or to suggest any changes. It was intended that the research findings would be presented to each leadership team after the research was concluded to enable the secondary academy leaders to make full use of the findings on the structure of the 4D model (see Figure 1) associated with the Appreciative Inquiry model (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). The findings

were summarised through a set of possibility statements in line with the Appreciative Inquiry model (Hammond, 2013) and presented as an original contribution to knowledge in Chapter 7. The methodology and the 4D cycle will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3.



**Figure 1: The model is based on the 4D cycle designed by Cooperrider and Whitney (2005)**

### **1.9 Participant population**

The participant population consists of members of three secondary academy leadership teams. The research participants are anonymised using pseudonyms to protect their identity. In a review of school leadership conducted for the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), Earley et al. (2012) note that in general many secondary schools in England still have a traditional leadership model comprised of a Headteacher, Deputies and Assistant Headteachers. While each distributed leadership model may not necessarily comprise exactly the same posts, it is expected that each distributed leadership team taking part in the research will consist broadly of similar leadership positions. Therefore, it is assumed that each distributed leadership model may consist of a Headteacher or Principal and Deputy

Headteachers, Assistant Headteachers and any associate leaders. The members of the leadership teams were recruited by inviting them to take part in the research by letter, having set out the scope of the research and the nature of the Appreciative Inquiry methodological approach through a participant information sheet. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Executive Headteacher or Chair of Governors, as appropriate to the academy's structure, are the gatekeepers of each secondary academy research site (Briggs, et al., 2012).

The starting point for the research is a set of eight assumptions as identified by Hammond (2013) which will be presented as part of the Appreciative Inquiry methodological approach in the methodology, Chapter 3. According to Hammond, these assumptions are the long-held beliefs by groups of people and their behaviours. She argues that for an organisation to change, the groups of people will need to recognise these long-held assumptions in order to consider changing their behaviours within their organisational setting. Therefore the research question and subsidiary questions were designed with Hammond's (2013) eight assumptions in mind. The voices of secondary academy leaders and their perceptions were intended to be of central importance to the study, giving space to participants to recount their experiences, drawn from their professional work and contributions as leaders.

### **1.10 A brief overview of the literature review**

The literature review in Chapter 2 will consider academy leadership in relation to the current educational landscape. The scope of the literature review is approximately the past 25 years. It will consider approaches to leadership, distributed leadership and its influence on student achievement, effective school and academy leadership, and a brief review of student achievement. The review will predominantly take account of the literature on English schools but will include relevant examples of literature from other countries and will include some literature from diverse communities.

According to Fullan, 'while research on school improvement is now into its fourth decade, systematic research on what the principal actually does and its relationship to stability and change is quite recent' (Fullan, 2007, p. 156). Fullan's comments were concerning work overload pressure on Headteachers in relation to leading change. He surmises that this overload makes it impossible for Headteachers to lead sustainable change. As part of the rapidly changing educational landscape, Jefferson and Anderson (2021, p.16) argue that schools often have to respond to 'complex, chaotic, contradictory challenges' that cause a discrepancy between policy and practice, suggesting that transformational leadership is necessary to meet these demands.

Osborne (2014), commenting on school leaders leading change, describes two key features of change as technical change linked to something that has happened

previously, and adaptive change concerning something new. Osborne suggested that some people appear to be less comfortable and confident when having to learn new knowledge, information and skills to apply them to a change in role. He argues that the challenge for school leaders may be to ensure that a strong and clear strategic vision is well supported by personalised training and development opportunities. Davies (2008) links strategy to structure. He defines the school's structure as presenting itself in many facets, such as curriculum, meeting schedules and timetables. Alternatively, he argues that the school's structure could also refer to the organisation of people at different levels, for example, Middle leaders and the senior leadership team. He suggests that to move strategically into the school's defined vision of success for the future, the articulation of strategy to the structure that the school operates in would be necessary.

### **1.11 Overview of approaches to school leadership**

An in-depth study of literature will be undertaken in Chapter 2. The following examples give a brief overview of accounts of school leadership. Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley and Beresford (2003) identify aspects of leadership that they consider remain important, such as vision, direction, ethos and motivation. A different view is presented by Earley et al. (2012), who note that literature on school leadership over the last decade strongly links leadership to school improvement. They argue that documented cases of school improvement are linked to talented leadership. Earley et al. (2012), propose that transformational leadership is effective, especially when considering sustainability over a longer time. However, they acknowledge that external pressures sometimes mean that the focus is on leading in

the short-term in order to produce immediate results. The argument regarding long-term sustainability and short-term goal setting is developed by Blanchard (2010), who states that while short-term goal setting is necessary, leaders ought to be also thinking about the long-term future. He cites key components of such highly effective leadership as a leader being relational, developmental with the ability to grow, learn and become successful, and identifies three leadership models that he refers to as situational leadership, servant leadership and organisational leadership.

In a contrasting example of effective leadership, Kouzes and Posner (2007) emphasise the importance of the relationship between leadership and learning. Developing the argument for leadership and learning, Fuller (2015) considers the importance of value-led leadership, building on the notion of value-based leadership. She argues that for a leader's work to have an emancipatory intent, it would need to be based on a deep understanding of their own being and also of others around them, whether that would be staff or pupils. In opposition to this view, MacBeath (1998) identifies that school leaders have to use a repertoire of leadership styles and skills and that over time these change and develop, shaped by context and culture. This view of different leadership styles is echoed by Bush (2020, p. 29) who regards different leadership models as both 'alternative and competing'.

### **1.12 Distributed leadership**

The NCSL review of the school leadership landscape (Earley, et al., 2012, p. 27) suggests that 'the current era of distributed leadership' exhibits four different

distributed leadership approaches. They state that Headteachers use these approaches depending on the context of the school and how experienced the staff are. These approaches range from the Headteacher being directive within distributed leadership to the Headteacher adopting an inclusive distributed leadership style, delegating tasks internally, with the school closely following good practice. Their argument builds on Earley et al. (2012) and Dunford's (2007) suggestion that workload pressures are responsible for a shift towards distributed leadership. The argument developed by Earley et al. (2012) is that workload pressures of Headteachers include increased accountability which affects strategic planning time with other Senior leaders. Lewis and Murphy (2014) cite distributed leadership as easing the pressure on Headteachers, because the Headteachers' work is distributed as they work with teams.

A definition of distributed leadership offered by Jones, Harvey, Lefoe and Ryland (2013) conveys distributed leadership as a leadership concept and style that is both collaborative and reflective. They state that in a distributed leadership model, leaders work together, trusting each other's contributions. One of the fundamental principles of distributed leadership is that it is a collaborative model. Within the distributed leadership model there is the acceptance of each leader leading an area of expertise. Another feature of distributed leadership is that it encourages leadership development (Harris, 2010). Distributed leadership is described by Earley et al. (2012) as an inclusive approach to leadership because the leadership model allows Middle leaders and those with less experience to lead. They comment that distributed leadership is characterised by the active participation of members from the school community, contributing widely to school leadership. Bush (2020)

considers that within educational leadership, distributed leadership is the preferred leadership model of the 21st century.

### **1.13 Student achievement**

Student achievement is difficult to define or measure and causes much debate both in the UK and internationally. According to Ryan and Soehner (2011), student achievement can be interpreted as any student learning defined by a curriculum. However, student achievement is subject to different interpretations as, while the goal of student achievement may be measurable, the concept of student achievement may vary (Bos and Schwippert, 2003) and as such, there is no one definition. Davies argues that student success cannot only be measured by examination results (Davies, 2008).

Research conducted by Hattie (2009) considers teaching and learning relating to student achievement and presents 138 factors, referred to as effects that may influence student achievement; these effects were revised to 150 in 2011. Hattie (2009; 2012) argues that the achievement of students needs to be visible to the student, the teacher and others, such as parents. He considers both quantitative and qualitative effects on student achievement and as such includes student anxiety, behaviour and engagement alongside examination and test measurable indicators of success. Other views such as Earley et al. (2012) note that while insufficient evidence has been collected they notionally connect the sustainability of an academy and transformational leadership to academy improvements, demonstrated by an

increase in student achievement. Similarly, the argument linking distributed leadership and school transformation to improved student achievement is suggested by Spillane (2005). Furthermore, student achievement is recognised by the DfE (2020) including improvement in GCSE grades, which aligns with the criteria within the secondary accountability, performance measures (DfE, 2020). As such, the focus of student achievement aligning with national accountability and performance measures may create national pressures, where schools and academies are measuring student achievement or success by narrow, measurable outcomes (Middlewood, et al., 2018).

#### **1.14 My professional background and experience**

My professional context is that I have held senior leadership posts for over 18 years and regard myself as an experienced school and academy leader. Previous and recent posts have included being a consultant Headteacher, Headteacher of two secondary schools over 12 years and an Executive Headteacher for some time with oversight of a school regeneration project. More recently I held the post of Director of secondary education and quality assurance within a trust setting of 14 academies, comprising secondary and primary academies and an external expert post within the DfE. My interest in school leadership developed through a traditional route of becoming a secondary school teacher and then developing as a Middle leader. From being the Head of a Department of a curriculum area, I progressed further to become the Head of Faculty. Over ten years, I increased the leadership responsibility that I held within the secondary schools that I worked in, before moving into a Deputy Headteacher role, based in a London, diverse secondary school setting. For

example, diverse in race, religious, cultural, SEND and social status. Therefore, as an experienced school practitioner, I consider my research to be broadly insider/outsider research. My position is based on the fact that because I am a fellow educational professional, I feel a part of the context of educational research suggesting insider researcher. However, I am not a part of any of the leadership teams or academies in which I am conducting my research, suggesting I am also an outsider researcher. Therefore, in the context of my research, I oscillate between the insider/outsider research position and also occupy the space in the middle (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). This enables me as a researcher to gain the fullest experience possible and to build the best rapport with the participants to facilitate their contribution to the research, through the interview process.

### **1.15 Outline and organisation of the chapters**

The thesis is structured into seven chapters.

### **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

Chapter 2 consists of the review of literature broadly taking account of the last 25 years, focusing on English schools and academies and some international literature where relevant. It provides a framework for the research and considers school leadership in relation to the context of the current educational landscape. The review explores effective school leadership and includes relevant examples of literature from other countries. The internal structure of this chapter explains the scope of the study and covers the following areas: introduction to the literature; leadership; school leadership; distributed leadership and aspects of the structure and attributes of

distributed leadership; the context of the present educational landscape; student achievement and the conclusion.

### **Chapter 3 - Methodology**

Chapter 3 sets out the methodological approach, research design and research methods. As a researcher, it states my ontological position as constructivist and positions the research as being set in an interpretative paradigm with the research design adopting a qualitative methodology. The chapter introduces Appreciative Inquiry as the methodological approach, suggesting that a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2013) will broadly supplement the Appreciative Inquiry methodology. It describes the specific method of data collection as semi-structured interviews, with emphasis placed on the significance of the participant's voice contributing to the conversation and includes a section that explores my own role in the research as the facilitator (Soltis-Jarrett, 1997; Zuber-Skerritt, 2001).

### **Chapter 4 - Findings**

Chapter 4 presents the data analysis and the research findings. It describes in more detail the data analysis, the use of manual coding, thematic coding, frequency counts and thematic analysis identifying the main themes. It explores emerging themes from the research before offering a conclusion.

## **Chapter 5 - Discussion**

In Chapter 5, the discussion includes my interpretation and analysis of the findings of the research. This chapter seeks to address the research question set out in Chapter 1, the introduction to the thesis and demonstrates how the results from the findings answer it. The conclusions are explained in detail and defended. Following this, an explanation is then given as to how what is revealed fit into the existing body of knowledge on distributed leadership and student achievement, before concluding the chapter.

## **Chapter 6 - Reflections and reflexivity on professional practice and the doctoral journey**

This chapter of the thesis is reflective and reflexive in nature and sets out my professional background, including my professional roles and experience. It explains the context of my professional work and explores elements of my own practice. Drawing upon my professional knowledge and experience the chapter then reflects on the possibilities of what the research may mean to me within my professional context as an academy leader. It offers recommendations as to how the research may advance my practice and have a wider impact on the practice of other educational professionals.

## **Chapter 7 - Conclusion**

This final chapter restates the research questions and seeks to answer them succinctly. It mentions what has been covered in the thesis and emphasises the

most important points. It assesses the value of the research study and its deepening of knowledge and contribution to new knowledge. It considers any limitations. Finally, it offers concluding remarks relating to the implications of the research in light of existing literature on distributed leadership and the perceptions of elements that together influence student achievement.

### **1.16 Conclusion**

To conclude, evidence from both literature and Government policy suggests that there may be merit in questioning and exploring the role, function and structure of any leadership team set against what could be described as a slightly chaotic picture of change nationally. The nature and pace of the changing landscape of education mean that it may be the case that academy leaders could continue to learn a great deal from other academy leaders in different educational settings. I would argue that more research into English school and academy leadership through emerging practice would be insightful and useful. This Appreciative Inquiry will provide a methodological approach to explore further evidence of practice that may be developed and adopted for secondary school and academy leaders to meet the demands of the national education reform agenda. Chapter 2 will present the literature review.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

Fullan (2007) acknowledges that it is only recently that systematic research has taken place to investigate what effective Headteachers do in leading stability and change. He suggests that research into school improvement has been established over the past forty years. However, the literature review considers the complexities of school and academy leadership in relation to the current educational landscape and reviews effective school leadership of recent practice, with a scope of broadly the past 25 years. While the review focuses on English school leadership, I have included relevant examples of literature from other countries where it has focused on successful school leadership. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) undertook a literature and research review on how leadership influences student learning investigating the culture of leadership in the USA. They suggest that there is more research evidence to support the intention of school improvement, for example, leadership restructuring as an activity, rather than evidence of actual improved results. This chapter considers leadership, an overview of school leadership, distributed leadership and aspects of the structure and attributes of distributed leadership, before presenting the context of the present educational landscape and student achievement. This is followed by a conclusion.

## **2.2 Leadership**

Kouzes and Posner (2002) define leadership and the leadership process as universal and comprehensible to all. Their definition is expanded to suggest that each leader is individual but patterns and practices of leadership can be shared. In describing the engagement of leaders in making challenges meaningful, Kouzes and Posner cite: vision, creating a sense of destiny, being forward-looking in times of rapid change, enlisting others, making incremental gains and learning from mistakes as being important elements of leadership. They propose that leadership is about finding the leader's voice to enable others. Kouzes and Posner affirm that exemplary leaders strengthen everyone's capacity, describing leadership as a journey and defining the qualities and practices that are essential. They emphasise the importance of the skill of collaboration in leading an effective team (Kouzes and Posner, 2007).

Building on the theme of the journey of leaders, Ball (2013, p.163) comments that 'leaders, as opposed to managers, are the key agents in reculturing and re-engineering a school'. Ball (2013) argues that the self-managing school requires capable leaders with the capacity to change teaching through working collaboratively and in partnership with others with increased autonomy and innovation. Going beyond the idea of increased autonomy and innovation, Bottery, Ping-Man and Ngai (2018) regard the sustainability of leadership as being of central importance. They consider that to sustain leadership, there needs to be the acknowledgement of each leader's approach, arguing that this adds diversity within the leadership team. However, they state that such recognition of individual leadership is based on an

understanding that leaders must be familiar with the problems that their school faces, rather than distancing themselves from the problems. Bottery et al. (2018) connect this style of leading with sustainable leadership in a changing landscape, where they argue that adopting one model of leadership may not be sustainable or necessarily effective. Bush (2020) builds a contrary argument of leadership models in an era of change, setting out a clear position that school and academy leadership concerns influence, stemming from an understanding of values and beliefs, according to the academy's vision. The theme of leadership influence is developed by Jefferson et al. (2021), who identify that leadership influence relates initiative and responsibility together, generating actions of self and with others to initiate change.

### **2.3 An overview of school leadership**

Reviewing literature that contextualises the present is crucial in researching and evaluating effective school leadership. It is important to consider what the perceptions are of leaders relating to effective leadership, including distributed leadership that enables school leaders to continue to influence student achievement. Earley et al. (2012) look at the relationship between school leadership and improving standards, and find that in the documented examples of school improvement that they examined, talented leadership was always a factor. They acknowledge that in reviewing a decade of the landscape of school leadership, they had only evidenced an indirect link between school leadership and student outcomes, regarding the development of leadership for learning. Contrary to this view, Kouzes and Posner (2007) recognise that there has been an important link between leadership and

learning as part of school leadership. The importance of high standards associated with excellence from leaders is echoed by the DfE regarding Headteachers (2015a).

Fullan (2007) identifies the importance that the cycle of improvement and change in school leadership has on student and staff performance and suggests that barriers such as increased workload may impact the profession negatively. The theme of workload is reiterated by Dunford (2007), who suggests that the pressures of workload within school leadership account for a rise in distributed leadership. Davies (2008) defines school strategic leadership as developing the concept of strategy from a series of decisions that culminate in shaping the direction of the school. He relates the leading of strategic direction by school leaders to short operational activities that are carefully planned by leaders.

Day et al. (2003) refer to different qualities of leadership and identify that the essence of leadership is about aspects such as vision, direction, ethos and motivation. In a further example of leadership motivation, Gwyther, Resnick and Roberto (2018) argue that intrinsic motivation of leadership is linked to leadership resilience. Furthermore, the quality of leadership resilience is acknowledged as being in response to leaders having to meet the demands of being professionals in education over the last decade (Beltman and Mansfield, 2018). This notion of resilience is developed by Leppin et al. (2014), who argue that stress has to be managed through professionals adapting to situations. Moreover, resilience linked to managing stress is defined by Earovolini-Ramires (2007) as the ability to absorb the challenges experienced in life and to be able to persevere in adverse situations.

However, it is noted that professional resilience and personal resilience are not mutual, as a leader can demonstrate resilience within the workplace but not display this quality within a personal context (Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, Southwick and Yehuda, 2014). Earley (2020) notes resilience in senior leaders is important to the effectiveness of the leader. He comments that individual leaders need to be resilient to support happiness, confidence and sustainability.

Trusting relations are considered by Crawford (2014) to be at the heart of effective teams working together and an element that is borne out in the literature as being important to school leadership. Crawford (2014) notes that trust takes time to build upon and suggests that leadership teams should make it a priority to work towards. The stance of focusing on trust is justified by Crawford's argument that when trusting relationships are built up within an organisation, those within it can work together with greater confidence (Crawford, 2014). Furthermore, Fink (2013) identifies that trust is composed of three leadership characteristics, reliability, being caring and being honest. Research concerning school improvement reveals that where there is evidence of a high level of trusting relationships, student achievement increases (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). Value-led school and academy leadership considers overt or inherent values of leaders who may exhibit emancipatory qualities. As such, the moral imperative in this leadership implies that school leaders seek to address some issues of social justice, in seeking to enable all students to succeed (Fuller, 2015). However, Briggs et al. (2012) consider school leadership in relation to educational research and propose that since school leadership relationships can make insider research difficult, leadership relationships should be given priority in reviews.

## **2.4 Distributed leadership**

Defining distributed leadership Jones et al. (2013) summarise a leadership concept and style for learning and teaching that is collaborative, reflective and based on mutual respect. They ascertain that in this environment school leaders contribute by leading together through activities such as reflective practice, development planning and action cycles. By doing this, Jones et al. (2013) argue that school leaders develop leadership capacity which contributes to sustaining school improvement in teaching and learning. Furthermore, Harris (2010) states that one of the fundamental principles of distributed leadership as a collaborative leadership model is the acceptance of each leader leading an area of expertise as well as providing the opportunity for leadership development. She proposes that distributed leadership is an organisational structure that enables school leaders to identify clear leadership roles. However, Pavlopoulos (2021, p.153) presents a contrary argument to Harris' (2010) view. Pavlopoulos comments on the lack of clarity particularly of middle leaders within distributed leadership models. Pavlopoulos states that "distributed leadership is a somewhat malleable concept. What are you accountable for delivering, to whom and what degree of autonomy do you have in making decisions in relation to those deliverables?"

The importance of the role of the Principal or Headteacher in effective distributed leadership is commented on by Tubin and Pinyan-Weiss (2015, p. 510). They propose that "the importance of a Principal's ability for distributing leadership and creating a leading team while meeting environmental expectations has been identified in several studies. At one Australian school for example, it was found that the Principal's collaborative, open and democratic leadership style was beneficial in

improving the school, but on a second visit four years later it was found that this kind of 'almost too supportive' style was not enough to move the school from good to great". The findings of the NCSL (Hargreaves, 2010) indicate that schools or academies that are considered to be self-improving are more likely to employ distributed leadership because such schools view the empowerment of leadership at every level as important in creating capacity and in accepting the responsibility of initiatives. Therefore, self-improvement in distributed leadership can be considered empowering as leaders own their improvement. Building on this, Busher's (2006) view is that leadership empowerment creates ownership. In an opposing view, according to Lewis and Murphy (2014), distributed leadership is also seen to ease the pressure on Headteachers, as the Headteacher works with teams which can often include Middle leaders. They suggest that through the development of middle leadership in this way, distributed leadership can be seen as a capacity-building leadership model.

In an NCSL review of school leadership (Earley et al., 2012), the value of leaders, their experience and the context of the academy were found to influence different expressions of distributive leadership. The review cited Forrester and Gunter (2009), suggesting that there were four common approaches to distributive leadership. The first two approaches were directive and directed. In directive leadership, Forrester et al. (2009) argue that the Headteacher informs the leadership team of their own intentions, compared to directed leadership, where they propose that the Headteacher still directs their own purpose through the leadership team; however, this is also influenced by the views of external groups such as governors. The third style of distributive leadership found to be common was inclusive leadership, which

implied community inclusion in following vision and purpose and the fourth approach was considered as distributed leadership. This distributed leadership approach was characterised by the Headteacher delegating internally to leaders to carry out tasks in line with school or academy policy.

McCall and Haigh (2015) present an argument linking distributed school leadership to the co-Headteacher model and offer practical examples of where this distributed leadership strategy can be effective, such as leading a school through Ofsted or in the case of Headteacher absence. In an earlier example of structure linked to distributed leadership, Cole and Southworth (2009, p.148) suggest that the 'effect of distributed leadership on student outcomes is indirect', however they note that certain qualities of leadership are important to emphasise. They identified these distributed leadership qualities as empowerment; inclusion in making decisions; support; facilitation and transparency. Collaboration and a focus on learning are also identified.

Middlewood et al. (2018,) suggest that there has to be a specific purpose in order for leaders to collaborate, rather than it being meaningful on its own without a common focus. In contrast, Kydd et al. (2009) consider that collaboration is a workplace shared value that develops workplace culture. Furthermore, they consider that the development of a collaborative workplace culture where collective actions of leaders are evident will create an increased responsibility towards achieving better educational and academic outcomes and goals. The positive effects associated with distributed leadership are identified by Holloway, Neilsen and Saltmarsh (2018) as

including school improvement and school culture. However, Holloway et al. (2018) argue that leaders of distributed leadership teams need to maintain a professional collaborative attitude so that distributed leadership is effective. Collins, Risku and Tian (2016, p.151) argue that “the scope of distributed leadership has gradually been expanded from task sharing to collective interactions and then to a hybridity of individual and collective, hierarchical and heterarchical leadership forms, which could be utilised as frameworks for empirical studies”.

## **2.5 Distributed leadership, structure and leadership attributes**

Within the context of systems leadership, distributed school leadership could help to provide the capacity needed for further school improvement and for emerging leaders to take on increased roles. Reporting on ‘Early Years’ leadership, Dunlop (2008) comments that attributes of the single leader are not sufficient but that a flatter distributed style consisting of visionary leaders is needed. The notion of a single leader, as ‘hero’ leader and not being as effective as distributed leadership is echoed by Anderson and Jefferson (2021, p. 30). They suggest that

“Leadership is a frequently misunderstood capability. Our conceptualisation of leadership is dramatically opposed to ‘hero leadership’ narratives we see constantly. In our experience transformation cannot be established successfully unless and until leadership with transformational values and agency emerge in each setting”.

Therefore, Anderson and Jefferson's argument implies that distributed leadership enables a leadership capability that is not necessarily attainable through the single leader approach to leadership.

Hargreaves (2014b) identified that structure and leadership are both necessary strands for improvement, linking 12 strands of leadership to partnership work, professional development and the collaboration of school leaders. Analysing the journey to maturity in the self-improving school-led system he connects moral purpose to distributed systems leadership. There is also a description of some leadership attributes such as modelling trust and having a passion to create a self-improvement system. Through the illustrations from case studies, Hargreaves suggests how the social capital of academies can be increased if professionals take ownership of accountability together in a collaborative manner as a group of schools; social capital being defined by the Office for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as 'networks with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups' (OECD, 2015, p. 41).

Arar and Taysum (2020) develop the argument further, linking empowerment of staff to autonomy and accountability from members of a diverse community. Through an international comparative analysis, they compare two high schools in the Arab education system in Israel and in the English education system. Their findings demonstrate that moving from a hierarchical leadership structure to a mark of distributed leadership, increases the sense of empowerment, autonomy and collective accountability. Arar and Taysum (2020) illustrate that through whole school

inquiry focused on a mark of distributed leadership, staff increased shared aims, themes and methods as a result of distributed leadership practice. The empowering of staff through greater collaborative, distributed leadership led to an improvement in student outcomes of between 17% and 27%. There was also inter-cultural change evidenced in the research through an increase in the inter-cultural understanding of staff and students, who were from communities of diverse race, ethnicity, religious, cultural and social status, for example both citizens and refugees.

The argument for collaborative school support is identified in guidance issued by the NCTL on systems leaders explaining the merit of providing peer support (NCTL, 2014). The notion is of bespoke support to a school needing support from highly experienced and successful school leaders. The underlying principle considers that one of the most effective ways of achieving school improvement is by working with other schools. Examples are given, such as opportunities for school leaders and governors to work together supporting schools needing the support through peer working. In a further example of the consideration of a more collaborative systems leadership approach, greater capacity to address workload issues and transformational qualities within a school and academy context were cited as benefits (Earley et al., 2012). Earley et al. (2012) comment that transformational leadership is needed to ensure the sustainability of school and academy improvements; however, they suggest that while early evidence may notionally convey that this is the case, insufficient evidence had to date been obtained.

Building on previously mentioned collaborative characteristic of distributed leadership by Jones et al. (2013), they define distributed leadership for learning and teaching as a leadership style where collaborative working is undertaken between individuals who trust and respect individual contributions. The elements of distributed leadership identified as collaboration and high levels of trust and respect between individuals are presented in a case for distributed leadership (Good Governance, 2018). This discussion document challenges the behaviours that institutional leadership in public service can model and the culture that then ensues. Furthermore, the recognition of the importance of trust as a critical element of the development of distributed leadership is identified by Louis, Mayrowetz, Murphy and Smylie (2007). They explore the connection between different trust relationships and how these different trust relationships may shape the development of distributed leadership opportunities at school level. They evidence through research that the element of trust is important in developing distributed leadership.

In further consideration of leadership attributes, Bottery et al. (2018) questions whether effective leadership is borne from leadership characteristics such as leading from a moral imperative, or from the model of leadership, for example, distributed leadership. Bottery builds on the argument presented by Gunter (2016) of moving away from a singular leadership model to a more distributed, value-based model of leadership. Gunter (2016) suggests that the transformational leadership approach is linked to a set of national competencies and is still popular because it relates to a target driven delivery of educational standards. However, she purports that leaders are moving towards value-based leadership approaches that relate to context more. This notion of value-based leadership linked to moral purpose is explored by Fuller

(2015). Fuller (2015) connects value-based leadership and moral leadership to a leadership approach where the leadership enable and empower others. Through relational leadership, Fuller (2015) argues that through a collaborative approach, the power and authority of leadership is shared and promoted through dialogue.

Blackmore and Sachs' (2007) suggest a tension exists in educational leadership and management in the UK, between the imposed external accountability enforced by statutory education policy and a more collegiate way of working that centres around internal decision-making leading to school improvement. This position of the tension of external accountability and collegial decision making as a participative approach within schools and academies is echoed by Bush (2020). Bush (2020) argues that the collegial approach to decision-making in schools does not align comfortably with external accountability frameworks and as such causes a tension. Therefore, Bush (2020) purports that the distributed leadership approach to school and academy leadership, has replaced the collegiate style of leadership as a preferred leadership style. He argues that the preference of distributed leadership is due to the problems associated with marrying the collegiate decision-making process in schools and academies with the imposition of external accountability.

The leadership element of shared accountability is presented by MacBeath and Dempster (2009). They argue that it is no longer sustainable for the burden of accountability to fall on the shoulders of the Headteacher. They also consider the impossible position of Senior leaders having to be accountable for factors that are

not within their control. With this in mind, MacBeath et al. (2009, p. 137), propose that 'leadership for learning rests on a shared sense of accountability'.

Tarpey and Poultney (2015) researched a group of institutions within a local authority team focused on an integrated leadership theory and argue for the decentralisation of children's services. Tarpey and Poultney (2015) cite restructuring as a positive key characteristic in appointing the right staff with good leadership skills as well as the ability of the Headteacher and senior team to adopt a positive outlook with constructive feedback, rather than complaining. They also consider that removing barriers is a central theme to their work in strengthening leadership. The summary of the work suggests the notion of building collective professional capacity.

Blanchard (2010) offers a different perspective on leadership, suggesting that effective organisational leadership is more about 'managing the journey of change than announcing the destination' (Blanchard, 2010, p.197). He acknowledges the place of short-term goal setting within the context of securing a long-term future in a school or academy. However, this is not to say that targets and goals are not achieved as Blanchard argues that whether short-term or long-term goals, what will be measured will be clearly established. This suggests that the relationship of process and outcomes are both acknowledged as important. According to Osborne, these relationships are described as technical change, connected to something former, and adaptive change, concerning something new (Osborne, 2014). West-Burnham (2008) cites interdependence and relationships as the significant elements

of systems leadership in a new way of working (West-Burnham, 2008; Collarbone and West-Burnham, 2008).

The importance to school leaders of strategic nature of long-term planning is echoed by Middlewood et al. (2018, p.140). They maintain that “strategic leadership involves having a longer-term view, and therefore, the ability to place any new set of requirements (national policy changes, for example) in the context of that longer-term plan or vision is crucial”. They argue that rather than this approach to long-term planning being considered as a fixed plan, in effective long-term planning, strategic leaders are able to scan and to see the bigger picture. Middlewood et al. (2018) suggest that this strategic approach to long-term planning enables effective leaders to identify any apparent dangers that might cause issues in the future and also to notice opportunities.

## **2.6 The context of the present educational landscape**

A brief overview of the difficulties to school and academy leadership that the global pandemic has brought as recently as August 2021 provides a part of the context of the present educational landscape. These complexities for leaders of education have been demonstrated in all phases. The unprecedented nature of the global pandemic has undoubtedly added significant pressure and problems to school leadership and this is evidenced through the DfE guidance on ‘actions that school leaders should take to reduce the transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19) in their schools’ (DfE, 2021c). This guidance sets out the control measures that schools must put into effect

so that as an imperative, there is the least possible disruption to the education of children and young people. The guidance states that the focus of school leaders must be the delivery of face to face, high-quality education for all children and young people. Furthermore, the DfE launched guidance for the 'well-being of education return programme' (DfE, 2021b) as part of a response to the pandemic, intending to provide additional resources and training to one-third of the schools and academies in England, targeting children's well-being and mental health. This new initiative identifies working with local partners to support children and young people's mental health and well-being. Part of this guidance includes a new and revised combined approach to the curriculum regarding relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) focusing on a mental health training module. The guidance aims to enable students at schools and academies to manage their own mental health and well-being effectively.

In further identification of the disruption to education caused by the pandemic, the DfE comment that they acknowledge the disruption that the pandemic and COVID-19 had to initial teacher training programmes (ITT). As such, the DfE undertook a thorough review of ITT and recently published a report of the recommendations of ITT reforms for schools in England (DfE, 2021a). The main thrust of the recommendation identifies the proposed implementation of a new set of quality requirements (QR's) for all ITT providers that lead to qualified teacher status (QTS). The DfE report (Baukham, 2021) also recommends that all schools and trusts engage in ITT, citing such engagement as beneficial to schools and trusts as, at the very least, the professional development of teachers will have continuity.

More broadly, in recent years, the educational landscape has presented a time of rapid and rigorous educational change through the national education reform programme. Fautley (2018) considers that the Government in England has manipulated educational policy to privilege certain subjects through educational reform policies such as performance measures, the English Baccalaureate and Progress 8 measures, suggesting that science, maths, technology and engineering have benefitted at the expense of the arts. An argument is presented by Bertoni, Gibbons and Silva (2020) promoting the position that the rapid expansion of the academisation policy in England, which claimed to focus on school quality, was politically motivated by those in Government whose stance was against local government control of schools (Bertoni et al., 2020). In support of the argument of a fast pace of the changing landscape, Baker (2010) suggests that contemporary policy change in the educational context is rapid, while Ball (2013) considers that the past 20 years have consisted of an overload of policy. Other examples of significant change have included substantial changes to vocational education at the secondary education level (Hancock, 2014) and major changes to the Ofsted education inspection framework from 2015 (Ofsted, 2015).

There have been recent reforms to GCSE qualifications. For example, the Government policy applying to all schools in England, 'Reforming qualifications and the curriculum to better prepare pupils for life after school' (DfE, 2013), does not allow students to take GCSEs early unless the result obtained will be the student's absolute best attainment. The Government introduced this policy, arguing that it was

necessary as 42% of school, academy or college leavers have to engage in further training at the expense of the employer, due to a perception of lack of skills in English, maths or science. The policy suggests, therefore, that students are not well prepared for life and this argument justifies making the public examination system more rigorous. Further changes within the education sector presented in the DfE reforming qualifications and curriculum policy (2013) included slimming down the national curriculum; the introduction of statutory phonics screening; key stage 2 grammar, punctuation and spelling tests and the abolition of national curriculum levels. Also in 2012, a greater focus on fairer funding and accountability was introduced through school funding reform, focusing on the next steps towards a fairer system (DfE, 2012). Collectively, these policies now account for what is termed as the accountability framework, providing a professional context for school and academy leaders within the workplace. Other reforms concerning GCSE examinations changed the GCSE grading system from A\* to G to 9 to 1. Qualifications like the educational baccalaureate suite of qualifications that the Government wanted more students to take (Gibb, 2015) are presented alongside recently changed performance measures.

Two secondary accountability measures were introduced by the DfE in 2014 (DfE, 2020) and these were described as performance measures referred to as 'Attainment 8' and 'Progress 8'. These aim to measure progress and attainment of the eight 'best' GCSE results rather than the five 'good' GCSE A\*-C passes that schools and academies previously focused on as a benchmark. Morgan (2015), former Education Secretary, also announced further benchmark criteria of 'coasting schools', to define schools that had not made sufficient progress over a three-year

period. This measure was aimed at considering whether a school had met the criteria for the expected progress of its students through a set attainment benchmark. For secondary schools and academies, this benchmark was expected to be a nationally set percentage for progress and the benchmark of 60% of students achieving five A\*-C GCSEs including English and maths. The coasting schools criterion is considered alongside the other performance measures that consider eight 'good' GCSE passes.

In 2016 Morgan (DfE, 2016b) former Education Secretary related effective school leadership to a profound impact on children's education. Morgan signalled that schools and academies that were classed as great schools would be afforded greater autonomy in their quest to enable children to reach their full potential. Through the DfE policy 'Educational Excellence Everywhere' (DfE, 2016b), a five-year vision for English schools and academies was presented to develop the recent years of educational reforms. The policy argument suggested that by building on recent reforms through a focus on 'Educational Excellence Everywhere' excellence would be achieved. However, the reforms to all qualifications, including GCSE, A level and vocational qualifications, are considered by Rogers and Spours (2020) to have ushered in a new period of 'end point assessments' (EPAs) (Rogers and Spours, p. 1235), where a linear approach leads to final examinations.

Morales (2021) identifies the theme of the greater autonomy for academy trusts since 2010, and connects autonomy to increased accountability. He suggests that while school-based management has moved away from local authority management

to academies and academy trusts, business managers at schools and academies in particular are not always given the autonomy that they need as leaders. Morales (2021) recognises that although school business management often requires different skills to leading on pedagogy, there is still a reluctance by Headteachers to include school business managers within the senior leadership team. Moreover, Armstrong, Creaby and Wood's (2020) recent survey of school business managers revealed that it is still common for business managers not to belong to senior leadership teams and to only be invited to leadership team meetings for particular agenda items. A recent report by the Key (2020) suggested that the disconnect between school and academy leaders and school business managers had been exposed during the pandemic. The report suggested that business managers had become vulnerable as they were not sufficiently involved in the strategic planning of the school or academy however, they were expected to take a key role in the re-opening of academies and related health and safety challenges.

As referred to earlier in this thesis, the current educational reforms present challenges to the profession. These include increased workloads and complexities to the professional job of school leadership which are most prevalent at senior leadership and headship levels. While the current educational landscape provides opportunities, Hargreaves states that the difficulties faced by school leaders are unprecedented, with the expectation that the resolution of issues would be at the school and academy level (Hargreaves, 2014a). Jefferson and Anderson (2021) consider that within this current educational landscape, leaders often have to respond to complexities that they consider to be chaotic. The additional Progress 8 performance measure requires school leaders to account for progress and

attainment by the filling of buckets, where results of attainment from different categories of subjects are purported to demonstrate student progress. Commenting on the reform of performance measures, the Headteacher of an English secondary school, Pugh (2015), considers the performance tables and opines that the education of children is about lighting fires rather than filling buckets.

Cooke et al. (2015), note that the recent pace and scale of change had been significant in summarising the views of participants in a review of the changing nature of school leadership in England. They acknowledge the development of school-led systems as part of a school leadership model, identifying that this leadership approach has moved away from close accountability to local authority. However, despite the opportunities for ambitious Headteachers to take on larger roles, the accountability is also acknowledged by Cruddas (2015), to be greater and the consequences of failure more severe. She suggests that the complexity of leadership in the current educational context warrants the development of collective, participative leadership concepts which include examining the attitudes and characteristics of school leaders. In the draft paper 'a blueprint for a self-improving system', Cruddas (2015) argues a compelling vision of school leadership towards 2020 where leaders are agents of their own accountability. Recent educational policy linking back to the Conservative manifesto of 2015, described the Government's commitment to driving up standards in schools so that every child can experience a good education. Bold statements like 'we know what works' (Conservative manifesto, 2015) defined great teachers and brilliant leadership as a part of the answer.

Writing on the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) blog, Ziltener (2015) illustrates the importance of learning from experienced leaders who have a very strong, proven track record through the systems leader approach. Fidler (1996) links people to systems in strategic planning for school improvement, with the systems ensuring that people are doing things in a coordinated, consistent way towards the strategic aim (Fidler, 1996). In a report commissioned by the National Union of Teachers (NUT), Hutchings (2015) states that in an investigation into the impact of various accountability measures on young people, teachers felt that they were often held to account for things that were outside of their control. In this report, the teachers interviewed cited the social background of pupils as well as a school teacher or department leadership absence as issues that were beyond their control. Hutchings (2015) notes that the teachers interviewed felt that they were held to account for pupil performance even though the factors described as beyond their control affected pupil performance.

Wilshaw, the former chief inspector of Ofsted (2014), recognises the introduction of shorter school Ofsted inspections for good schools, surmising that school improvement is brought about by good school leadership. He develops his argument further to explain that in future Ofsted inspections, Her Majesty's Inspectors will focus on school leadership as a priority in order to judge whether or not a school leadership team has the necessary capacity to continue to improve standards. In addition, he cited the activity of school leadership evaluation of a school's strengths and weaknesses as being important in establishing whether or not school leaders know how to accurately identify areas for school improvement and have the necessary strategies mapped out to address any weaknesses. He comments that

the Ofsted approach is integral to transforming school standards in a way that would not have been considered possible 20 years previously. The theme of good leadership underpinning school improvement is emphasised and further developed in the most recent 2019 Ofsted Education Inspection Framework (EIF) and the revised 2021 EIF. These Ofsted documents (2019; 2021) demand that educational leaders have a greater focus on achieving the best outcomes for students, rather than a focus on leadership and management, ensuring impact on all students. However, building on the previous argument of good leadership, the current EIF (2021) implies distributed leadership as a model of good leadership, as it considers that leadership is highly effective when it is shared and is distributed across different levels of a school or academy.

Fullan (2002) proposes that it is the link between successful leadership and transformational change leadership that provides sustainable success during a cultural change in schools. He identifies motivation, energy, creating and sharing knowledge, relationships and moral purpose as necessary leadership characteristics for changing school culture to sustain success. Moral leadership is presented as ethical leadership by Brown and Trevino (2006, p.128) who suggest that an ethical leader combines the characteristics of a moral person and a moral manager. They state that

“to be perceived as an ethical leader, it is not enough to just be an ethical person. An executive ethical leader must also find ways to focus the organisation’s attention on ethics and values and to infuse

the organisation with principles that will guide the actions of all employees”.

Fullan (2008) develops his argument on school leadership characteristics to suggest that successful organisational change involves six key concepts which cover: a commitment to the employee, meaningful peer connections, transparency, capacity building, learning from the work and ensuring that systems are reviewed and updated from learning. Macbeath and Mortimore (2001) consider the profile of a school or academy and identify collaboration as an important element in creating change. Transformational leadership relating to transforming education is considered to be essential in schools and academies being equipped and fit for purpose in the 21st century. According to Jefferson and Anderson (2021), there is a necessity to build student, academy and community capabilities through the agentic power of leaders. Jefferson and Anderson (2021) place emphasis on the importance of leadership influence in creating and increasing such leadership agency, through the initiation of actions.

In further consideration of the context of the present educational landscape, Brooks and Brooks (2015) propose that it is no longer sufficient for school leaders to hold more traditional beliefs that they describe as previous leadership paradigms, if they do not meet the needs of children in today's culturally diverse school demographic. They argue that in the changing landscape of the 21st century distributed school leadership in urban educational leadership should be connected to culturally competent practices that are fit for the 21st century, commenting that such an

approach to leadership ensures that staff can provide for a culturally diverse demographic in schools.

The notion of culturally competent practices offered by Brooks and Brooks (2015) differs from the view of leadership presented by Hernez-Broome and Hughes (2004) who identify trends in leadership over the previous 20 years illustrating a significant interest in leadership development that provides employees with greater opportunities to learn from within the workplace. They also argue that there has been a greater focus on the quality of the leader's relationships and how they connect to people emotionally. Furthermore, qualities such as credibility, trustworthiness and authenticity have become important (Collins, 2001; Goleman et al., 2002). In addition, MacBeath (1998) identified that school leaders have to use a repertoire of leadership styles and skills that change over time and develop, shaped by the context and culture that the leaders are working in. Bush (2020, p. 24) broadens the argument of the development of leadership styles and skills, to the development of different leadership models, referring to the variety of leadership models as stated earlier as 'alternative and competing'. In an empirical assessment of school leadership in Northern and Southern Ireland, emphasis is placed on the significance of effective school leadership raising standards in education. Leithwood et al., (2004) report that classroom teaching has the most impact on educational achievement followed by school leadership. They add that the accountability of Principals is increasing and that this could be a deterrent for some professionals to consider headship. However, a different view presented by Lupton and Thrupp (2013) noted that the pressure on English schools increases when operating in areas of disadvantage.

Breslin and Moores (2014) describe the change to educational policy over four decades in the United Kingdom through a carefully detailed narrative. They document key political changes and illustrate the key educational policy changes of each decade. They cite the beginning of local management of schools in the late 1980's to the academisation of schools and free schools to demonstrate the shift to the competitive market-driven policies of the years between 1994 and 2014. Here league tables and Ofsted judgements help to define the increased target-driven and performance accountability regimes. These stem from the first concept of Local Schools Management (LSM). The theme of competitive education and league tables are traceable back to Blair, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and a speech given at Ruskin College, Oxford (Blair, 1996); the speech included content around rigorous assessment of pupil and school performance and early intervention when things go wrong. Almost 20 years later in 2015, the narrative from the Government and Ofsted are very similar (DfE, 2010; Ofsted, 2015).

Robertson (2014) cites the target-driven culture as the reason for a shift in educational pedagogy, arguing that programmes such as the organisation for economic cooperation and development's (OECD) international student assessment (PISA) suggests too much emphasis on competition. This programme ranks a country's students in terms of skills such as problem solving in maths, science and literacy. The suggestion of a narrowing of the focus as each student is a part of the race to the top is questioned. A similar stance is taken by Goleman (2015), away from the rigidity of data sets when commenting on new leaders. Goleman (2015)

describes emotional intelligence as an attribute of an inspirational leader. He suggests great leaders are superior to elements of leadership such as strategy, vision and technical knowledge. He argues that while these elements are important, they are not as important as emotional intelligence in determining great qualities in leaders.

Taylor (2009) recognises that Headteachers need greater empowerment while acknowledging that greater empowerment generates greater accountability from stakeholders such as Governing Bodies and parents. There are similarities here with Wilshaw's views surrounding educational leadership. Wilshaw proclaimed that "strong and powerful Headteachers and Principals are running successful federations and chains of schools which have the flexibility to do much more" (Wilshaw, 2014). The view here links strong and successful leadership to having greater flexibility.

## **2.7 Student achievement**

The research question of this study concerns the perception of participants of distributed leadership on student achievement; therefore, this section provides an overview of literature considering student achievement. It is not exhaustive, as the research relates to student achievement from the perspective of distributed leadership but provides an overview of key literature to support the full exploration of the research question in this study.

### **2.7.1 Defining student achievement**

There are many definitions of student achievement and as such, student achievement is difficult to define and can be a contested concept even though it is the intention of almost every area of education (Guskey, 2013). The definition of both student attainment and student achievement is also contentious. The difference between student achievement and student attainment is defined by Whetstone (2011) who suggest that attainment is the standard a student has reached demonstrated by examination or test results and achievement is defined as the distance travelled between two learning points so that learning can be considered successful. Similarly, Ofsted (2011) presents an argument that assessment and tracking progress raises student attainment, but fails to define what attainment is. Furthermore, the Ofsted document (2011) focusing on raising attainment and achievement, states that assessment raises both attainment and achievement, suggesting that achievement can be increased through regular assessment. Therefore, this argument presented by Ofsted (2011) implies that achievement is the progress in learning made by a student. However, this view is different from the position of Ryan and Soehner (2011). They propose that student achievement can be interpreted as any student learning defined by a curriculum. A separation of academic achievement and other achievement from Kydd et al. (2009, p. 109) refers to the 'achievement of academic excellence as being innate to the purpose of almost any school'.

Developing an argument about measuring achievement, Bos and Schwippert (2003) consider that while the focus of student achievement may be on measurability, the

measurement of student achievement is subject to different interpretations, because conceptualisations of student achievement also vary. Ballafkih and Van Middlekoop (2019) identify two types of student achievement. Firstly they consider a narrow definition of student achievement, where student achievement is measured by standardised testing, which they consider is defined by knowledge and tasks. This quantitative approach to student achievement considers more numerical academic skill indicators such as test and examination grades, which they argue are highly variable. Secondly, they suggest that a contrasting view is to define a broader range of student achievement that includes 'softer skills' (Ballafkih and Van Middlekoop; 2019, p. 46). They suggest that these soft skills acknowledge a wider breadth of qualitative, subjective student skills and include examples such as 'personal growth, as well as such qualitative aspects as student engagement in educationally purposeful activities, student satisfaction, student acquisition of desired knowledge, persistence, and attainment of educational objectives'. Ballafkih et al. (2019) note that within this broader consideration of student achievement the relationship between the family and school and parental involvement is also considered. This important point builds on Busher (2006), and Dougill et al. (2011), who each suggest that parental engagement programmes are an important part of supporting students' academic achievement and should be developed to support academic progress more widely, rather than just the limited action of agreeing with an academy's homework policy.

The notion of measuring or valuing success is drawn upon by Davies (2008), who similar to Ballafkih and Van Middlekoop identifies quantitative measurements of achievement as maybe only being 'indicative of underlying ability' (Davies, 2008, p.

150). Ballafkih and Van Middlekoop (2019) are explicit in separating numerically defined achievement through knowledge and task and softer achievement as more subjective, qualitative achievements. Moreover, Davies (2008) comments that a broader view of achievement and success may take account of social learning, such as the behaviour of students to each other as well as the adults around them. He suggests that qualitative aspects of achievement and success may also include the ability to problem solve, as well as personal qualities such as determination, commitment, a passion for learning and motivation. Therefore, Davies (2008, p. 12) presents the notion that 'success can be seen in how children achieve academically, socially, spiritually, physically and emotionally, enabling children to be all they can be'. He concludes that student success needs to be measured by more than just results from examinations (Davies, 2008). The notion of achievement being more than a narrow set of subjective quantitative data is built on by Macbeath and Dempster (2009). They consider that a narrow focus on attainment data derived from subjects where numerical data is more readily available perverts the central purpose of an educational establishment and ignores qualitative subjects that are more difficult to measure in numerical terms, such as the arts.

The argument that student achievement recognises a broader skill set is built on by Altae, Canfarotta, Haidar-Baldwin, and Taysum (2020). Taysum et al. (2020) offer documentary analysis and analysis of policy as text, of cases of education curriculum policy from Iraq, Italy, Lebanon and England. Their evidence reveals that these curriculum policies as text do not include a focus on Mayssa's critical thinking competencies. Through mapping, using Mayssa's framework of four competencies of critical thinking, Taysum et al. (2020) identify that skills such as good questioning

skills, problem solving, communication and collaboration skills were lacking in each curriculum. The research outlines the importance of developing a broader set of critical thinking skills than the nation states in the study were able to demonstrate. Furthermore, Taysum et al. (2020) argue that the lack of evidence of critical thinking skills deepens the divide between state school and private education. As such, the absence of critical thinking skill development in state school education affects the examination success pattern of students compared to the examination success of students from private schools where critical thinking skills are a part of curriculum policy.

### **2.7.2 Factors influencing student achievement**

As previously mentioned, Hattie's (2009) research originally identified 138 factors that may influence achievement, focusing on both teaching and learning. Among the comprehensive list of characteristics of influence are many qualitative, subjective aspects such as student help-seeking, behavioural intervention, anxiety, motivation, peer influence and parental engagement. Taking account of effects from six areas, which include students; their homes; the school; curriculum; teachers and teaching and learning styles, Hattie (2009; 2012) suggests that the achievement of students needs to be visible to everybody, seen from the lens of the student. This view suggests regard for subjectivity and qualitative interpretations of student achievement alongside more quantitative, measurable indicators. Both the academic and non-academic achievements of students are considered by Harris (2008) and Day et al. (2006) as evidence of the outcomes of successful distributed leadership.

Macbeath and Dempster (2009) argue that within the curriculum, creative subjects that are not so easy to measure are ignored as indicators for learning, while subjects within the curriculum that are more quantifiable are presented as indicators for learning. This argument is emphasised by the focus of the DfE on performance measures that indicate student success in achievement and are demonstrated in the documentation concerning the alignment of GCSE grades and the secondary accountability, performance measures (DfE, 2020), reiterating the importance of numerically measured achievement. As such, Middlewood et al. (2018) consider that these accountability and performance measures are a national pressure on schools, limiting schools and academies to measuring achievement through narrow, measurable outcomes. Presenting an argument for student achievement to develop relevant key skills, Conneely, Johnston, Murchan and Tangney (2015) identify that students need to be allowed to develop skills that are relevant for living in the 21st century, through a wide range of curricular activities.

Taking a broader view of student success related to leadership and cultural change, Fullan (2001) suggested that while the structure of leadership is a part of making a difference, it is the success rather than the structure that is most important. Focusing on school improvement, Bryk and Schneider's (2002) research suggests that in considering student achievement, high-trusting relationships are important in the context of school improvement. While Cole and Southworth (2005) consider that any effect from distributed leadership on student achievement is indirect, they argue that leadership structure, trust and empowerment within the distributed leadership model are important characteristics to develop in leaders who focus on successful student achievement.

Other factors that affect achievement concern the quality of the learning experience in connection with the learning of the most disadvantaged. The OECD (2012) state that the performance gap between disadvantaged learners in England compared to their peers exists due to a lack of inclusion and fairness. Moreover, the OECD considers leaders to have frequently failed regarding the poor quality of the learning experience of disadvantaged students in England, leading to such a performance gap. They identify that this performance gap in England is the largest of all OECD countries (OECD, 2014). In relation to the intrinsic value of moral leadership, Pellicer (2007) suggests that leaders need to care enough to make a difference to disadvantaged student achievement. The theme of the achievement of disadvantaged students is echoed in DfE documentation (2010; 2015) where the DfE guidance suggests enabling disadvantaged students in practical ways to bridge any gaps that they face and to overcome barriers to attainment.

Morris and Dobson (2021, p. 284) suggest that “the pupil premium policy was announced in England in 2010, presented as strategy to reduce the attainment gap between pupils from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and their more affluent peers, and improve outcomes for children from poorer households”. They cite schools with a high level of students who are from disadvantaged backgrounds as having additional challenges associated with student welfare, student behaviour, low aspirations of students and parents and a lack of parental engagement.

An international comparative analysis of ten groundwork case-studies in schools considers the point of strategy being employed to increase student achievement and attainment in diverse communities (Taysum, Arar, Chopra, Collins Ayanlaja, Harrison, Imam, McGuinness, McNamara, Mynbayeva, O'Hara, Pogolian, Yelbayeva, 2020). Taysum et al. (2020) identify that evidence informed strategies presented from the research as leaders' intervention strategies may develop students' participation in gaining target examination outcomes. Taysum et al. (2020) argue that developing the participation process between staff, students and other stakeholders is essential in optimising the well-being and learning of students in different diverse cultural settings and as such securing the ambition of young people. They recognise the importance of an inclusive and caring ethos within diverse educational community settings, respecting all stakeholders, and encouraging increased participation. Taysum et al. (2020) suggest that engaging students through the participatory process leads to increasing student outcomes. As such, Taysum et al. (2020) argue that current international educational policies and standards regimes do not allow for the nurturing of well-being and learning characteristics that underpin improved student attainment, laying the foundation for greater social capital in adulthood.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

The literature review suggests that there is a gap in the literature in that there is less literature specifically on successful English secondary school leadership linked to student achievement. Through this literature review, the aim has been to review selected literature in order to look at effective leadership and the complexities of

leading in a fast-changing landscape. In addition, due to the national educational reforms, systems leadership and the accountability system, a culture of change is evident. Some of these educational reforms may have added to workload and may be seen as barriers to achievement; however, in some cases, the educational reforms may have created opportunities, such as greater autonomy for academies. The extent to which leadership characteristics and attributes or leadership systems make the difference would also need further consideration. The review evidenced some arguments for structural organisation, such as systems leadership in relation to distributed leadership. However, while there are some studies on what qualities in a leader or leadership team may drive success, there are fewer examples in the literature of English secondary school distributed leadership and what makes the difference to students. Consideration of what influences students in making the difference would be useful, especially in this time of change through the recent national educational reform with much of the literature demonstrating that it relates to policy, driven by a target and data-driven culture. The next chapter in this thesis, Chapter 3, presents the research methodology.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the methodological approach taken for my research in exploring the research question ‘what do participants think is the influence of distributed leadership on student achievement?’ It builds on the research context of Chapter 1, the introduction to this thesis and Chapter 2, the literature review. My research methodology was an Appreciative Inquiry exploring and reflecting on the distributed leadership practice of three secondary academies from the southeast of England. Each academy considered that it had implemented a distributed leadership model and therefore had a distributed leadership team. The three academies covered the Ofsted categories of ‘outstanding’, ‘good’ and ‘requires improvement’.

This chapter sets out the decisions made in the choice of the methodological approach, with consideration given to other research methodologies. It presents the rationale and aims of the research and the research paradigm, followed by the research design, and a conceptual framework for this research methodology. It then briefly illustrates the Appreciative Inquiry methodology, outlining the four key phases of the 4D Appreciative Inquiry methodological model. This section is followed by an overview of the participants; participant population and context; data collection methods; data analysis and thematic analysis. The trustworthiness is then

considered, demonstrating a robust and rigorous application to the research. The chapter closes with ethical considerations and a conclusion.

### **3.2 The rationale and aims of the research**

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the rationale for the research was to benefit school leaders and the wider educational audience. It was the intention that the voice of the leadership teams of three anonymous secondary academies and their perceptions would be of central importance to this small-scale study. The value, usefulness and impact of the research aimed to provide further insight to educational professionals to influence and improve practice. The research sought to explore the perceptions of leaders from distributed leadership teams of their influence on student achievement, justifying discovering and illustrating perceptions of good practice so that it could be repeated. In planning the research, I deliberately did not define student achievement to participants, as I considered it an important element of the research that each participant gave their own interpretation of student achievement. The intention was to make an original contribution to knowledge through an Appreciative Inquiry methodological approach, broadly under the umbrella of the action research paradigm (McNiff, 2017), presenting unique possibility statements generated from the research. The argument for the justification of the originality of the study was that this small-scale research study was distinctive, conducted with a unique group of professional leaders from three different secondary academies, at one moment in time and space. The main findings were intended to be focused on student achievement; however, it was acknowledged that there might also be unexpected secondary findings. The outcomes of the research proposed identifying successful elements of distributed leadership practice. Having analysed, interpreted and

discussed the evidence, the findings are offered as an original contribution to knowledge through possibility statements, an alternative to provocative propositions (Hammond, 2013).

The research aimed to allow the participants in the study to explore their perceptions through experiences as leaders from distributed leadership teams. The main methods of the methodological approach are outlined in the conceptual framework for the methodology in figure 2 and as such include semi-structured interviews and group fora. Therefore, participants took part in the research through individual semi-structured interviews to understand their perception of what elements from distributed leadership contributed to influencing student achievement. Group interviews, intended to be conducted as group fora, were planned as a co-constructed part of the research and to offer the opportunity of member checking; however, it was not possible to conduct these and an alternative was sought, through constructing feedback sheets. In identifying broad themes drawn from the experiences of participants, the research intends to provide useful insights, such as aspects of best practice of distributed leadership, to facilitate further future success.

### **3.3 Research Paradigm**

The research methodology is underpinned by key theoretical concepts that guide the research activities and relate to ontology, epistemology and methodology (Briggs, 2014). This section gives a brief overview of these key theoretical concepts. The relationship between 'what one sees and understands, known as ontology and theories about knowledge, expressed through epistemology (Briggs, 2014, p. 15), determine how the researcher thinks about creating knowledge'. As such, the

researcher's relationship between ontological and epistemological premises and oneself can be defined as self-validating (Bateson, 1972). In justifying the term 'self-validating' Guba (1990) suggests that the relationship between the set of beliefs and feelings held, guide action in how the world should be understood and studied. Furthermore, according to Denzin and Lincoln, (2011), this self-validation is regardless of whether ultimately there is truth or not. Moreover, in some cases the set of beliefs and feelings guide actions that due to the experience of individuals would include a mandate for social action (Lincoln, et al., 2011), suggesting a position towards the more controversial new inquiry paradigm. The research paradigm of the methodology of appreciative inquiry (McNiff, 2017), is set out in figure 2 as a conceptual framework for the methodology. The next section, 3.3.1 sets out my ontological position.

### **3.3.1 Ontological position**

In identifying the research paradigm, careful consideration was given to my ontological position. Ontology is described by Taysum (2012, p. 65) as 'what is' in relation to the way individuals think about 'the concrete' or object. My ontological position is from a social constructivist perspective, where reality is a social construct. As Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) define, constructivism is built on the principle that the relationship between human knowledge and the destiny of an organisation are intertwined because human beings continually re-evaluate their understanding of the world in order to make sense of people and the world around them. Furthermore, Creswell (2014) defines social constructivism as humans engaging in and interpreting their world and in so doing constructing meaning. Social constructivism

is defined by Denzin and Lincoln (2011) as people constructing their own understanding of reality. Therefore, my ontological position is influenced by my beliefs and values of how I view the world. The following section, 3.3.2 presents my epistemological position.

### **3.3.2 Epistemological position**

In identifying my epistemological position, I will briefly look at overarching theory and perspectives underpinning epistemology. According to Lincoln et al. (2011) epistemology is defined as what the relationship is between the researcher and the known. Other definitions of epistemology suggest that epistemology is defined as how reality can be known (Briggs, 2014) and ‘the knowledge of what is’ (Taysum, 2010, p. 7). I carefully considered the view of McNiff (2013) concerning epistemology. McNiff (2013, p. 5) suggests that researchers should accept ‘epistemic responsibility for their work, inspiring a mindset towards life and lifelong learning by practitioners across the professions’. She defines epistemology as ‘the study of what we know and how we come to know it’ (McNiff, 2013, p. 28). Her stance is that knowledge is generated from people’s experiences through living and learning and as such can be considered as a living process. Therefore, from this perspective, my research will be conducted from constructivist epistemology. Creswell (2014, p. 8) defines social constructivists as ‘individuals developing subjective meaning from experiences, where meaning is formed through interaction with others’, arguing that a social constructivist perspective is often combined with an interpretivist paradigm and this is briefly outlined in the next section.

### **3.3.3 Interpretivist Paradigm**

In accordance with Creswell (2014), I recognise that my own background and experience shapes my interpretation of research. I agree with Creswell (2014, p. 8) that as a researcher my 'intent is to make sense (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world'. I found that an interpretivist paradigm would allow me to recognise elements such as values and beliefs (McNiff, 1998) and lived experiences (Reed, 2006) as part of my research. As the researcher, my justification for identifying with the interpretivist paradigm aligns with the distinctive features of the interpretivist paradigm presented by Cohen et al. (2011). According to Cohen et al. (2011) there are several features of interpretivist approaches that distinguish the interpretivist perspective from other approaches or paradigms. Cohen et al. (2011, p. 17) suggest that interpretivist features include 'multiple interpretations of and perspectives on, single events and situations where reality is multilayered and complex'. They also purport that the situation being researched should be looked at from the lens of the participant rather than the researcher. As such Cohen et al, (2011) posit that one of the central aims within the interpretivist paradigm is to gain understanding of the 'subjective world of human experience' (Cohen, 2011, p. 17). The section below, 3.3.4 gives a brief overview of qualitative methodology.

### **3.3.4 Qualitative Methodology**

I chose qualitative research methodology as it supported my interest in the 'how' and the 'what' that came from semi-structured interviews and in congruence with Preissle (2011), how the two intertwine as subject matter and research method. According to

Stake (1995, p. 35) 'there is no single wellspring of qualitative research'. Stake opines that the history of qualitative research evolves from the curiosity of humans over centuries and is therefore extensive. Stake (1995) develops the nature of qualitative research as trying to make sense of the experience of humans to the reader, through empathetic description to the reader which is often defined as thick description.

Furthermore, in choosing to conduct research within the qualitative research paradigm, Creswell's (2014) presentation of the characteristics of qualitative research is of note. Creswell (2014) suggests that qualitative research usually collects data from the natural setting in the research field where the participants are. Therefore the researcher is a key instrument in interviewing participants within the setting of their experience. Creswell (2014) states importantly, that qualitative research focuses on the meaning that the participants bring to the inquiry. However, he also affirms that the experiences and the personal background of the researcher shape the inquiry through the researchers own reflexive practice. The following section considers decision making and the choice of research methodology as the methodological approach of appreciative inquiry.

### **3.3.5 Decision making and the choice of Appreciative Inquiry methodology**

The methodological choice for this research took account of my decision making and reflects Baumfield, Hall and Wall's (2008) emphasis on the importance of sharing research findings in education and in so doing address the gap between theory and practice. Referring to the literature review in Chapter 2, it was evident that strong and

successful leadership remains a key feature of Government policy (DfE, 2016b). However, the literature review revealed that there is currently a gap in the literature exploring the views of English school leaders and the relationship between distributed leadership and student achievement. Building on previous reforms, the Department for Education's 'Educational Excellence Everywhere' (DfE, 2016b), and 'Schools that work for everyone' (DfE, 2016a) continue the theme of strong schools and leaders as important in improving children's life chances. According to Hargreaves (2014a), while the current educational landscape provides opportunities for systems leadership and more autonomy at the school level, the challenges faced by school leaders are unprecedented. With this in mind, I selected the methodological approach of Appreciative Inquiry into school leadership as the most appropriate methodology for my research. This choice was suitable because one characteristic of an Appreciative Inquiry is that it intends to focus on the positive, and the outcomes are intended to support the development of the organisation (Hammond, 2013). As a secondary Headteacher, I felt that there was such merit in learning from distributed leadership teams' experiences through an Appreciative Inquiry, especially set against this changing landscape of education. Therefore, drawing on Reed (2006) to clarify my use of the methodological approach of appreciative inquiry, Reed (2006) considers that the methodology of appreciative inquiry is a research methodology for change. This is because the questions and conversations are designed to elicit from participants what is positive and can be built upon and the summary of the findings can be presented as possibility statement. Through the possibility statements Reed (2006) argues that researchers who use the appreciative inquiry methodology promote change. Further, as an educational leader myself, I considered the research to be practitioner research

(Briggs, et al., 2014); as such, the methodology of Appreciative Inquiry would enable me to relate theory and practice together, as suggested by McNiff (2017). This new theorised practice is then presented as new knowledge and insight in the study.

In selecting the research method, consideration was given to the specific methods of interest that I was most likely to adopt, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, with the decision made that the methodology of Appreciative Inquiry was the most suitable. The main concepts supporting my choice of the methodology of appreciative inquiry are presented in figure 2. In justifying this choice, I considered that in order to gain the most valuable insight into leadership teams' work, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions would be the most suitable data collection method (Robson, 2002). Furthermore, I believe that the collection of non-numeric data was of more value in this research than numerical data (Creswell, 2014). The research was inductive as I intended to seek the contribution of participants, drawing on the historical data derived from the interview process of participants. Cooperrider (1990) describes such historical data as grounded, positive examples from the participant's past. As such, another way that the appreciative inquiry methodology was used was to elicit positive, historic data from participants, through the use of carefully constructed semi-structured questions. As the purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions of senior leaders, I took the decision not to interview students as part of this study, as it was considered outside of the scope (Briggs, et al., 2014) of this research. However, I anticipated that this could be future research, building on this study and this aspect is covered more fully in

Chapter 7, the conclusion, under recommendations for further research. The following section presents consideration of other research methodologies.

### **3.3.6 Consideration of other research methodologies**

I considered and rejected other research methodologies. I dismissed viewing the world through the lens of positivist and post-positivist paradigms as I did not consider that my research design would incorporate the elements of experimentation, objectivity or measurability (Cohen, et al., 2007). Therefore I did not consider that positivist and post-positivist paradigms would not be suitable for my research. I justifiably took into account a detachment from a more hard-line quantitative scientific method. In rejecting the paradigms of positivism and post-positivism, I also considered Creswell's (2014) stance, highlighting examples from these research paradigms that are typically depicted through determination, reductionism and measurement and theory verification, such as testing a hypothesis.

When considering other research methodologies, I rejected using a full case study approach as a method of inquiry. While face to face interviews can form a valuable part of a case study, I felt that face to face semi-structured interviews within an Appreciative Inquiry methodological approach would be more suitable for my research to focus on possible best practice. In justifying this decision, I identified that along with the importance of eliciting the views, experiences and perceptions of the participants in the research, the notion of an element of the reflection and co-construction of participants would also be important.

Case study as a methodology fitted the research as a suitable research method for school performance (Yin, 2013); however, I recognised that the optimum would be that the case studies should be collected over some time and typically focus on an event, programme or activity. This argument is also related to Bell's (1999) view, that a strength of the case study method is that it enables the researcher to explore one event or situation to uncover or discover processes that may be missed through larger-scale research methods, such as surveys. I compared this case study approach with the methodological approach of an Appreciative Inquiry. On reflection, I decided that the methodological approach of an Appreciative Inquiry offered more flexibility, operating from within a set of assumptions (Hammond, 2013) and focusing on the positives of an organisation (Cooperrider, 1990). Therefore I chose the methodological approach of Appreciative Inquiry broadly supported by multiple case studies, (Yin, 2013) seeing each academy as a case.

I drew on elements of Stake's (1995) instrumental case study as I was researching one or more particular situations to try to understand a concern, using it to inform my work. Developing this point further, Stake (1995) defines an instrumental case study as the study of a case or multiple cases or person or specific group, in order to gain insight into a particular issue. In this research, within the instrumental case strategy, the particular focus of the study is the relationship between distributed leadership and influence on student achievement. The specific group of the multiple cases are the participating leaders of the three distributed leadership teams from the three secondary academies and the multiple cases are the three academies. In this way, in the broadest sense, I argue that this definition of an instrumental case study pertains to the multiple cases in this study and therefore the instrumental case

strategy is justified. Furthermore, Stake (1995) states that in qualitative case study, the researcher seeks a greater understanding of the case and its 'uniqueness and complexities' (Stake, 1995, p. 16). Therefore, the broadest sense of instrumental case and multiple case study (Yin, 2013) supported the overall methodology of appreciative inquiry. I decided that from the stance of the Appreciative Inquiry methodology, the 4D model of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005) gave a form and structure which I believed was more suited to my research question. Therefore, this methodology was the most suited to what I was endeavouring to achieve in exploring and uncovering valuable practice.

Mixed method action research was another alternative research methodology suitable for this educational research (Creswell, 2014). While initially mixed methods research offered the appeal of collecting qualitative and quantitative data, summarised by Briggs et al. (2012) as systematically using the combined strengths of both qualitative and quantitative data, I felt that the method did not suit my research question.

Justification for my choice of a qualitative research methodology was that the quantitative aspect of mixed methods research would have meant potentially researching achievement data. Therefore, I felt that a qualitative research method facilitated a more in-depth study of local cases, using rich data. I decided that mixed methods research would not allow me to have a broad focus on the participants' perceptions of the relationship between distributed leadership and student achievement. Finally, I considered the naturalistic paradigm and a naturalistic

investigation as possible methodological approaches. As a researcher, a naturalistic investigation would have enabled me to consider the subjective experiences of participants closely, rather than being distant from them (Briggs, et al., 2012). However, a naturalistic investigation would have acknowledged some affinity towards the key principles presented by Lincoln and Guba (1985) concerning the nature of reality; the relationship between the researcher and the subject; generalisation and the influences of values of those involved. Furthermore, as Bernard's (2000) view promotes that naturalistic investigation involves researching an experimental field without participants' or subjects' knowledge that they were being observed, I felt that this methodology was not as compatible with my research aims as I had initially thought. In 3.4 below, I present the research design.

### **3.4 Research design**

The research design provided the vehicle for me to understand other professionals' perceptions of their work in answering my research question. As part of the methodological approach, I made the conscious decision in the research design not to define a specific model of distributed leadership and not to define student achievement. This qualitative research study was a small-scale inquiry into three leadership teams (Cooperrider, 1990), using the methodology of Appreciative Inquiry which enabled me to analyse and interpret rich data, revealing new meanings. Following the view of Stake (1995), the research design promoted the use of understanding and interpretation on a subjective matter to avoid misunderstandings and thereby strengthen validity. The organic nature of the methodological approach of Appreciative Inquiry allowed for uniqueness and a degree of improvisation to prosper. As a researcher conducting practitioner-based research using the

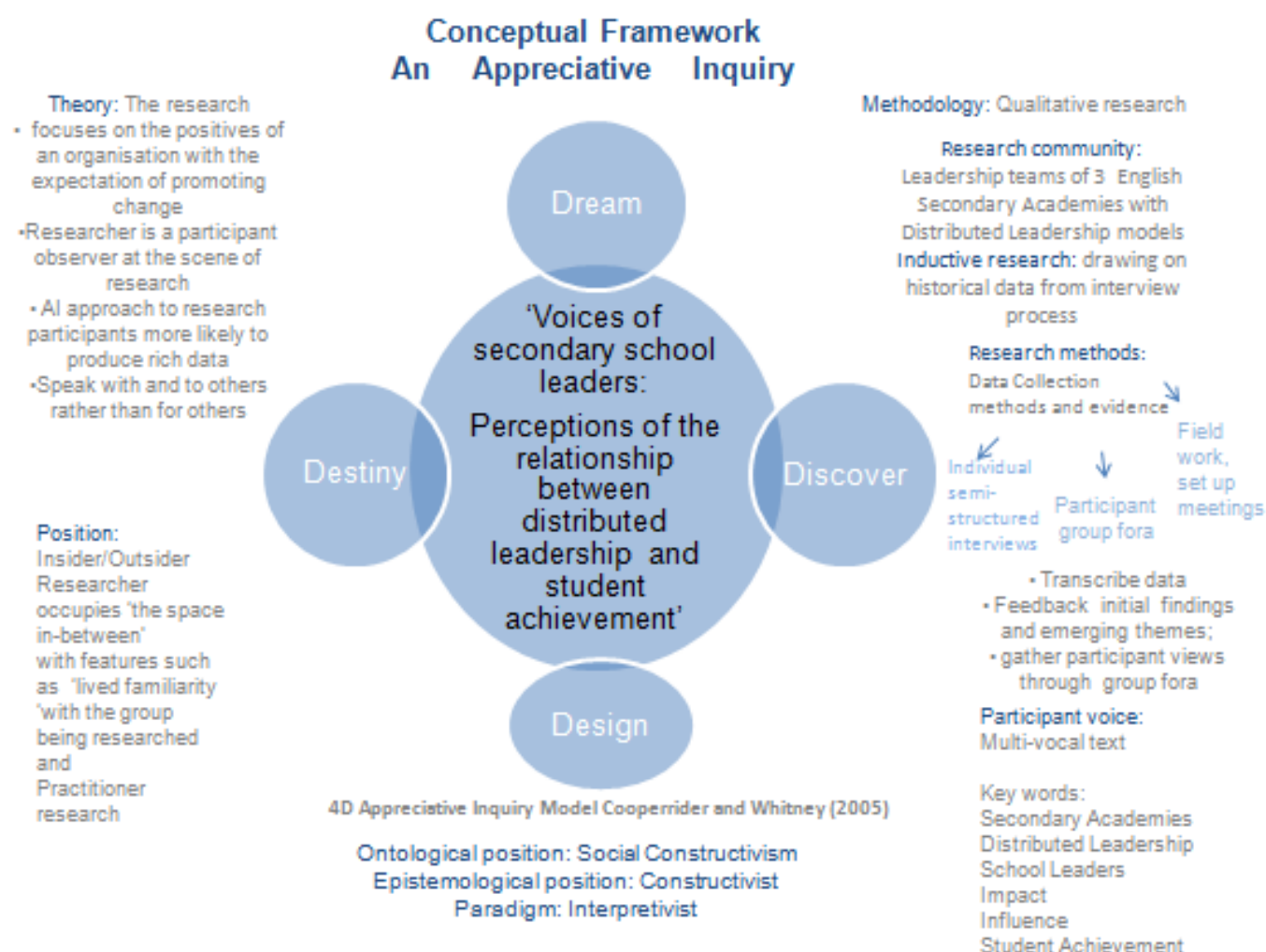
methodology of Appreciative Inquiry, I would suggest that I chose a fairly pragmatic approach.

According to Willis, (2009) there are five different types of researchers, one being a pragmatist, considered as a needs-based scholar. Willis suggests that this type of researcher takes a pragmatic approach because the researcher has a particular question in mind that fits with the professional or personal development of the researcher at that time. From early on in my doctoral journey, the notion of being a researcher as 'bricoleur' also appealed to me (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 4) in being both eclectic and pragmatic as a researcher. Therefore, the choice of Appreciative Inquiry as a methodological approach suited my research journey as it meaningfully employed skills that I believe I have developed professionally.

As a researcher, considering the research design, I noted the distinction between participative inquiry and participatory inquiry. In defining participative inquiry, I suggest that participants are involved in some aspect of the research process (Reason and Bradbury, 2008); this is in contrast to the definition of the participatory inquiry paradigm, meaning a co-construction of the full inquiry, viewed as more of a partnership between the researcher and the stakeholders throughout the research process (Wright, et al., 2013). This research design focused on a group of secondary academy leaders, using Appreciative Inquiry as a methodology to discover their views as authentic voices (Silverman, 2013) and as such was a participative inquiry.

### 3.5 The conceptual framework for the research methodology

From the onset of the consideration of the methodology, I then chose an Appreciative Inquiry as the methodological approach, demonstrated in the conceptual framework for the research methodology, illustrated below in Figure 2.



**Figure 2. Conceptual Framework for Appreciative Inquiry methodology**

### **3.6 The Appreciative Inquiry Methodology broadly supported by multiple case study**

The Appreciative Inquiry methodology can be defined as:

an approach to understanding the social world, that concentrates on exploring ideas that people have about what is valuable in what they do and then trying to work out ways in which this can be built on. The emphasis is firmly on appreciating the activities and responses of people, rather than concentrating on their problems (Reed, 2006: p. 2).

Traditionally, the Appreciative Inquiry methodology takes the form of a 4D model in which research comprises four phases: 1) Discovery; 2) Dream; 3) Design and 4) Destiny (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). These 4 Ds as they are known, may explore current practice; identify areas of success; formulate ways in which these might be developed, and embed improved ideas into practice.

The research question: 'what do participants think is the influence of distributed leadership on student achievement?' was explored using three subsidiary research questions:

What do participants think are the leadership characteristics that influence student achievement?

What are the perceptions of distributed leadership held by the leaders of three secondary academies?

How do secondary academy leaders perceive that distributed leadership influences student achievement?

As previously stated, the methodological approach of Appreciative Inquiry is broadly considered under the umbrella of action research, as the analysis of organisations is based on a positives- and strengths-oriented focus (Grape, 2003; Hammond, 2013). The Appreciative Inquiry methodological approach recounts previous historical detail about an organisation from the participant's perspective (Hammond, 2013) and offers a suitable methodology for small-scale research (Cooperrider, 1990). Sharp, Dewar, Barrie and Meyer (2016) suggest that there is no single Appreciative Inquiry method, but rather Appreciative Inquiry is formed around a set of core principles where voice, patterns of conversation and different perspectives to explore new possibilities are key. The Appreciative Inquiry methodology is based on the assumption that organisations are socially constructed (Bushe, 2013), limited only by the imagination and agreements of those within the organisation. Hammond (2013) suggests that Appreciative Inquiry operates from within a set of eight assumptions, presented in Table 2. These assumptions clearly recognise co-construction of knowledge by individuals and groups, the validity of multiple interpretations of events and the importance of reflection for supporting future practice. Hammond's (2013) set of eight assumptions were used as a starting point for the research. Each

participant was given the assumptions as part of the pre-research literature. It was intended that at the start of each individual participant interview, the assumptions, as long-held beliefs and behaviours (Hammond, 2013) would provide some common agreement from each participant of the notion of reorganising long-held beliefs in order to consider change. In recognising and understanding long-held beliefs and behaviours within an organisation, it was anticipated that participants would then begin to re-organise their long-held beliefs from the commencement of the research.

**Table 2: Hammond's (2013) eight assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry**

<b>Hammond's (2013) eight assumptions</b>	
1	In every society, organisation or group something works
2	What we focus on becomes our reality
3	Reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities
4	The act of asking questions of an organisation or group influences the group in some way
5	People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known)
6	If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past
7	It is important to value differences
8	The language we use creates our reality

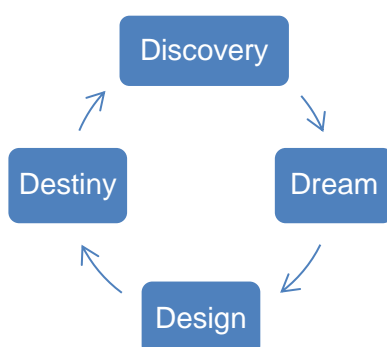
The Appreciative Inquiry methodology allows a more flexible and improvisatory methodological approach by creating the opportunity to interview people within an organisation and allowing them to consider their perceived success (Whitney, et al., 2010). Bushe (2013; p. 5) suggests Appreciative Inquiry 'offers generativity instead of problem solving' as it intentionally advances future possibilities into the present. This generativity is described by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) and Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros (2008, p. 44) as "grounded examples" because the examples were derived from respondents' recollections of previous success. Otte (2015) further describes this kind of engagement as participants contributing towards the participants' future. The methodological approach of Appreciative Inquiry also enables participants to consider modifying or adapting their practice using what has worked in the past as a template for positive change. This is a significant point because Appreciative Inquiry is grounded in real experience and history, creating the potential to increase understanding of successful practice and share best practices. Through interviews recounting peak experiences or success, participants develop this work to advance future successful practice. Participants create relationships between their memory and new information (Lee, Lim, Grabowski, 2008; Farley and Wittrock, 2010). Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) suggest that the Appreciative Inquiry methodology embraces curiosity and learning in a pragmatic sense; the purpose of the inquiry includes questions that create a generative process and explore the topic to create a positive articulation of future possibilities through linking the past and the future (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005).

The study is supported by the broadest sense of a multiple case study as an adaptation of a case study that is suitable for researching an aspect of school performance (Yin, 2013). As stated in 3.3.2, I will draw on elements of Stake's (1995) instrumental case study, to gain understanding and insight by studying these cases. The cases are three secondary schools in the southeast of England with different Ofsted ratings. The boundaries of the cases are the participating distributed senior leadership team members. Yin suggests that the suitability of small groups of people and organisations, such as the cases in this research, are 'a real-world phenomenon with some concrete manifestation' (Yin, 2013; p. 31). According to Stake (1995) the case study approach is personalised; it can be personalised towards the cases or the researcher. In developing this stance, I have considered the notion of the broadest sense of multiple case studies as personalising my research, which fundamentally uses the Appreciative Inquiry methodology. Stake (1995) suggests that it is difficult to fit too many cases into a collective research study, as this may result in individual cases not being robust enough. Bassey (1999) argues that not all case studies fit into a categorisation, such as evaluative, or story-telling for example, and indicates that some cases stand by themselves.

### **3.6.1 Appreciative Inquiry, Methodological process**

As stated in Chapter 1, the intention of the Appreciative Inquiry methodological approach in this research study is to base the Appreciative Inquiry on Cooperrider's (2005) model, a 4D cycle consisting of four phases: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny. While the 4D model gives a form and structure, there is also scope within the flexible nature of Appreciative Inquiry to improvise or adapt the method. The

recap of the 4D model presented in Chapter 1 as Figure 1, is presented again in the diagram below (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: The model – based on the 4D cycle designed by Cooperrider and Whitney (2005).**

I have summarised the purposes of the four phases of Cooperrider and Whitney's (2005) 4D Appreciative Inquiry model, shown in Table 5 below:

**Table 3: A brief outline of the purpose of the four key phases of the 4D model of Appreciative Inquiry, based on Cooperrider and Whitney (2005)**

Number	Phase	Outline of the purpose of phase
1	Discovery	Reflect on and voice participants' own most successful or best experiences within the identified topic
2	Dream	Be aspirational; imagine the future with those successes and aspirations carried forward
3	Design	Participants choose proposals or categories identified from previous phases to develop into possibility statements or provocative propositions

4	Destiny	The outworking of new plans or ideas from the previous phases
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The justification for selecting three academies for the research is to cover the range of Ofsted categories of 'outstanding', 'good' and 'requires improvement' at academies where the leadership professes to practice a distributed leadership model. The academies also range in size (Garrett, et al., 2004). Therefore, the profiles of the three academies presented in the research are

#### **Portside Academy**

An academy for students aged 11-16 with 1020 students. This academy was rated by Ofsted as 'requires improvement'.

#### **Hillstream Academy**

An academy for students aged 11-16 with 860 students. This academy was rated as 'good' by Ofsted.

#### **Riverview Academy**

An academy for students aged 11-18 (including a sixth form) with 2,097 students. This academy was rated by Ofsted as 'outstanding'.

As a researcher, I felt that a small-scale study of these three academies would provide sufficient breadth and depth for the purpose of this research. For clarity, each academy is presented individually, in turn, in the first instance, to provide an overarching view of the context of each case academy. Subsequently, the study then presents the profile of each distributed leadership team and locates those taking part

in the research within the wider context of each leadership team. These overarching profiles of each case academy can be seen in the presentation of the participants of Portside at 3.6.4, and the academy context and the composition of the distributed leadership team at 3.6.5. The Riverview profile similarly presented at 3.6.6 and 3.6.7 and Hillstream Academy at 3.6.8 and 3.6.9. I consider that by positioning each case separately at first, I have identified each case and thereby presented a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2013) that broadly supplements the Appreciative Inquiry methodology. Furthermore, I can acknowledge more fully that one of the purposes of the Appreciative Inquiry methodology is to offer each academy their own, unique summary of findings for their consideration of future action planning. The composite research findings then consider the findings of the three academies together. On reflection, the deliberate choice I have made as a researcher to use the methodological approach of an Appreciative Inquiry and to define each academy as a case that stands alone, has enabled balance in the breadth and depth of the cases studied within the inquiry to achieve the aims of the research.

### **3.6.2 Participants**

Each academy was selected purposively (Silverman, 2013) firstly for their Ofsted grade, but equally importantly because of their distributed leadership model. As the researcher, I consider that the choice of academies was important, as they covered the range of Ofsted categories of 'good', 'outstanding', and 'requires improvement', in addition to the justifications made earlier in the thesis. The participants outlined in the table below represent the total of all participants from the three academies who volunteered to take part in this research. The table presents the overarching profile

of the participants, illustrating the role of each participant within their distributed leadership team, their pseudonym, their gender (presented as male or female) and the area of the academy that each participant leads. Other demographic details such as race and length of time in a leadership role were not recorded as I felt that these details were not relevant to the research question and were therefore outside of the scope of the research. It can be noted from the profile of all participants (see Table 4) that academies used the terms academy and school interchangeably, with Portside Academy using the title ‘Head of School’, to define the person with the overall responsibility of the academy, reporting to a CEO who, having overall responsibility for the trust, does not form part of the research. The term ‘Headteacher’ or ‘Principal’ were preferred by each academy when referring to similar leadership positions; for example, either an ‘Assistant Headteacher’ or an ‘Assistant Principal’. The profile of the 19 participants from the distributed leadership teams in the study demonstrates a range in the breadth of leadership posts from Executive Headteacher to Vice Principals or Deputy Headteachers, Assistant Heads and some Head of Faculty or Head of Department positions.

**Table 4: Illustration of the profile of all participants from the distributed leadership teams of the three academies taking part in the research**

<b>Profile of all participants</b>			
<b>Profile of the leaders from Portside Academy</b>			
<b>Role of Participant</b>	<b>Participant pseudonyms</b>	<b>Male or Female</b>	<b>Area of leadership</b>
Head of School	Anne	Female	Whole school
Vice Principal	Graham	Male	Whole school ethos
Vice Principal	Ralph	Male	Attainment, Data, Curriculum

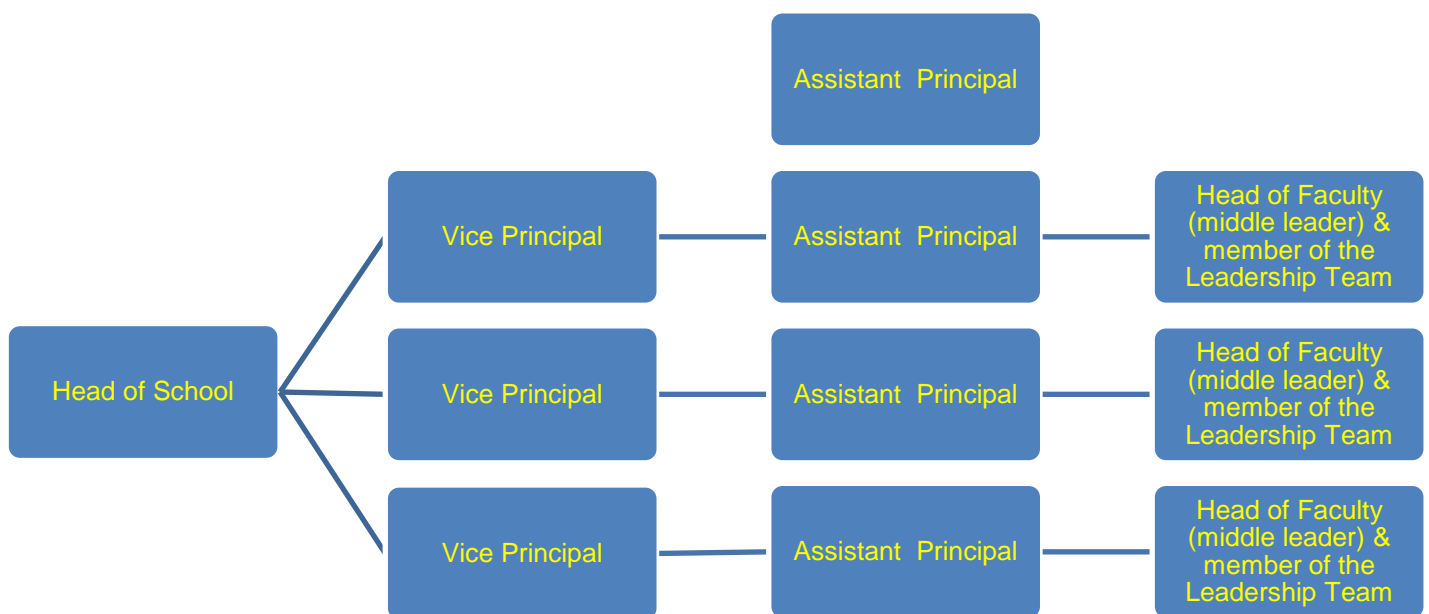
Vice Principal	Laura	Female	Teaching and learning
Assistant Principal	Susan	Female	Impact
Assistant Principal	Sonia	Female	Standards
Assistant Principal	Jonathan	Male	Student development
Assistant Principal	Dean	Male	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)
Director of Faculty and Assistant Headteacher	Linda	Female	Head of maths
Director of Faculty and Assistant Headteacher	Tracey	Female	Head of English
Director of Faculty and Assistant Headteacher	Jamal	Male	Head of science
<b>Profile of the leaders from Riverview Academy</b>			
Executive Headteacher and CEO	Janet	Female	Multi-Academy Trust Whole School
Deputy Headteacher	Richard	Male	Teaching and learning
Associate Deputy Headteacher	Andrew	Male	Data, Multi-Academy Trust Teaching, School Alliance
Director of Faculty and Assistant Headteacher	Christine	Female	English and best practice across the academy
<b>Profile of the leaders from Hillstream Academy</b>			
Headteacher	Justin	Male	Whole school
Senior Deputy Headteacher	Denise	Female	Teaching and learning
Deputy Headteacher	Mike	Male	General
Associate Assistant Headteacher and Head of Faculty.	John	Male	Head of maths

The leadership roles of the participants interviewed from Portside, Riverview, and Hillstream Academies are illustrated below in Figure 4 to give a clear overview of those taking part in the study. Each academy leadership team represents a range of leadership roles from those who volunteered. I have created each organisational chart in the study showing distributed senior leadership teams horizontally to illustrate distributed leadership rather than a hierarchical, top-down, leadership

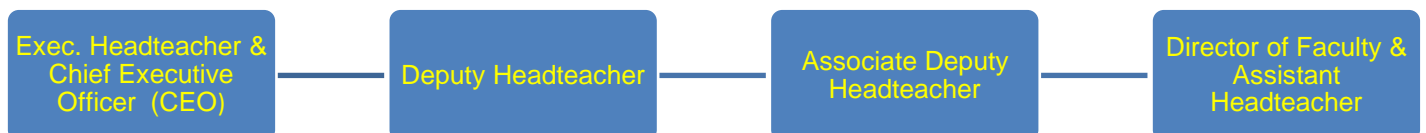
approach, usually displayed vertically. I feel that this is a better way to illustrate the point that leaders are carrying out the leadership function of leading the school with the Headteacher (Bottery, 2004).

### Distributed leadership participants from each case academy:

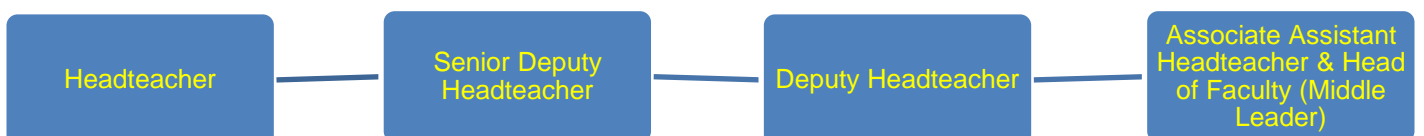
#### Portside Academy



#### Riverview Academy



#### Hillstream Academy



**Figure 4: Distributed leadership team participants from**

## **Portside, Riverview and Hillstream academies**

The following section gives a brief context of each academy and the composition of each of the leadership teams of the academies.

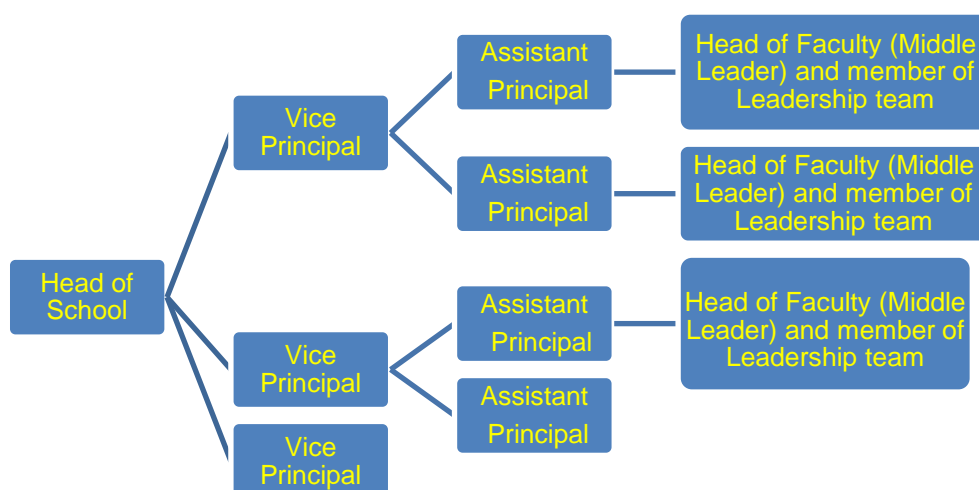
### **3.6.3 Portside Academy**

Portside Academy became a sponsored academy in 2007, as part of a multi-academy trust of five academies, and is a mixed secondary academy of 1,020 11- to 16-year-old students, admitted to the academy by a distance criterion. Portside is set on the outskirts of a large town. The academy was rated as 'requires improvement' by Ofsted in 2017. 50% of students from Portside come from the category of disadvantaged backgrounds commonly defined in terms of family socioeconomic status (DfE, 2015b). The proportion of students who receive support for special educational needs is well above the national average, while the number of students in receipt of an education, health and care plan is slightly higher than the national average. The number of students who have English as an additional language is below the national average.

### **3.6.4 The composition of the Portside Academy leadership team**

There are 11 leaders in the senior leadership team at Portside, all of whom volunteered to take part in the study. The nature of the roles is important in demonstrating a version of a distributed leadership structure, consisting of the Head of School; three Vice Principals, four Assistant Principals and three Middle leaders with a dual role of Head of Faculty (see Figure 5 below). The participating members of the leadership team from Portside are highlighted in yellow on the organisational

chart (Figure 5) and in subsequent charts. Where leaders from each academy did not take part in the study, the posts are illustrated in white.



**Figure 5: The Distributed leadership team of Portside Academy.**

In addition to showing the distribution of the leadership team at Portside (Figure 5), the profile of the leaders from Portside who took part in the study and the pseudonym allocated to each participant are shown in Table 5 below.

**Table 5: Profile of the leaders from Portside Academy**

Profile of the leaders from Portside Academy			
Role of participant	Participant pseudonyms	Male or Female	Area of leadership

Head of School	Anne	Female	Whole school
Vice Principal	Graham	Male	Whole school ethos
Vice Principal	Ralph	Male	Attainment, Data, Curriculum
Vice Principal	Laura	Female	Teaching and learning
Assistant Principal	Susan	Female	Impact
Assistant Principal	Sonia	Female	Standards
Assistant Principal	Jonathan	Male	Student development
Assistant Principal	Dean	Male	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)
Director of Faculty and Assistant Headteacher	Linda	Female	Head of maths
Director of Faculty and Assistant Headteacher	Tracey	Female	Head of English
Director of Faculty and Assistant Headteacher	Jamal	Male	Head of science

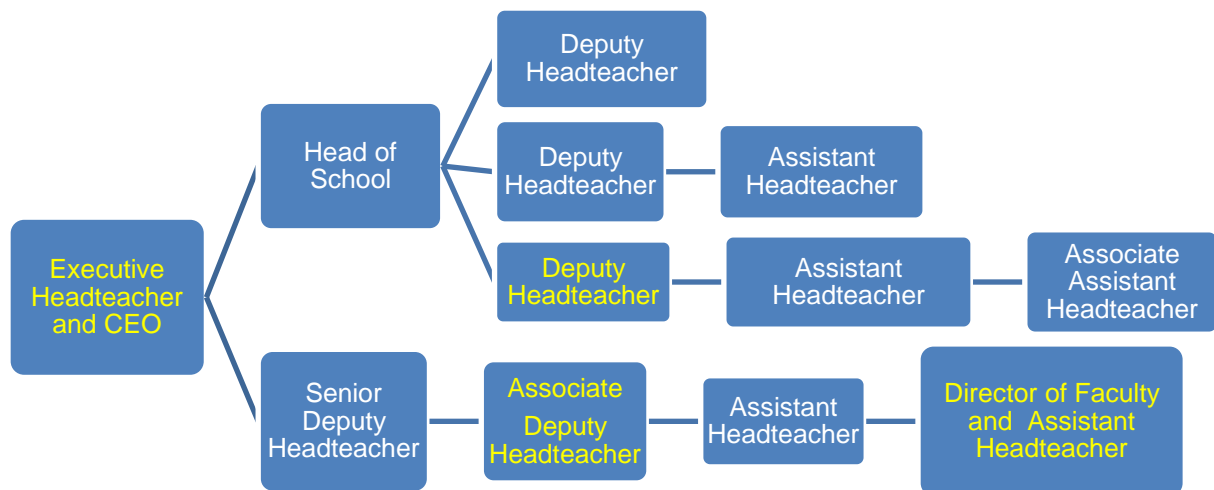
### 3.6.5 Riverview Academy

Riverview Academy is set within a small town and is a mixed secondary academy for 11- to 18-year-old students admitted to the academy by a distance criterion. While 15% of students are admitted to the academy by general ability through testing, the academy is still classified as 'non-selective' according to its admissions policy. There

are 1,597 11- to 16-year-old students on the roll at the academy and a further 500 16- to 18-year-old students in the sixth form. Riverview School became an academy in 2011 and is the lead academy of a small trust comprising four academies. The academy received an Ofsted rating of 'outstanding' in 2013. There are a minority of students (13.9%) attending Riverside that are from the category of disadvantaged backgrounds, commonly defined in terms of family socioeconomic status (DfE, 2015b). The proportion of students who receive support for special educational needs, including students in receipt of an education, health and care plan, is lower than the national average. The number of students who have English as an additional language is below the national average. In 2013 Riverside became the lead school of a local teaching school alliance formed with two other 'outstanding' academies, aiming to strengthen and develop teaching and learning in the locality.

### **3.6.6 The composition of the Riverview Academy leadership team**

There are 12 members in the Riverview Academy leadership team consisting of the Executive Headteacher and Chief Executive Officer (CEO); the Head of School; a Senior Deputy Headteacher; three Deputy Headteachers; an Associate Deputy Headteacher; three Assistant Headteachers; an associate Assistant Headteacher and a Middle leader with a dual role of a Head of a Faculty and member of the leadership team as an Assistant Headteacher (see Figure 6 below).



**Figure 6: The Distributed leadership team of Riverview Academy.**

Four participants from the Riverview leadership team of 12 volunteered to take part in the study: the Executive Headteacher and CEO; Associate Deputy Headteacher; Deputy Headteacher and the Director of Faculty and Assistant Headteacher. The leaders who were unable to take part did not volunteer due to teaching and whole school leadership commitments, with consideration given to not disadvantaging students in any way. Table 6 below shows the profile of each participant from Riverview and the pseudonyms used for the purpose of the study.

**Table 6: Profile of the leaders from Riverview Academy**

Profile of the leaders from Riverview Academy			
Role of participant	Participant pseudonyms	Male or Female	Area of leadership

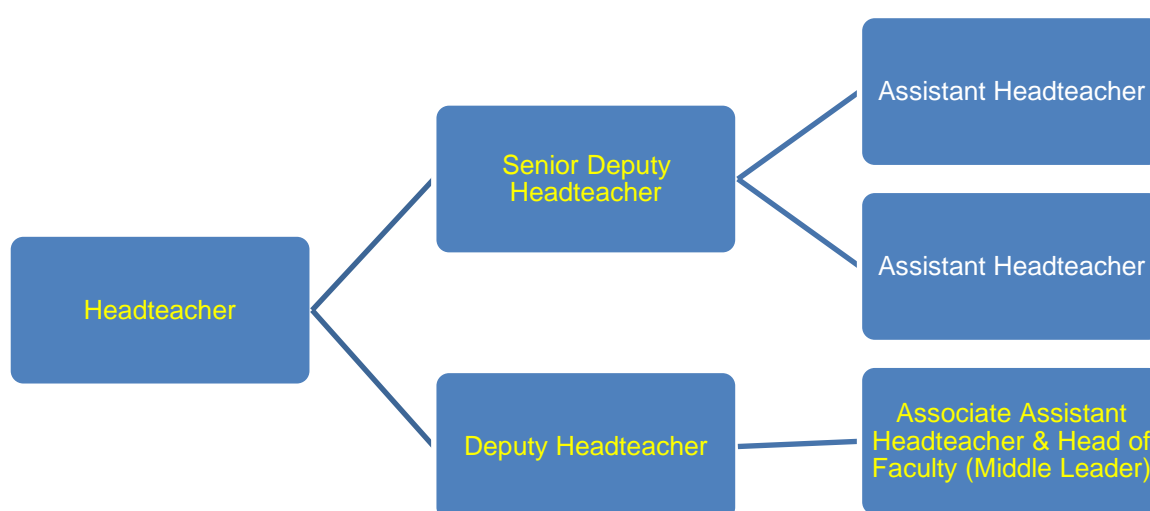
Executive Headteacher and CEO	Janet	Female	Multi-Academy Trust Whole school
Deputy Headteacher	Richard	Male	Teaching and learning
Associate Deputy Headteacher	Andrew	Male	Data Multi-Academy Trust Teaching school alliance
Director of Faculty and Assistant Headteacher	Christine	Female	English and Best Practice across the academy

### 3.6.7 Hillstream Academy

Hillstream Academy is a mixed secondary academy of 860 11- to 16-year-old students, admitted to the academy by a distance criterion. Hillstream, set in an urban town, became an academy sponsored by a small multi-academy trust of four academies in 2012. Ofsted rated the academy as 'good' in 2016. 56% of Hillstream's students come from the category of disadvantaged backgrounds commonly defined in terms of family socioeconomic status (DfE, 2015b). The proportion of students who receive support for special educational needs is below the national average; however, the proportion of students supported by an education, health and care plan is above the national average. The number of students who have English as an additional language is below the national average.

### 3.6.8 The composition of the Hillstream Academy leadership team

There are six people in the senior leadership team at Hillstream: the Headteacher; a Senior Deputy Headteacher; a Deputy Headteacher; two Assistant Principals and one Middle leader with a dual role of Head of a Faculty and member of the leadership team (see Figure 7 below). Four out of the six leaders volunteered to take part in the study. The roles of those taking part are Headteacher; Senior Deputy Headteacher; Assistant Headteacher; Director of a Faculty (Middle leader) and member of the leadership team (see Table 7 below). The leaders who were unable to take part did not volunteer due to teaching and whole school leadership commitments with consideration given to not disadvantaging students in any way.



**Figure 7: The Distributed leadership team of Hillstream Academy.**

The profile of the leaders from Hillstream who participated in the study, along with the participant pseudonyms allocated are shown below in Table 7.

**Table 7: Profile of the leaders from Hillstream Academy**

<b>Profile of the leaders from Hillstream Academy</b>			
<b>Role of participant</b>	<b>Participant pseudonyms</b>	<b>Male or Female</b>	<b>Area of leadership</b>
Headteacher	Justin	Male	Whole school
Senior Deputy Headteacher	Denise	Female	Teaching and learning
Deputy Headteacher	Mike	Male	General
Associate Assistant Headteacher and Head of Faculty.	John	Male	Head of maths

### **3.6.9 Field visit; general observation, tour of academy and pre-meeting with each Headteacher**

Before the data collection commenced at each of the three academies, a field visit was arranged for me to have a brief tour of each of the academies with each Headteacher to acquaint myself with the research settings. This was at the invitation of each Headteacher. While on the tour, preliminary observations of each academy helped me to start to appreciate the ethos of each academy and to familiarise myself with each setting. At each of the academies, the Headteachers were keen to point out to me as we walked around, any special or noteworthy features that they felt characterised their academy. Together we spoke to some students 'en route' and

entered some classrooms to briefly encounter the learning climate of each academy. This was followed up by a pre-research meeting with each Headteacher to outline the details of the research, go through the research process and illustrate the research documentation to gain agreement from each Headteacher. For example, each Headteacher was shown the research flyer (see Figure 5); the participant information form; the consent form; the withdrawal form and the table presenting the eight assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry (see Figure 4).

The expectations for the length of semi-structured interviews and group fora were established and that feedback to the Headteacher and Senior leaders of the initial findings would then be communicated by email (see Appendix 4). The observations and the experience of the pre-meeting at each academy were captured through my reflective journal; however, no official record of the field visit was held as this had not been identified through the research process as gaining consent.

### **3.7 Data collection**

#### **3.7.1 Semi-structured individual interviews**

I considered the choice of semi-structured individual interviews to be the most appropriate. Semi-structured individual interviews took place in each participant's location of choice, which was a place familiar to them, such as an office or a meeting room, and were approximately one hour in duration. The list of the 19 participants interviewed is presented in Section 3.6.2, Table 3. The schedule of the interviews was compiled in communication with the academy, to ensure that suitable times were mutually agreed that did not encroach on any participant's teaching or leadership responsibilities. By way of an introduction to the research, acknowledging

the Appreciative Inquiry and ethical framework interview protocol for research, prior to the interviews participants were given the following documents illustrated below (see Figure 8).

- 1) A participant information sheet
- 2) A consent form
- 3) A withdrawal of participation form
- 4) A copy of the table of the Appreciative Inquiry eight assumptions

1) **Participation information sheet**



## **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

**Section A** -Thank you for considering participating in research that I am conducting with members of the leadership team at your academy. I hope that this participant information sheet will provide you with useful information about my research study. There is a flyer in addition to briefly provide details of an Appreciative Inquiry for your interest and information.

**Title of the research project:** 'Voices of Secondary School Leaders: Perceptions of the relationship between distributed leadership and student achievement'.

**The main research question:** What do participants think is the influence of Distributed Leadership on student achievement?

### **Here is a brief summary of research.**

The research is a study of aspects of school leadership and is intended to be considered as practitioner research because I am also a school leader. It will seek to explore and reflect upon the perceptions of what participants think is the influence of distributed leadership on student achievement.

The rationale for the research is to increase understanding of the influence that distributed leadership may have on student achievement, for the benefit of children and educational professionals. The intention is to make an original contribution to knowledge through an Appreciative Inquiry (AI), the value and usefulness being that it could be of benefit to other professionals, particularly school leaders. The aim of this work is to understand better what your perceptions are of distributed leadership influencing student achievement through conducting a small-scale research study, with individual interviews of the leadership team and a group forum afterwards. In identifying themes the intention is to provide insights that could enable future success for your team and others. It is envisaged that the audience would include colleagues in the field of education, for example: senior leaders, Headteachers, CEOs of academy trusts and wider professionals in education.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study is to be of benefit to school and academy leaders by providing useful insights in to successful school and academy leadership. It will also form part of my Doctorate in Education (Ed.D) at Anglia Ruskin University.

**The name of my Supervisor** is Dr. Simon Pratt-Adams. His email address is [Simon.pratt-adams@anglia.ac.uk](mailto:Simon.pratt-adams@anglia.ac.uk)

**You have been asked to participate because:**

I would like to research the perceptions of distributed leadership of an Outstanding English Secondary School/academy and you are part of the membership of the academy leadership team. The total number of people participating will be those members of your academy's leadership team who volunteer.

**What are the likely benefits of taking part?**

The likely benefit to you as a participant may be that because this study will explore perceptions of distributed leadership on student achievement, it may benefit you to understand either your individual contribution or a part of the group's contribution. It may be unlikely that there will be any direct benefits to you as a participant and whilst I should make this clear, the study may yield some useful information that may help you to reflect on your professional practice as part of the academy leadership team.

**Can I refuse to take part?** You may refuse to take part without giving a reason. Under no circumstances should you feel coerced into taking part.

**Has the study got ethical approval?**

The study has ethical approval from an ethics committee at Anglia Ruskin University.

**Has the organisation where you are carrying out the research given permission?**

I have obtained written permission from your CEO, Headteacher to carry out the research. This is general permission from your organisation. It is the decision of each person whether they would like to take part in the research into distributed leadership and any influence on student achievement.

**What will happen to the results of the study?**

The research will be written up for my doctoral thesis. If I am able to have some of it published in a journal I would aim to do so. I will also aim to present aspects of it at conferences.

**Contact for further information**

Anglia email address: [Gillian.thomas@student.anglia.ac.uk](mailto:Gillian.thomas@student.anglia.ac.uk)

**Section B: Your Participation in the Research Project**

**What will I be asked to do?**

As part of my Doctoral studies I will be conducting a small-scale study at your academy with members of your leadership team. Participation is voluntary. The research will take place at your academy during the summer term. Every effort will be made to take account of your work pattern to minimise any disruption to you or your pupils and to ensure your well being during this time. Each participant will have an individual interview of about 40 to 60 minutes. The interviews will be semi-structured so that you will be able to answer questions in whichever way you feel best. The focus of the questions will be positive based on where you perceive you have been successful as a school leader.

After an initial analysis of data collected the broad themes that have come from the interviews will be presented as initial finding to you for you to have the opportunity to feed back in a group based on the emerging picture from the data analysis. The study is a positive study as it is based on what leadership practice you consider has been successful in influencing student achievement as you define student achievement. Whilst this is the main

interest, wider benefits may also emerge. The study will be unique to your leadership team and your academy because it is about you and your views of success and your reflections. Through this study I hope to learn more about successful distributed leadership and what you feel is important and made the difference. This may help to benefit others in the future. I am interested in the individual and the collective, collaborative, team based aspects of leadership. The methodology I am going to use is called Appreciative Inquiry. I have chosen this as it has a clear model which can form the base of the structure and because it focuses on the positives. The opportunity for you and I to explore positives that emerge together is both interesting and exciting.

### **Will my participation in the study be kept confidential?**

The participants and the academy will be anonymous and every effort will be made to ensure anonymity. As with your usual procedures in school providing anonymity means that an individual cannot be identified from the information whereas confidentiality is keeping anything you have said as private. Confidentiality will be kept unless something of an illegal nature is raised.

I will be the only person as the investigator who will have full access to participant data. My Supervisor may be shown the anonymised transcripts. Sensitive personal data will not be included in dissemination.

The results will be written up in anonymised format. I will ensure that that every attempt will be made to ensure anonymity. It is possible that participants may be identified by their colleagues or peers if not by the general public. If quotes from participants are used in dissemination, this increases the likelihood that participants could be identified by peers. I may use quotes from individuals or groups interviewed. I plan to carry out interviews and to use recording equipment to record them, so that I can then transcribe them for analysis afterwards. The transcripts will be kept secure in a password protected folder on a secure server. Just to note that you won't be required to travel anywhere and you won't be offered incentives to take part in the research.

### **Are there any possible disadvantages or risks to taking part?**

There are no perceived disadvantages or risks to taking part and I will make every effort to make sure that the time is interesting and engaging for you. To ensure your well-being as a participant I will ensure rest breaks as required and will take into account the pattern of your working day and any special circumstances for each individual made known to me on the consent form. If you feel stressed or tired at any point then breaks can be built into the schedule. Please note that you don't have to answer any interview questions that you feel you don't want to.

I do not consider that there is a risk to confidentiality (e.g. the chance of participants being identified from dissemination) because the participants and the academy will remain anonymous.

Please also note that agreement to participate in the study does not affect your legal rights.

### **Whether I can withdraw at any time, and how.**

As a participant, you may withdraw from the study at any time and without giving a reason. As you may not feel comfortable telling me directly that you would no longer like to take part in my research you may email me to let me know if this is the case. Any data that I may have collected from you up to that point would still be useful to me and I would seek your permission to use this data. As a participant, should you withdraw, the last date it will be possible to withdraw your data, would be the end of July 2018.

### **Whether there are any special precautions to take before, during or after taking part in the study.**

There are no special precautions you must take as part of this study but as you would expect, I would have to disclose to someone else anything revealed of an illegal nature. For further information, please refer to Section 3.14 of the Code of Practice for Applying for Ethical Approval at Anglia Ruskin University.

**What will happen to any information/data that are collected from you?**

I will ensure that data is securely held. It will be held until the end of July 2018 when it will be destroyed. Personal identifiable information (e.g. consent forms) will be kept separately from the data. Each Participant will be assigned a code number and identifying information will be separated from the data at the earliest opportunity so that you remain anonymous.

You will not be shown individual transcripts of the interviews but you will be presented with a summary of research findings which you will be given a copy of and they will be written up in the thesis.

**Contact details for complaints.**

If as a participant you have any complaints about the study, I would encourage you to speak to me or my Supervisor in the first instance. If you did need it, you should also, however, be given access to details about Anglia Ruskin University's complaints procedure. The email address is: [complaints@anglia.ac.uk](mailto:complaints@anglia.ac.uk) and the Postal address: Office of the Secretary and Clerk, Anglia Ruskin University, Bishop Hall Lane, Chelmsford, Essex, CM1 1SQ.

V1.6 04.06.18

## 2) Consent form



Department of Education  
Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education  
Anglia Ruskin University  
William Harvey Building  
Bishop Hall Lane  
Chelmsford  
CM1 1SQ

### **Consent Form**

#### **NAME OF PARTICIPANT:**

**Title of the research project:** Voices of secondary school leaders: Perceptions of the relationship between distributed leadership and student achievement.

**The main research question:** What do participants think is the influence of distributed leadership on student achievement?

Main investigator and contact details: Gill Thomas c/o Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education Anglia University. William Harvey Building. Chelmsford CM1 1SQ. Email: [Gillian.thomas@student.anglia.ac.uk](mailto:Gillian.thomas@student.anglia.ac.uk)

Members of the research team: Gill Thomas

I agree to take part in the above research. I have read the Participant Information Sheet  
04<sup>th</sup> June 2018 for the study.

I understand what my role will be in this research, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I am free to ask any questions at any time before and during the study.

I understand that my participation in this project will involve me taking part in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 40/60 minutes. There will also be an opportunity to comment on initial findings through feedback from a group forum afterwards.

I understand that my working pattern will be considered to help to ensure my well-being during this process. The nature of the study is to find out what my perceptions are about successful leadership so that this can be repeated in the future.

My participation is voluntary and if needed I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, without giving a reason.

I understand that the participants and the academy will be used anonymously and that my data will be anonymised. The main investigator will be the only person able to track it back to me and that this will be confidential. After my data is transcribed I understand that it will not be able to be traced back to me.

Every effort will be made to keep anonymity.

I understand what will happen to the data collected from me for the research.

I have been provided with a copy of this form and the Participant Information Sheet.

I understand that quotes from me will be used in the dissemination of the research.

I understand that the interview will be recorded and that the recording will be deleted once transcribed by the end of July 2018 at the latest when the data has been analysed. At the end of the study I will receive some feedback on the findings of the data which may or may not be of personal benefit to me but may be useful.

Data Protection: I agree to the University<sup>1</sup> processing personal data which I have supplied. I agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the Research Project as outlined to me\* I do/do not (*delete as appropriate*) have special requirements for you to consider:\_\_\_\_\_

Name of participant (print).....Signed.....Date.....

\_\_\_\_\_  
<sup>1</sup> "The University" includes Anglia Ruskin University and its Associate Colleges.  
12.05.17 V1.6

### 3) Withdrawal of participation form



PARTICIPANTS MUST BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS FORM TO KEEP

ADD DATE AND VERSION NUMBER OF CONSENT FORM.

-----  
**I WISH TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY.**

If you wish to withdraw from the research, please speak to the researcher or email them at [Gillian.thomas@student.anglia.ac.uk](mailto:Gillian.thomas@student.anglia.ac.uk) stating the title of the research.

You do not have to give a reason for why you would like to withdraw.

Please let the researcher know whether you are/are not happy for them to use any data from you collected to date in the write up and dissemination of the research.

Date 04.06.18  
V1.3

#### 4) Hammond's (2013) eight assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry

Hammond's (2013) eight assumptions	
1	In every society, organisation or group something works
2	What we focus on becomes our reality
3	Reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities
4	The act of asking questions of an organisation or group influences the group in some way
5	People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known)
6	If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past
7	It is important to value differences
8	The language we use creates our reality

**Figure 8: Participant interview protocol documents**

I considered Nisbet and Entwistle's (1984, p. 256) comment that "research in isolation serves no purpose. Effective communication, both to other research workers and to teachers and other educationists, is the essence of good educational research". Taking into account their view, I composed a participant information flyer as a point of good communication. The flyer presented an outline of the research proposal in an attractive, informal and informative display so that all participants could easily access the outline and scope of the research. The participant information flyer briefly explained an Appreciative Inquiry, noting that it was based on a positive model and presented the research question (see Figure 9 below).

## A flyer for participants to briefly explain an Appreciative Inquiry.

*This is an addition to the Participant Information Sheet.*

**My research question is: What do participants think is the influence of Distributed Leadership on Student Achievement.**

The purpose of the Appreciative Inquiry model is to build on positives in order to increase success.

An Appreciative Inquiry analyses and seeks to gain understanding on positive effects in an organisation.

It asks participants to consider when they feel they were most successful & uses the 4D cycle as a structure.

### An Appreciative Inquiry

**Voluntary Participants from members of a leadership team of an Outstanding English secondary school**

Distributed leadership

- collaborative
- reflective
- encourages leadership development and networking in and beyond school.

### The 4D cycle of an Appreciative Inquiry



The 4D cycle designed by Cooperrider & Whitney(2005)

**I will conduct my research through individual interviews. I will record these and then transcribe them. I will feedback my findings to you and ask for your feedback.**

**Figure 9: Participant information flyer presenting a brief outline of the research**

The questions asked during the research aimed to explore the successful experience of each individual, and may also have related to the team as a whole. The following approach to designing the interview questions helped to ensure that rich data was elicited from the participants. The semi-structured interview questions related to the positive nature of the Appreciative Inquiry methodology (Cooperrider, 1990) and Hammond's (2013) eight assumptions. The eight assumptions (Hammond, 2013) are also an integral part of the Appreciative Inquiry methodology and were previously presented in this thesis (see figure 4). These assumptions intend to explore

participant perceptions in order to re-organise participants' long-held beliefs and behaviours. The interview questions are linked to the assumptions as part of the over-riding principle of the Appreciative Inquiry methodology to elicit historic, positive data from participant's experiences. For example, Hammond's (2013) first assumption states that in every society, organisation or group something works and the fifth assumption states that people have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past. To this end, the interview questions that I designed with these assumptions in mind were:

describe a time when you were most proud to be a member of the leadership team?

what specifically made you proud?

in thinking about moments of success or high points in the success of your organisation, what did you experience and how did your own performance make a difference?

what if any, was the affect of what you did on students?

Furthermore, interview question seven asked 'what factors or policies made the success possible?' and as such, this question relates to the second assumption, 'what we focus on becomes our reality'. This interview question also supports assumption four which states that 'the act of asking questions of an organisation or group influences the group in some way'. Finally, the interview question 'what do you value most about being a member of this team?' draws upon the seventh and eighth assumptions. These state that it is important to value differences and also that the

language we use creates our reality. The eight assumptions (Hammond, 2013) were also an important consideration in designing the subsidiary questions based around the perceptions of the participants, distributed leadership and student achievement.

In further considering the interview questions, Tierney-Moore and MacNeill suggest that questions need to be specific enough to the topic being explored and generic enough for the participants to be able to engage with them (Tierney-Moore and MacNeill, 2014). Examples of questions used in the semi-structured interviews included:

1. Describe a time when you were most proud to be a member of the leadership team
2. What specifically made you proud?
3. What do you value most in being a member of this team?
4. In thinking about moments of success or high points in the success of your organisation, what did you experience and how did your own performance make a difference?
5. What if any, was the effect of what you did, on students?
6. How did others contribute to the experience?
7. What factors or policies made the success possible?
8. In your view, what was the impact? On whom and why and how do you know?

### 3.8 Data analysis

There were four stages to analysing my data which included the transcribing of the data as I considered this an integral part of familiarising myself with the data. I transcribed the 19 semi-structured interviews verbatim, manually from audio recordings so that I could immerse myself in the rich data provided by the interviews (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012). The questions for the individual, semi-structured interviews were coded as facilitator questions (FQ). Supplementary questions and further prompts were used if needed, which were coded as facilitator supplementary questions (FSQ). The participant responses were coded as 'participant' and then a number; for example P1. The interviews generated 60,500 words over 112 pages, which were then assigned line numbers from 1 through to 8,000. To ensure a rigorous approach in looking at the whole data set of all the semi-structured interviews, the second stage was for me to immerse myself in the data by reading and re-reading it. The raw data was worked on through transcribing the data using simple lined coding. For example,

FQ1 (Facilitator Question 1) Describe a time when you felt.....

P1 (Participant 1) The time when I felt .....was.....

As the researcher, I coded myself as F for facilitator; each participant of the leadership teams was given a number to refer to, for example: P1 for participant one and so on.

During the third stage, the transcripts were then organised through coding the data by making notes, jottings, lists, Wordles and initially tagging texts that I considered might be relevant by using generic codes from the transcripts relating to the research question. I also used repetition, word frequency, code frequency and frequency per participant (Guest, et al., 2012). It was also important to ensure as far as possible that the use of transcript coding preserved the context from the data. Furthermore, I coded chunks of patterns of meaning from data items (individual participant views) as well as from across the data set. This showed where patterns of meaning were developing from the contributions of all of the participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The themes were organised into a table with examples of the coding (see Appendix 3). An important point to note in the method of data collection and analysis is that the approach needed to be a flexible approach to allow for maximum interpretation of the emerging themes from the textual data. This helped to ensure both the meaningfulness and usefulness of the findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis is presented below.

### **3.8.1 Thematic analysis**

Table 3 illustrates the profile of all participants from the distributed leadership teams of the three academies taking part in the research through semi-structured interviews and planned group fora. While the thematic analysis was not strictly a discourse, narrative or conversational analysis, it drew upon elements of these three methods of analysing qualitative data (Cohen, et. al, 2011). During the fourth phase, the themes were drawn from what has been described by Cooperrider and Srivatra as

“grounded examples” because they were generated from the participants’ perceptions of previous success (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider, et al., 2008, p. 44). Therefore, from the thematic analysis that took place using thematic coding of the transcripts of the individual interviews, the most prolific themes that emerged from the analysis were identified. I considered it important to give prominence to the participants’ views through the use of quotes as the primary form of evidence (Guest, et al., 2012).

During the data analysis phase, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) both semantic and latent (i.e. underlying) themes were considered in examining repeated patterns of meaning from the data. This process of thematic analysis was inductive as it did not seek to organise the codes into pre-existing themes or from themes from the researcher’s analytical stance. Each participant responded to open-ended questions, building an indicative process which then allowed me to identify broad themes. The inductive analysis allowed the data derived from the semi-structured interviews of participants to generate the patterns of meaning which in turn created the themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). While Braun and Clarke use this approach within the research field of psychology, the flexibility of this process, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), suited my qualitative research and the methodological approach of an Appreciative Inquiry in this educational study.

The themes identified were either, a word, a sentence or repeated phrase or pattern. Divergent or conflicting data was also considered (Cohen, et al., 2011) and presented where this contributed to thematic development and also to help to ensure

credibility. Therefore, the themes were presented to the group by email on feedback sheets, replacing the planned group fora and then confirmed by the participants responding to feedback sheets (Silverman, 2013). Through the feedback sheets, the participants were invited as an element of co-construction and also member checking, to suggest which themes they believed reflected their perceptions. This adapted feedback was part of the Appreciative Inquiry adapted methodology which helped to ensure validation of the themes by the case academies Portside, Riverview and Hillstream (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The themes were reviewed along with the analysis of any other discussion points or affirmative comments from the emailed feedback sheets. This review ensured that the main themes and subthemes represented the most seemingly significant views in relation to the research question and subsidiary questions (Guest et al., 2012). A consensus was formed from the further collection of the feedback sheets, collating the feedback sheets to verify the main themes.

Together with an accurate picture built up through semi-structured interviews and group fora conducted as emailed feedback sheets to all 19 participants, this method triangulates individual questions concerning self and team, the consensus of the group through the analysis of emailed feedback sheets and individual responses. By using these three types of communication, the analysis can be seen as robust and therefore more reliable. A table of the five most common themes and their categories was compiled to present back to the participants by feedback sheets, through a group by email. The intention was that after a brief explanation of the themes, the leadership team as individual participants would arrange them in order of their perceived priority of importance (see Appendix 4).

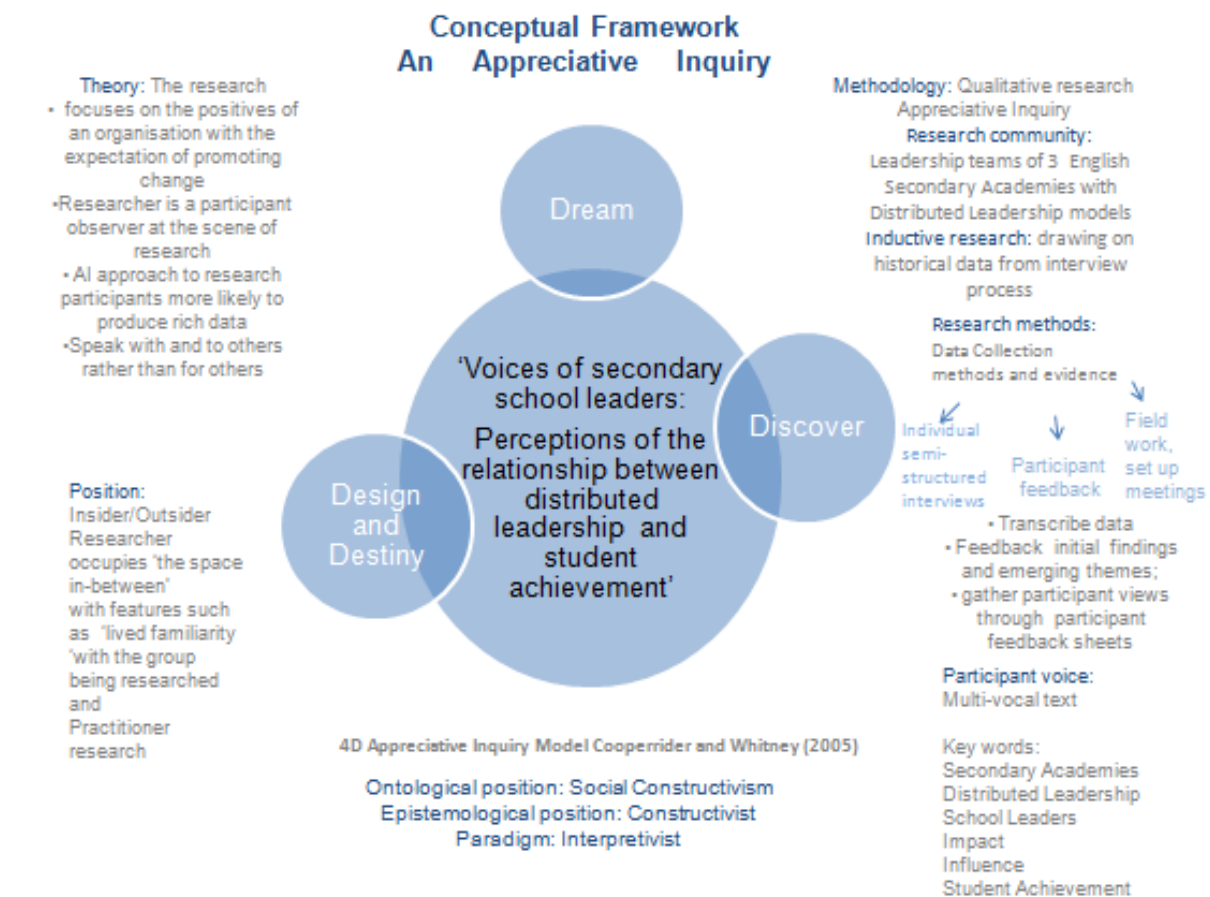
There were four main themes relating to distributed leadership and the influence on student achievement that emerged from the study as being common to all three secondary academies. These four themes were the interrelated elements of distributed leadership of trust, collaboration, shared accountability and moral purpose. These themes are presented as findings in Chapter 4, and discussed in Chapter 5. The different parts of the data and the relationship between them led to the emergence of a working definition of distributed leadership from this study. The four interrelated themes of trust, collaboration, shared accountability and moral purpose shaped this emerging working definition of distributed leadership. These four themes along with student achievement are presented as a unique set of possibility statements in Chapter 7, section 7.3.1 to 7.3.1.5., and an original contribution to knowledge.

### **3.8.2 Group fora**

I planned group interviews as group fora for the participants taking part in the research at each academy and scheduled these for approximately 40 minutes to one hour in duration at each of the three academies. Therefore the 11 participants from Portside Academy were scheduled for group fora in two groups of six and five; the four participants from Riverview were scheduled as one group at Riverview and the four participants who took part in the research at Hillstream were scheduled as one group. Each of these group fora had nominally been scheduled to take place at the close of the academy day, typically at 3.45 pm. The purpose of the group fora was not to integrate data but rather to allow a discussion session so that each group of participants could contribute by considering their individual interviews and the initial

findings that I would present. Through a co-construction element, the group fora were intended to validate the initial findings and to allow member checking. This was considered an important point in contributing to the triangulation of the respondent data by providing another multiple source to consider the initial findings, validating the findings through group fora. The intention was to record and transcribe the data using the same process as the individual interviews. However, as previously stated, it was not possible to conduct the group fora. Therefore, what I actually did was to adapt the research design and adapt the 4D original model to a 3D model, to include participant feedback sheets, emailed several times to participants to invite an element of co-construction and for members to check the initial findings.

The adapted Appreciative Inquiry methodology as a hybrid 3D Appreciative methodology, which resolved the issue of access to participants for the group fora, is illustrated below (see Figure 10) in the revised conceptual framework.



**Figure 10: Revised Conceptual Framework to illustrate the 3D Appreciative Inquiry adaptation of the methodology, adapted during data collection.**

### 3.9 Ethical considerations

The research followed the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines (BERA, 2018). In gaining ethical approval and constructing the research design, thought was given to the management of ethical risk concerning the impact of the inquiry process (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). Important aspects of conducting the research relating to the confidentiality and anonymity of

participants were considered. I also took account of compliance with the general data protection regulations (GDPR), (Gov. UK; 2018). Other ethical considerations such as access to participants were addressed and in particular, ensuring a flexible way of working that accommodated the needs of participants and a consideration of the amount of the participant's professional time used.

In managing and mitigating risk, examples of the ethical considerations of this research project included: ensuring that the researcher worked around the leader's work commitments when planning the individual interviews and group fora around leaders' schedules; ensuring that the participants' work was not disrupted and pupils were not disadvantaged in any way, and providing information of the participants' right to withdraw if the research study became too onerous in their view (see Appendix 2). Furthermore, consideration was given as to what action to take if participants became distressed in any way and also of the potential impact that the interviews could have on individuals; these aspects were addressed through careful scheduling, allowing recovery time for each participant after the semi-structured interview. While as a researcher I took great care not to create any stress for participants, water was available throughout the interviews to mitigate through adequate hydration any feeling of stress that participants might encounter and to maximise levels of concentration (BDA, 2019).

Consideration was given to relevant ethical guidelines with specific attention to two main documents. While not exclusively, these provided what I considered as the researcher, to be a sound basis on which to set out plans that fully consider researching within an ethical code of practice. These were namely: *Research Ethics*

*and Governance for Human Research – Code of Practice for Applying for Ethical Approval at Anglia Ruskin University* (Scott, 2014) and the ‘Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research’ (BERA, 2011; 2018). These guidelines are intended to be used to help to ensure the ethical practice of the research and to mitigate and safeguard against any such practice that would ever lead to negligence or harm of any kind.

Table 8 below identifies the ethical issues relating to the research and how they would be addressed:

**Table 8: Ethical issues relating to the research and mitigation**

<b>Ethical issues - amber range from the ethics checklist.</b>	<b>Mitigation</b>
<b>1) Involve human participants</b>  <b>Yes</b>	Participants may withdraw at any time; PIS sheet given to participants; take account of their work patterns and well-being. Ensure flexibility especially in data collection period.
<b>2) Involve participants whose responses could be influenced by relationships with them or by any perceived, or real, conflicts or interests?</b>  <b>Yes</b>	The CEO is under no obligation. He is a colleague whom I have known over the years; I do not know the leadership team nor have I worked directly with them. I have some current work in primary settings of two of the trust schools but not the secondary school.

	Due to any risk of being influenced, Appreciative Inquiry is a methodology chosen as it focuses on listening to the participants to gain their views and construct their views.
<b>3)</b> Involve the co-operation of a 'gatekeeper' to gain access to participants?  <b>Yes</b>	Have obtained the permission of the gatekeeper, both letters from the Head of School and CEO state that I am permitted to use data, have ownership of data and can publish findings.

### 3.10 Trustworthiness

In ensuring that the research is trustworthy, I refer to the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) describing trustworthiness through four elements within research, which are: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The research will address trustworthiness, which is expected in qualitative research, especially within the constructivist, interpretivist framework.

To ensure that the research is credible, I provide a detailed account of how the research was conducted. It is also important to ensure that the meaning given is that which the participants intended. To ensure transferability, there is a description of the context of the research, the participants and the culture in which the research was conducted. The depth of detail would assist professionals, especially but not

exclusively within education. It is expected that professionals would then be able to consider whether they would be able to transfer the findings to their organisation. This would increase the research findings' transferability so that others could decide if they could generalise it within their own field. In aiming to ensure that the work is dependable, it is important to note that this compares to reliability in quantitative research.

Guba and Lincoln's (2005) declaration of the worth of qualitative data sets the consideration of trustworthiness into context; namely that qualitative data can be viewed as gaining rich insight into the behaviour of humans. Furthermore, Guba's constructs (Shenton, 2003) provide a framework to consider trustworthiness and authenticity in assessing qualitative research. I will employ this method in the Appreciative Inquiry research:

- a) credibility (in preference to internal validity);
- b) transferability (in preference to external validity/generalizability);
- c) dependability (in preference to reliability);
- d) confirmability (in preference to objectivity).

Therefore, within the context of Appreciative Inquiry, while an external audit was not planned as part of this research methodology to check that the thematic analysis had been applied appropriately, it was anticipated that the participants would agree on which theme to take forward and develop. My intention was that the consensus that

came from this part of the inquiry would help to confirm its reliability. The confirmability was expected to come from the validity of the participants as respondents. The triangulation of the method also increased confirmability. It was expected that the findings would be useful and transferable to practitioners interested in school leadership and improvement. Additionally, Hatch (2002) suggests an important view of worthiness; he considers that a small-scale study may offer a useful and original contribution that may be explained to others. In strengthening the case of the worthiness of the research, his argument adds weight to the researcher collecting qualitative data through the accounts of experiences of participants taking part in the research. He suggests that the process of building the case which includes the researcher's interpretations is justified by ensuring the collection of enough actual data and detail.

Finally, throughout the six years of my doctoral studies, I have kept a reflective and reflexive journal which details my critical thoughts on my personal development, but also tracks the research journey. In particular, the journal illustrates reflections and reflexivity of the research process from start to finish, including my reflections and reflexive perceptions of the data collection at each of the three academies. This informal journal allowed me to question my own assumptions and bias throughout the process. The journal does not form a part of the Appreciative Inquiry, or the methodology. However, it strengthens the case of checking for my own bias, whether conscious or inherent, through documenting my reflections (Robson, 2002) and contributes more widely to the triangulation and authenticity of the research.

### **3.11 Conclusion**

This chapter presented the methodological approach taken for my research and justified the choices that I made in selecting Appreciative Inquiry, with consideration given to other methodologies. The chapter highlighted my interpretivist position within the research paradigm, and explained and justified the ontological position of social constructivism guiding the research. The chapter provided a rationale and aims of my research and set out the research design, including a conceptual framework (Figure 2) and then re-stated the research question and subsidiary questions. The chapter then offered an illustration of Hammond's (2013) eight assumptions (Table 2). The assumptions were followed by an outline of the Appreciative Inquiry process which created opportunity for participants to consider their perceived success (Whitney et al., 2010). Following on, the purpose of the four key phases of the Appreciative Inquiry 4D model was illustrated. The context of the Appreciative Inquiry demonstrated that the approach is supported by the broadest sense of multiple case study, drawing on elements of Stake's (1995) instrumental case study to gain understanding and insight of the three secondary academy cases. These cases were selected purposively (Silverman, 2013) to cover the range of Ofsted categories of 'outstanding', 'good' and 'requires improvement'. The academies were also selected because each academy determined that it practiced distributed leadership within a distributed leadership model. The chapter then presented an overarching profile of each of the three academies and their participants. Following an overview of the participant data, the data collection methods, and the adaptation of the methodology (Figure 4), an overview of the data analysis and thematic analysis was offered. The chapter then concluded giving consideration of ethical issues to ensure that participants were protected, and the

research was conducted in an ethical manner. The trustworthiness was considered to demonstrate the robust and rigorous application to the research. The next chapter will present the findings from the research, before the discussion which follows in Chapter 5.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Findings**

#### **4.1 Introduction to the findings**

This chapter presents the findings emerging from the semi-structured interviews of the 19 participants in the study. As stated in previous chapters, the Appreciative Inquiry is based on members of different leadership teams from three English secondary academies from the southeast of England, chosen through purposive sampling (Silverman, 2013). Each academy is also a school. For anonymity, I have replaced the name of each academy with a pseudonym. The academy pseudonyms used are Portside, Riverview and Hillstream Academy. Participants are also referred to using pseudonyms.

The three secondary academies range from 'outstanding' to 'good' and 'requires improvement' as defined by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2015). This range was developed to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the study by making sure that the study is sufficiently robust in exploring breadth in distributed leadership practice. This helps to ensure the qualitative criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings (Guba, 1990). In essence, the credibility of the study refers to the confidence that can be placed in the research findings being plausible (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004), for example: drawing on the original participant data, immersing oneself in the participant's world to gain the fullest insight (Bitsch, 2005), interview technique and member checking. Dependability as defined by Bitsch (2005, p. 86) relates to the 'stability over time' of the data given by participants in the study. This is achieved in this study through an

evaluation of the findings by participants, demonstrated through participant feedback sheets that replaced the planned group fora, with participants commenting on the initial findings of the study; these feedback sheets were given to all 19 participants. The confirmability of the study is illustrated by the findings being derived from the data within the study (Begley and Tobin, 2004, p. 392) supported by a reflexive journal and triangulation (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Finally, the transferability of the study refers to the degree to which the results can be transferred to different people and contexts (Bitsch, 2005; Begley and Tobin, 2004). In this study, transferability is facilitated by the 'thick description and purposeful sampling' (Bitsch, 2005, p. 85) of the participant data and participants, respectively, supporting the notion of 'the reader drawing inferences from the study after applying the findings to their own situations' (Briggs et al., 2014, p. 202).

As previously set out in the methodology chapter (Chapter 3), the academies range in size (Garrett, et al., 2004) from 860 students (Hillstream, an 11-16 academy rated 'good' by Ofsted) to 1,020 students (Portside, an 11-16 academy rated as 'requires improvement' by Ofsted) and finally, 2,097 students (Riverview, an 11-18 academy rated as 'outstanding' by Ofsted). To recap, the purpose of the research is to explore the perceptions of secondary academy leaders through the main research question, 'What do participants think is the influence of distributed leadership on student achievement?' The literature review revealed there is a gap in evidence of how distributed leadership is perceived by English school or academy leaders relating to student achievement.

The subsidiary research questions presented Chapter 3 support the main research question and form the basis of eight interview questions (listed in Chapter 3). These interview questions are designed to elicit the views of the secondary school leaders in the study to form rich data. This rich data provides the basis of the findings from the participant interviews which disclose the complexities of the study and the detail of the research as thick description (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). As such, the findings illuminate the perceptions of the participants about distributed secondary academy leadership bringing a new understanding of their own lived experience (Kirsch, 1999) from the position of their constructed reality (Gray, 2009). The inclusion in the interviews of Headteachers, Deputy Headteachers, Assistant Headteachers and Directors of Faculties (Middle leaders) ensures that a full range of senior leaders' professional experiences is explored within the limitations of this small-scale study.

## **4.2 Findings from Portside Academy**

To recap on the thematic coding process (Chapter 3), 19 semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analysed inductively through manual coding to identify the main themes (Boyatzis, 1998; Guest et al., 2012; Creswell, 2014). The main themes were then presented to the participants so that they could contribute to the research through an element of co-construction in agreeing on the main themes, and following Shenton, identify any discrepancies and offer explanations (Shenton, 2003) and to increase authenticity through member checking (Etherington, 2004).

The findings present five main themes from distributed leadership that leaders from Portside Academy perceived as important in influencing student achievement. These

five themes are the leadership elements of trust, honesty, collaboration, shared accountability and moral purpose. Participants recognised these elements as important in influencing student achievement in the areas of progress; minimum expected grades (MEGs) and academic attainment; personal development; wider curriculum opportunities; independent learning and attendance.

#### **4.2.1 Distributed leadership theme - trust**

Trust within the leadership team was viewed as imperative by ten participants. Graham commented on the leadership team that “you need to trust the people implicitly you are working with otherwise trust is undermined”. He linked trust with assigning responsibilities to staff by suggesting that this was a demonstration of trusting the person. Graham claimed that from his experience, “trusting a person with professional responsibilities meant that people felt the trust you have in them and they work hard for you”. He illustrated different kinds of trust, for example, being trusted and trusting others, suggesting trust was reciprocal. In contrast to Graham, Susan linked trust to a safe environment where she felt that the level of trust meant that she could voice her opinions recognising that different views may cause disagreement. In this environment, she noted that trust was an important value of distributed leadership, commenting that “we do have that trust within each other, where if someone doesn’t agree with something they can say it knowing that it’s a safe environment”. In stating what he valued most about the leadership team, one participant, Jonathan, combined trust with honesty. Jonathan claimed that for a team to work well together both leadership elements were equally important in enabling the team to become successful: “I value trust and honesty the most”. He identified that through the trust and honesty of the leadership team, strategic planning

improved student attainment and progress, rather than reacting to situations in what he described as 'firefighting'. Furthermore, Susan believed that the trust that the leadership team built together in their collective leadership influenced student achievement. She acknowledged that through the distributed leadership having a trusting relationship with each other, the academy was able to 'come together as staff and students' and recognise student achievement through special assemblies and regular celebration events.

The influence of the Portside leadership team being trusted and empowered to 'do things' was recognised by Graham, suggesting that evidence of better student behaviour allowed for much greater and more frequent events focusing on student achievement. As such, wider curriculum events and personal development opportunities were more frequently held, including regular celebrations and assemblies to support student learning and achievement. Graham viewed the trust he experienced in the distributed leadership as empowering him to do things that influence success for students, rather than his previous experience of "not been able to do things". He articulated the contrast of his previous encounter as "being expected to do everything, but trusted to do nothing". Graham suggested that he had seen a change in student behaviour and achievement develop over time because of this new way of working as a leadership team, where he and others were trusted to 'do things', empowered by the Head of School. In comparing what was possible to achieve in students' enrichment opportunities and how the academy used to operate, Graham implied that two or three years ago these opportunities would not have been possible to host regularly because the leadership team was not working collectively and because the student response would have not necessarily been positive.

Through collective leadership and empowerment, Graham identified that he recognised better student engagement in learning with students being “completely engaged and engrossed in what they are doing”.

#### **4.2.2 Distributed leadership theme - honesty**

Anne, Head of School at Portside, suggested that relationships took time to build, and the degree of honesty with colleagues increased as the relationship with each colleague grew. She linked being honest to staff and the leadership team, with addressing any errors or misconceptions made. She suggested that it was important to be as honest as possible in addressing issues to solve problems, rather than “brushing things under the carpet and making the same mistakes over and over”. Anne identified the importance of staff togetherness towards making a difference to student achievement, through increased trusting, honest relationships. This was mirrored by Jonathan stating “I can have an honest conversation with the Head of School; I can have an honest conversation with anybody, and it's taken on board to solve things and make a difference; never put aside; that honesty is valued”.

An alternative view of trust and honesty developing a greater ability of the leadership team was explained by Linda, describing trust and honesty as a way of sharing vulnerability safely to develop leadership practice with each other. She commented that honest conversations were not “malicious”, or conducted out of “nastiness” but were necessary to help to bring clarity to an issue through conversation in helping leaders to see the bigger picture relating to solving issues together. Linda suggested that “it's more a case of being able to explain with clarity and no undertone the

reason why something is happening, in trying to resolve issues and move the school forward by working towards a common goal with the drive for it to succeed”; or “going back to the team and trusting their advice on how to approach a difficult situation”.

Honesty mostly generated a positive feeling in the participants who mentioned it, however, one of the primary reasons for honest conversations was problem solving. Dean suggested that honesty could be uncomfortable in disagreements within the leadership team. He remarked that “there are times in meetings, when there isn't always a consensus or agreement; people are not afraid to challenge each other and I value this aspect in the distributed leadership team in seeking to resolve issues and increase the success of the academy”. Communication of key details to problem solve was another aspect of the honesty and trust between the leadership team and staff that was identified as affecting student achievement. For example, Ralph suggested that to obtain an accurate picture from the staff of how students were progressing depended on staff begin honest about student performance, whether it was concerning a lesson, behaviour or support. He stated that this degree of trust and honesty was important in helping the team to address issues.

#### **4.2.3 Distributed leadership theme - collaboration**

Participants demonstrated collaboration through working on specific projects as part of their distributed leadership team ethos. Leaders working together are defined by Harris (2008, p. 72) as “collaborative distribution” where “multiple leaders work together at one time and place”. Eight leaders commented on the distributed

leadership team displaying elements of collaboration that were shared, cohesive, and demonstrated working together. For example, leadership perceptions of collaboration included working together for a specific purpose, such as to obtain a positive Ofsted judgement to take the academy forward. Linda identified collaboration as a common element in the leadership team, supporting each other to achieve a 'good' Ofsted judgement. She stated that "we worked hard together because it was just the fact that nothing but us succeeding together mattered". Jonathan's view of collaborative working as a leadership team was that "we come together and we work together cohesively, well. We share what we are doing because we have a bigger impact that way". Collaboration was echoed by Jamal, commenting, "I think we always pull together and make sure we are doing everything we can for the academy". In a further example, Sonia suggested that support staff, such as learning support staff, administration staff, reprographics and canteen staff had collaborated very effectively with teaching staff on the Year 6 transition project.

Participants at Portside Academy suggested that collaboration was a feature of a recent review of academy policies at Portside. Linda commented that the rationale for collaborating on a policy revision was that by working collaboratively teams would be more likely to promote the policy within their teams because they had been a part of creating the policy. Furthermore, Dean expressed the view that in reviewing the assessment policy, staff needed to feel a part of it and through collaborating with different subject areas, staff revised the policy together. Dean described the activity as "a fantastic collaboration", suggesting that "now that means that people feel part of it and they are more likely to promote it to their teams and their staff because they feel part of it".

Tracey's view was that the academy had created flexibility in team structures for her to collaborate effectively in different teams. Tracey explained that as the Head of the English Faculty she led on literacy across the academy. However, she was also assigned to work with the data team. She demonstrated flexibility in working together in different teams, noting that she worked on literacy with the teaching and learning team and data with the data team. There was a common view from participants that the leadership team was more collaborative in its practice now than in the past. The Head of School, Anne, noted that collaborating was now an academy practice, stating "we've established teams of people that are collaborating with each other much more effectively and what's been important is that it's a collaborative approach rather than a top-down approach". Anne recalled a recent leadership team planning evening. She outlined each of the academy's teams as the teaching and learning team, the data team, the curriculum team, and the pastoral team. She suggested that the teams had worked together "pulling everything together, getting the job done together; people learning from each other, empowering each other, being honest and sharing the work together in collaboration, moving between each team to get the work done".

One participant identified a shift of leadership style and practice to a more collaborative, distributive style. Tracey noted that during the past three years there had been a shift of leadership style and practice initiated by the new Head of School, which she saw as being in support of her vision and values. Tracey claimed that before the current Head of School was in post, three years earlier, there was a

feeling in the leadership team of “this is my job, and that's your job, and we will do them separately, and I will beat you in my job”. Tracey suggested that the change to distributed leadership practice resulted in the leadership team working collaboratively as “a cohesive group who can see the value of what other people are doing and can do more collectively”. It was noted that this collaborative way of working had not been the case in the past, as not all leaders had been included in decision making. Linda argued that previously “the Heads of Faculties may have been left out of decision making on one level”. She suggested that this was a fragmented approach to groups making decisions, stating that “sometimes there might not necessarily be the timescale to go through the two different groups of people”. Linda noted that this approach to decision making was problematic because a lack of communication with different groups of staff led to poor delivery by staff because “staff did not understand the expectations and problems arose that had not been thought about”.

#### **4.2.4 Distributed leadership theme - accountability**

Portside participants had different perceptions of accountability. However, the Portside participants held the collective view of whole team accountability, where moral purpose and collective identity meant that the team were both individually and collectively accountable for their work. This collective accountability linked to moral purpose aligns with both Fullan (2004) and Harris' (2008) view of accountability and a connection with moral purpose. Examples of shared accountability included: the level of teaching; academic attainment and progress; well-being; ethos; attendance, behaviour and whole school standards.

Tracey and Dean perceived that shared accountability at Portside was a regular leadership obligation. Tracey identified that accountability was dispersed more widely across the academy and commented that accountability was greater than just the leadership team “with the Middle leaders having a voice, which is managed the same way as the senior leadership team is managed”. Tracey identified that focusing on distributed leadership had resulted in an impact of greater accountability across the academy, creating higher expectations within the academy. Tracey claimed that accountability was shared by both senior leadership and middle leadership in the academy. She suggested that although she was the Head of the English Faculty, the accountability for English was shared between every member of the Faculty staff. She stated that “every person is a part of the English team and every person is accountable for it”.

Dean referred to the accountability of Middle leaders, commenting that the monitoring of teaching, learning and progress was part of the shared accountability of staff to ensure that middle leaders fulfilled this part of their responsibility: “the monitoring that’s going on at the moment shows Heads of Faculty are being much more accountable for teaching and learning within their areas with their staff”. There was an acknowledgement of shared accountability from three other participants at Portside. Jonathan, Susan and Laura highlighted the collective team accountability associated with teaching, learning and progress, suggesting this had a positive effect on student achievement. These participants cited the improvement in the most recent year’s Progress 8 score, an improvement from -0.35 in 2016 to +0.08 in 2017, which was now in line with the national average. Within the context of this study, where participants have commented on a Progress 8 score, a brief

explanation of the Progress 8 score is in order. Nationally, the average progress of a school or academy is referred to as '0'. A minus score much below zero would be classed according to the performance measure as below average and a score above '1' would be described as above the national average progress. A score above '1' would also indicate that students had achieved a grade higher than similar pupils nationally (DfE, 2020).

The leadership team focus on student progress was identified by participants as contributing to student achievement. Nine participants felt that the academy intentionally focused on progress, with three participants stating that this was a direct result of the Progress 8 performance measure:

“there’s a bigger emphasis on progress whereas before I think a lot of that was overlooked; while this emphasis is promoted by our Head of School, it is also shared by our leadership team and distributed to all leaders across our academy. This has meant that we have been able to have a bigger impact on student progress because everyone is focusing on it” (Laura).

Jamal claimed that in contrast to the evidence of students now making better progress previously there had been a negative impact on the progress of year 7 students. He claimed that a lack of the leadership team working together and being accountable for communicating essential information to staff resulted in staff adopting a negative attitude to responding quickly to the problems that students were

facing in year 7. He identified that this staff attitude was due to the poor communication of the leadership team and this limited student achievement. Therefore, Jamal believed that as a result of poor leadership communication, the progress of year 7 students in the past had been adversely affected because information relating to 'year 7 student ability on entry' had not been communicated effectively sufficiently early in the autumn term. He suggested that the focus on shared accountability of year 7 with both leadership and staff, in respect of student progress, had influenced student achievement positively, resulting in significant improvement.

Participants identified shared accountability of the distributed leadership team, in relation to student achievement and the minimum expected Grades (MEGs) of students. Three participants explained that the academy used the strategy of MEGs to set the expected target for every student to achieve a minimum grade in each subject, and there was accountability of every member of staff, distributed across the academy. Jonathan explained that the leadership team regularly incorporated celebrating the academic achievement of students and improvement in reaching MEGs at assemblies for year 9, 10 and 11. At celebration assemblies for each year group, academic progress was celebrated alongside extracurricular achievements such as sports and other competitions. He claimed that these assemblies had helped to raise the profile of academic success. Jamal linked the strategy of the leadership team ensuring a greater emphasis across the academy on MEGs, as well as student aspirational targets set by themselves, to students achieving minimum targets and making better progress.

Four participants linked the strategy of focusing on student attendance with positive student engagement in a range of wider curricular opportunities. They said that if students attended the academy regularly, they were able to engage in extracurricular activities and wider out of hours learning activities to support academic learning and personal development. Jonathan commented on increased attendance of students and improvement in achievement

“You see it when our students get good results; they feel proud and so do we. It has affected our attendance. Attendance has shot up; that has been a focus right across the academy and linking attendance to rewards has been effective. I will say that students want to be here; they don’t want to go home; they want to stay on at the academy and take part in extracurricular things; they want the library to be open, so that they can stay on and work and see teachers and learn”.

Improved student attendance was identified as a distributed leadership strategy influencing student success. Jonathan stated in relation to student achievement that “there have been a number of successes and attendance has been a big one”. He suggested that a focus on a new academy reward system linking behaviour, attitude to learning, attendance, and punctuality together was likely to have helped to improve attendance. He noted that “attendance has gone up every year and that’s

something that has been a leadership team focus. Three years ago we were at 93.7% for attendance; last year we finished at 95.2%, so it's gone up dramatically over the last year". Jonathan posited that the leadership team had ensured that all staff had shared in the actions and the accountability for their part in the academy's attendance focus, which increased the effectiveness of this initiative. He claimed that staff showed a shared commitment to the academy attendance policy, which had increased the academy attendance from 93% to 95%. He commented that improved student attendance was the result of leaders ensuring shared accountability of both support and teaching staff in supporting the attendance policy. He identified that the link between attendance and reward points contributed towards leadership and staff actions in promoting positive behaviour. For example, staff awarded students reward points for positive behaviour such as attending school and arriving at lessons on time and for doing the right things in lessons. He noted that the reward system had motivated some students to engage with a positive routine at the academy.

#### **4.2.5 Distributed leadership theme – moral purpose (ethos and shared values)**

The moral purpose of leaders was evident through their recognition of the importance of the Portside Academy ethos and shared values identified by participants as: making a difference; being inclusive especially in the context of a deprived area; overcoming negative barriers for students; engaging students positively; providing students with enrichment opportunities. Leaders demonstrated their belief in a moral imperative. There was evidence of leaders focusing on student personal development opportunities and a commitment to providing a positive extracurricular climate as an alternative to the leadership's perception of the

prevalence of gang culture and poor social behaviour in the local area. Dean claimed that it was important to be a part of something that was morally right. He suggested that being a part of the leadership team meant “to be part of something that you believe in that is morally right for the children and the local area, which is important to me and others. We have a strong sense of social justice”. He commented that “to have a moral purpose is an unquestionable aspect of what we do as leaders but also as part of the team, for the children”.

As the Head of School, Anne considered that moral purpose and shared values were a part of the academy's ethos to express its vision. She suggested that the leadership team's moral purpose was the foundation of the team's common purpose and therefore people chose to work at Portside to “make a difference because they care”. She suggested that it was the academy leaders and staff's moral purpose that “enabled” students in the broadest sense of achievement, as without the academy helping students to focus on achievement, a substantial number of students would not “make it” by themselves

“We’ve got quite a substantial number of our students who without the academy, would not push forward to achieve. We have a responsibility to always go back to that vision and to that ethos of why people go into teaching, and people go into teaching because they want to make a difference”.

Furthermore, Anne suggested that the shared value of making a difference to the lives of students was not restricted to students' progress or results. She claimed that "teachers do not go into teaching because of Progress 8 and results or hammering everyone to get A stars! Nobody goes into it for that! It's to make a difference and to work with young people". Anne suggested that at Portside a broad educational ethos that was wider than academic success was important, because this ethos made a difference to students' lives. She related the ethos to her perception of Government policy on educational reform, and commented: "It's ridiculous! You can't just judge an academy on a very narrow set of criteria". This notion of an ethos and shared values that sought to make a difference in the lives of students was echoed by two of the three Deputy Headteachers, Graham and Ralph, who purported that staff at Portside worked at the academy to make a difference to the lives of children.

Another shared value expressed by all 11 participants was the strategic development of engaging students at the academy in learning and extended curricular activities, with a collective aim of students avoiding becoming engaged in local negative social issues. The connection between shared values, moral purpose and social issues and leadership strategies was raised by five of the 11 leaders at Portside. The main two issues perceived by leaders included gang culture and poor social behaviour out of school hours. Ralph and Graham both commented on the case of one student in successfully engaging him through science, as an alternative to anti-social behaviour at the academy and the gang culture within the local community. Graham considered that engagement in science had "steered students away from poor social behaviour", while Ralph recounted

“A student that was approximately Grade 4s or 5s, who was on the edge of a permanent exclusion became successfully engaged in science, with a passion and drive for it. Five years later he qualified to become a dentist. I can’t believe he has trained to be a dentist. He got into gangs and we couldn’t keep him in a lesson and suddenly he is running his own practice and he has qualified as a dentist”.

These leaders perceived that creating greater engagement in learning enabled this particular student and others with similar profiles to succeed. Seven participants linked shared values with the importance of the strategy of positive engagement through providing a wider curriculum offer. Among these leaders, there was a common perception that the shared value of being inclusive was also an integral part of the leadership team’s work in supporting the vision of the academy.

The position of school leadership concerning social justice is one of needing to have equitable insight in seeking equity and fairness for both individuals and communities (Brooks and Brooks, 2015). This sense of equity was reflected in Susan's reflections of student development “knowing that students can do it and they don’t have to be stunted within the community, because we are in quite a disadvantaged area; knowing that we are shaping children’s lives is central to us”. Susan identified examples of shaping students’ lives with ex-students coming back reporting that they had been to university and secured a good job.

Parental engagement was another strategic focus of the leadership and a shared value at Portside because of the social context of the academy. Susan commented on a lack of parental engagement: “parents don't massively engage with us, and it's becoming more and more the case”. Susan believed that the academy needed to either bridge or step into the gap where parental engagement was lacking, and suggested that the academy was the provider of a wider range of opportunities than merely academic outcomes.

The significance of the personal development of students was highlighted by seven of the 11 participants, who claimed that student personal development was relevant because of the large cohort of disadvantaged students at the academy. These participants perceived that students needed to have access to a wide range of subjects, topics, and activities to enable them to grow and develop, including enabling students to become successful adults beyond school. Jonathan stated that “part of our role is to create a whole person, so students have an understanding of real life really; so down to SMSC (Social, Moral, Spiritual and Cultural education), PSHE (Personal, Social, Health Education), sex education, relationships, racism, bullying and understanding the threat students have in the area in relation to gangs”. Ralph expanded on the leadership strategic direction of providing a wider educational experience enabling students to develop as a successful part of society. He acknowledged that as a leadership team, it was important to recognise and support the need for a wider curriculum that developed the whole child, as well as gaining qualifications. He provided an example of the importance of student personal

development, “to help students develop who socially can find things very difficult being able to hold together friendships; hold together relationships and deal with difficult issues”.

Four participants had the view that “qualifications play a part in that but that they are not the be-all and end-all” (Ralph). They felt that working in an area of social disadvantage meant a greater focus on the whole child, with one participant commenting that “in an area such as this ... the impact of the events that some of these children have been through in their short lives far outweighs the things that we will see in our perceived long lives today.” The leadership team ensured that as part of the distributed leadership team strategy, the academy included a broad range of activities, such as a variety of extracurricular subject activities; sporting activities within the academy and externally; competitions in cookery, science and maths; special events such as ‘wow days’ designed to promote and celebrate academic, cultural and social achievements and the regular use of the academy library out of school hours. Jonathan cited the variety of wider extracurricular opportunities where student achievement had recently been celebrated: “black belt jiu-jitsu; European champion boxer; rugby team winning a competition; taking part in a sports team; winning a science competition organised by the Transformation Trust; gaining an engineering certificate for building an aeroplane and academic achievements”. He stressed that it was important for students to achieve in something that they were good at, suggesting “whether that sports, science, maths, or academic achievement - studying for GCSEs, showing that they can progress to high expectations, positively, putting maximum effort in as well”.

Four leaders cited a positive influence on student achievement resulting from a leadership strategic focus on increasing independent learning and student engagement from out of school hours learning. They connected an improvement in student engagement to the distributed leadership team working collaboratively through shared actions. Anne commented on the focus on increasing students' ability as independent learners. Anne stated that "we now open up our library until eight at night, and we've got students that are here working independently and asking teachers for work". She perceived that for a significant number of students, the academy provided access to additional learning facilities that students may not have access to outside of the academy. The distributed leadership team all shared in this strategic initiative by taking it in turns to keep the library open every night to support student learning and to have access to the facilities to do so. Graham claimed that there had been a change in student attitudes to learning following this strategic initiative, with more students staying in school, after the school day. He stated that "a lot of children actually choose to stay and that then creates that independent feeling towards their studies".

### **4.3 Findings from Riverview Academy**

The findings from Riverview Academy present five main themes that leaders perceived as important influences of distributed leadership on student achievement. These five themes, presented below, are the leadership elements of trust, empowerment, collaboration, accountability, and moral purpose including a culture of success. These themes were recognised as important in developing and influencing

student achievement in academic attainment; progress; student voice; improvement and engagement and support.

#### **4.3.1 Distributed leadership theme - trust**

Participants at Riverview Academy describe trust as 'being trusted to lead'. They valued being trusted by the Executive Headteacher to lead development within the academy. The following examples from two participants demonstrate their understanding of trust, as either sharing best practice or learning from best practices within the team. Christine stated that the Executive Headteacher had trusted her to lead a whole school strategic initiative as the Director of English on the leadership team. She had transferred a successful systematic practice that influenced student progress in English to other subject areas across the academy. Christine commented that "it was a really nice feeling to get the Head's response that she can see that all of those conversations where I was saying trust me, let me try something different that we have not done before, has worked". She stated that the evidence of the impact of the 'focus on five' strategy that she had led was an increase in higher grades and improved results in the English Faculty. Christine claimed that by tracking students from September to July, "students who have been targeted from September are already making better progress in English and the reason that I know that is that those students are changing from the data list and they are no longer in that bottom five anymore". Feedback from leadership meetings confirmed that the strategy was working in other subjects too, demonstrated by an increase in student progress.

Richard offered a further example of the trusting environment identified among the leadership team, proposing that trust among the team allowed vulnerability to be exposed. He commented that “very experienced people on the leadership team trust each other; I trust and learn from them too, sharing best practice as role models to me. I can take things from their practice and make that my own; we share our practice together because we trust each other”. The importance of a trusting team was also expressed by Andrew in relation to creating a trusting environment among the local academy partnership of maths leaders. He believed that he needed to “be able to create an environment where teachers and leaders feel they can be open enough to admit what the issues are within their academies” so that all partnership maths project leaders could discuss issues on improvement within the local area. A trusting team atmosphere in this context was important in helping to ensure the success of the project.

#### **4.3.2 Distributed leadership theme - empowerment**

Empowerment in leadership was important to the development of leaders within the distributed leadership team at Riverview Academy. Three participants said that they had benefitted from the Executive Headteacher/CEO empowering them to lead on an academy development. Andrew noted that “at that point in time I felt like I was joining a team where every single one of the leadership team seemed to feel empowered in terms of the roles that they were fulfilling”. These three participants claimed that the Executive Headteacher had “empowered them to lead” on a new development, implying that the Executive Headteacher had afforded them a new leadership development opportunity.

Andrew claimed that he had been empowered to lead a partnership project, commenting that “the main thing is being given the freedom to be able to shape up and lead the project, but at the same time I am accountable to the CEO; she has empowered me to lead on it”. Andrew stated that it was important to him that the Executive Headteacher had empowered him to lead the partnership because it enabled him to develop his leadership skills. He explained, “I feel like I am empowered to be able to come up with innovative things that that may seem a little bit outside of the box”. Andrew identified that through his empowerment to lead the partnership of 18 academies and schools, student achievement had been positively affected. He commented that

“Through being empowered to lead this project with a team of staff, I can see that students are already making progress; I can see the impact of the work that I am doing. When I interview students, they tell me that now they feel like they are learning much more from their maths lessons and that they feel more comfortable being able to ask questions. They say they have gained confidence and they feel like they are getting much more from the feedback from their teachers”.

Andrew linked the distributed leadership of the 18 academies and schools to empowerment and ownership. He suggested that empowering leaders was important to him in creating a distributed leadership team to lead the maths partnership programme

“Creating an environment where each academy or school was empowered to lead the maths project and took ownership of it was key. Part of empowering people was for them to identify what the key issues for them were in maths in their academy or school. It was also important to me that these leaders from each academy or school were empowered to come up with the action plan; they came up with the issues themselves and constructed the action plan that resulted themselves. I could have said this is the best thing to do and come up with the action plan but because I believe that distributed leadership empowers leaders, and because I have been empowered through distributed leadership to lead this maths project, I wanted these maths leaders to set it up by themselves. I think it helped them have the motivation to deliver on the project because in a sense they felt they were empowered to find the issues, construct the action plan and take ownership of it” (Andrew).

Christine valued being empowered by stating that she valued “being given an opportunity to be empowered to lead full staff meetings and staff briefings to recall to staff what the focus is we are looking at”. She believed that the empowerment of the leadership team helped to ensure that the focus of the leadership team was dispersed across the academy. Christine was asked by the Executive Headteacher to lead a new whole school strategic initiative from her successful Faculty practice. The whole school strategy led to a positive influence on the progress of year 7

students. Christine stated that “students in year 7 are actively doing a bit more to get out of that bottom group and I can see that its working because of the data that’s being presented to us at leadership team”.

Christine reflected on the opportunities that she had been given at the academy and connected being empowered to experiencing professional development and growth through different roles. She commented that

“This academy has really empowered me to not only be a good practitioner but it has also offered me the support I have needed throughout my career. I have been empowered to develop over the last ten years now and I have been given a lot of opportunities. I have become an advanced skills teacher, a Head of Department, a Head of Faculty, and through being empowered and developing this has led to a promotion to the leadership team. This promotion has led to more opportunities specifically working with teams on progress, data and teaching and learning team. I really do believe that this academy look at staff and try and them to develop through being empowered and this leads to career development and progression” (Christine).

#### **4.3.3 Distributed leadership theme - collaboration**

Three out of four participants at Riverview commented on the dedication of the leadership team. Through collaboration and hard work, collaboration contributed to student achievement and the success of the academy. Christine stated “I think that as a leadership team, we work collaboratively very effectively together. There are good communications; we are a very hard-working leadership team and we go above and beyond; that is one of the reasons that it is an outstanding academy”. Richard acknowledged that “it is a very dedicated team; everyone works together and gives one hundred percent!” He commented that the ‘sense’ of working as a team through collaboration was evident daily and was something that he was very proud of: “I am very proud of the team. I think we work as a team, that sense of collaboration, really well, day in, day out; I feel really proud of the way that we work together for the good of the academy”. Considering the composition of the leadership team, Richard felt that a strength of the team was that leaders' differences complemented each other, especially concerning their collaboration. He suggested, “I think that the different strengths in the team complement each other as well; we don't all approach things the same way, but I think we complement each other when we work closely together, sharing the work”.

Participants also referred to collaborative teams across groups of schools and academies. Richard and Andrew both considered that collaborative opportunities beyond the academy were an important part of leadership and a feature of being an outstanding academy, in sharing expertise and supporting other schools. Andrew stressed the importance of a collaborative secondary and primary maths leadership

team that he had created to oversee a teaching alliance maths project for 18 local schools focused on improving maths outcomes for disadvantaged students. He noted that the team collaborated with shared actions as a group, commenting that

“After creating the action plans together as a collaborative team, we agreed shared actions across the partnership. Secondary and primary leaders and staff have been able to implement these action plans created together for their individual schools; due to this collaborative way of working leaders have contributed to leading the project immensely” (Andrew).

A deliberate strategy of the academy leadership was to operate two teams to cover strategic and operational planning. The two team meetings allowed flexibility for leaders to move between the two regular leadership meetings. Christine explained how the two teams operated, noting that initiatives from the core leadership team meeting were conveyed to the extended team leadership meetings to distribute across the academy. She remarked that “when we have had those discussions in core leadership, the item is then put down as a priority for other leadership teams to try and promote that initiative through disseminating it across the academy”. She commented that there were other team meetings where Middle leaders would be expected to distribute the information, where there was also the flexibility of who attended according to leaders’ roles to facilitate the information being disseminated to wider, extended teams. She suggested that through the flexibility of attending

meetings and distributing the strategies across the academy, a variety of teams would be involved in leading an initiative, rather than just the core leadership team.

Richard demonstrated that the effect from the distributed leadership team collaborating together through the 'focus on five' strategy was evidenced in the increase of the progress of students

"The 'focus on five' strategy... A member of the leadership team championed this strategy, but we all worked together as a leadership team to distribute the strategy across the academy. Working together, we monitored and tracked the progress of those five students together, who weren't making progress, in each year group and in each subject across the academy. They are now making better progress, which we can monitor more precisely through the tracking of the assessment data shared with our team so that we can revise the strategy"(Richard).

#### **4.3.4 Distributed leadership theme – accountability**

Janet, the Executive Headteacher, stated that she valued the accountability of staff among the elements that were important in supporting staff in their responsibilities and in keeping the 'outstanding' rating of the academy. She implied that accountability came with leadership development opportunities, and she assumed that appropriate leadership development opportunities would be accompanied by the expectation that leaders would be accountable for their work. This view was noted by

Andrew, who perceived that “so far as the Executive Headteacher is concerned, if it’s your role, you lead on it; you make the decisions, you make the final decision and whatever the outcomes are, are your responsibility. I am accountable to the CEO”.

Three of the participants used the term responsibility with accountability. Richard did not use the term accountability but implied that he was accountable for leading the area of teaching and learning and that staff were supported to continually improve their teaching and learning practice. He commented: “I am responsible for the quality of teaching in the academy; monitoring activities are in place to share the accountability of teaching and learning”. He suggested that monitoring activities were carried out by a range of different leaders to check that learning and teaching standards were being upheld by teaching staff.

Christine suggested a nuanced example of shared accountability, stating that “there is a lot of pressure and responsibility on those people that hold positions within the school, both together and as individuals”. She linked successful academic attainment of students to the hard work of the leadership team and their shared focus on student progress across the academy which had influenced student achievement through shared accountability. Christine occupied the role of Head of Faculty and Assistant Headteacher, and had been given the task by the Executive Headteacher of improving the English results. She referred to increasing the GCSE results for students achieving a Grade 5 in English Literature and Language by 10% from the previous year to 82% and 81% respectively. A level English Language also improved from ALPS (A level performance system) 6 to 3, with ‘1’ being rated as ‘outstanding’ and ‘9’ being rated as ‘poor’ in the system. Christine proposed that the impact of her leadership was the shared accountability among her team, demonstrated in higher

results for students and improvement for the subject: “the impact of shared accountability was higher grades; improved results for that subject”. Andrew indicated that GCSE results for the last year were “outstanding outcomes”. He proposed that everyone in the leadership team had contributed to achieving this set of results through working together and being accountable together. Andrew identified that the shared accountability of the leadership team had led to successful strategies being disseminated across teams. He gave the example of a consistent approach across the academy of staff checking in greater depth that students had acted on their feedback in order to secure improvements to learning and progress.

#### **4.3.5 Distributed leadership theme - moral purpose and a culture of success**

Three out of the four participants linked their moral obligation to enable all students to reach their full potential. Participants recognised that staff wanted to do everything possible to support students to do well. One participant referred to this aspect enabling students to reach their full potential as ‘going the extra mile’ for students. Richard explained that leaders and staff felt a moral obligation in this academy “to really be doing everything they can to support the students in whatever form that may take; whether it's pastoral or whatever; for each child, genuinely that support is there”. In describing the moral purpose of staff, Richard noted the effort that staff went to regularly for students and suggested that staff were dedicated to supporting students which resulted in “children being very well served”. The extent of the leaders and staff supporting students to succeed was demonstrated through academic and extracurricular success. Participants gave examples of the academic

success of students alongside extracurricular activities such as performing arts; dance shows; school productions, and sports. Christine referred to the “relentless support” that students had from staff as a part of ensuring that all students “succeed”. She stated that the moral purpose of leaders and staff was evident through “the hard work, tears, the sweat, giving students every opportunity, and everything else that we all put into trying to get our students to be the best that they can be”.

Each participant emphasised the importance of a focus on students’ progress in sustaining a culture of success. All four participants demonstrated that a priority of the leadership team and of staff was to support the progress of students with weaker progress. Christine had created a specific initiative for recovering student progress towards targets set, which was not restricted to a focus on the top grades, but rather progress towards all grades, and this initiative was distributed across the academy as best practice. She suggested that the strategic initiative had been successful, commenting that: “I can see that those students are already making better progress and the reason that I know that is that those students are no longer in that bottom five”.

Andrew suggested that progress was also a priority for the teaching alliance attached to Riverview Academy. He confirmed that the maths project that he was leading across 18 schools had “already identified the fact that from one half term to the other, the gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils is actually closing in terms of the progress that they are making”. Richard identified changes in

practice relating to both policy and planning in teaching and learning by the leadership team to ensure increased progress that he linked back to the moral purpose of the leadership team. Importantly, he explained that a shift in academy policy to a focus on progress rather than attainment meant “a change in the mindset of teachers that was needed for teachers to concentrate on progress in their practice rather than just attainment and to think about the reasons why we are doing what we are doing; so that all students can do their very best”.

Andrew recounted that he had worked with his maths project team covering the 18 schools in the partnership to identify in detail key issues to target for improvement. He stated that his approach had been to include the moral obligation of improving disadvantaged student outcomes to close the gap in progress between disadvantaged students and their peers. He and his team identified “the key issues that impact negatively in terms of the achievement on disadvantaged students when it comes to maths through looking at the engagement of students in lessons”.

Andrew explained that in discussion with the Heads of Department across all of the 18 schools, the team identified what they thought were the key barriers for students in terms of making progress. He recounted that the team developed an action plan and training to look at different aspects of teaching and learning, such as feedback, assessment, questioning, and marking. He claimed “with assessment and marking there is an obvious impact on students; I can see students are improving. The specialist leaders of education have huge experience in helping individual schools to improve. They support the subject leadership in maths”. He suggested that half-termly assessment had demonstrated student improvement, and commented that “student improvement is born through the results that they are achieving through the

assessments on a half-termly basis. Students are proud of themselves because they can see that they are improving”.

Two participants identified distributed leadership strategic initiatives that had been adopted across the academy to support students where data analysis identified that they were underperforming against projected targets. Christine and Richard referred to these strategic initiatives as ‘strive for 5’ and ‘focus on 5’. Christine suggested that the effect on the students who were selected for these initiatives was that over time their progress improved. These students were frequently told by staff in a supportive manner “at the moment you are our focus”. Christine described the first strategic initiative, named ‘strive for 5’, as an intervention that challenged and supported students who “aren’t quite making those Grade 5s and ensuring that they get there, putting interventions in place”. The second strategic initiative, ‘focus on 5’, involved each member of staff challenging and supporting the students in each lesson who demonstrated the least progress over a given period. Christine explained that “students who are in the bottom five get targeted, challenged and asked questions; they are invited to read from the board; they are constantly being quizzed and to offer answers”. Christine claimed that this approach to challenging underperforming students helped increase their engagement and build their confidence and self-belief, which she acknowledged was very important to her and her colleagues. Furthermore, Christine believed that it was the responsibility of all teachers at the academy as part of their shared values to identify which students needed additional intervention and support to reach target grades. She surmised, “it’s just being relentlessly supportive to those students”.

The relationship between extensive support, a moral obligation to students and the shared values of the academy was echoed by Richard, who commented that “it’s all the additional support that we provide; the intervention that goes on; all year round for each year group”. Support extended to parental initiatives such as ‘Partnership for Parents’. According to Richard, the leadership team regarded this initiative as an extension of support to students. As an example, he suggested that recently a ‘partnership for parents’ meeting had taken place with year 8 parents, as year 8 students had recently chosen the options subjects that they would commence in year 9. He stated that the purpose of the evening was to “show how they [parents] could support their child at home” (Richard) with the options process.

Christine commented on moral purpose relating to the influence on student achievement and the deliberate focus from leaders in promoting a culture of success. She said that the purpose of an intervention was to enable students to believe in and be confident in their ability. She claimed that targeted intervention that supported students would “give those children a belief that they can achieve that very much needed and wanted Grade 5”. Andrew noted that “students are feeling much more confident and proud of themselves because they can see that they are making much more progress”, referring to the students supported to increase their progress on the maths partnership project.

Three out of four of the participants from Riverview Academy gave examples of where students had demonstrated success through showing improvement. Christine suggested that improvement would be noted as a rise in the grade of a student: “we look at our results and when a data drop comes those students have risen in their grades”. Richard claimed that an improvement in progress from the sequence of students acting on feedback from assessment, focusing on small details led to an improvement in progress. For example, he suggested that “you can see in their books that they are acting on feedback, closing those little gaps in things they may have missed in assessments leading to progress”. However, regular student voice was also cited by two participants as a routine practice at the academy that engaged students about their learning, contributing to the culture of student success. Richard recounted meetings with students that focused on listening to the students’ voice, “when we sit down and have those conversations within the students’ voice, and you ask them what they feel about this academy; they say this is a good academy to be at with good relationships with their teachers and a successful academy where they are given every opportunity”.

#### **4.4 Findings from Hillstream Academy**

The following section presents the five main themes from the findings from distributed leadership that leaders from Hillstream Academy perceived as important in influencing student achievement, which are presented below. They are the leadership elements of trust; collaboration; shared accountability, creating a culture of success and moral purpose including ethos and shared values. Participants identified five themes that they perceived were important in influencing student

achievement as progress and academic attainment; developing a culture of student success; student achievement driven by teaching; the achievement of disadvantaged students, and student and parental engagement.

#### **4.4.1 Distributed leadership theme - trust**

An element of trust among the participants from the leadership team at Hillstream came from their development as a team, described by Denise as “a journey from ‘requires improvement’ to a ‘good’ Ofsted judgement in 2016”. Denise believed that her close working relationship with the Headteacher emerged from having to work together in leading changes that included implementing a new teaching and learning strategy. She noted that the Headteacher had trusted her with this significant task. Denise commented that “in the first term, out of the fifty-six staff, twenty-three members of staff were RI or less. So it was my job at the time, leading teaching and learning, being trusted to improve teaching and learning”. Mike acknowledged that gaining the trust and respect of staff had been important in establishing himself in his new post as Deputy Headteacher. He recalled that he believed he had achieved the trust of staff from leading by the example of himself teaching a substantial amount of the time in the classroom, viewing this as leading by example. While Justin, the Headteacher, did not specifically use the term ‘trust’, he alluded to the trust that he had with the leadership team, by suggesting that he had built confidence in the team that he could now rely upon. John also viewed that senior leaders had trusted him with the task of leading the raising of standards in maths and valued being trusted by others. He believed that he should, therefore, trust his maths department colleagues to take part in and to deliver improvement in the maths Department and share the ownership

for improvement among the team. Furthermore, John claimed that mutual trust had enabled him to lead the maths strategy and perform to his best, demonstrated by improved results.

The influence on student achievement was demonstrated in the maths Department by seeing an increase in the number of students who achieved a Grade 4 plus in maths rise from 45% in the previous year to the current 60%. John stated that the trust he gained from the Headteacher was important to him as it gave him the confidence to raise student achievement, lead a team and share the success across the team. The Headteacher (Justin) commented that

“As the Headteacher within a distributed leadership team, it is important that we trust each other. We have to trust each other as a team and work together on strategies to improve standards, to ensure that every student can excel and do their best and to and to solve complex and difficult problems. We would not be able to experience the improvement and success that we have, if we did not work in a way that promoted trust between us. Trust gives people confidence to go out there and do a great job!”

#### **4.4.2 Distributed leadership theme – collaboration**

The Headteacher (Justin) articulated that the leadership team had a collective vision of how to operate together as a leadership team to deliver the high expectations they shared for the academy. He claimed that this collaborative team approach to a collective vision was necessary for moving Hillstream Academy out of the Ofsted judgement of 'requires improvement' to a 'good' rating. Justin suggested that he and the leadership team had worked very hard to build a collaborative team that he believed was capable of taking the school forward. Denise also acknowledged the importance of the leadership team; she particularly valued the relationships within the leadership team. She suggested that the trust, openness, honesty, and challenge in solving issues that were characteristic of the team were essential in helping the academy to improve: "it's essential to be able to challenge one another in the team without judgement; it's not that kind of feeling that you can't challenge somebody". Denise described a teamwork ethic where "if things are not going right, we trust each other and we say they are not working". Her view was that this degree of trust and honesty within the team "had really helped move the school forward, especially with the high level of students that were disadvantaged at the academy".

The participants attributed the success to distributed teams influencing student attainment. For example in maths, John commented that "it was the general achievement of all of the students where maths attainment rose by almost 15% that resulted from a distributed maths team". He suggested that there was a collective responsibility from staff in maths towards student success: "everybody got on board and engaged with it". Across the academy, as identified by both Justin and Denise,

there had been a successful influence on student attainment and progress, with results increasing over the past three years for all students.

#### **4.4.3 Distributed leadership theme - shared accountability**

Denise associated accountability with the raising of standards at Hillstream: “in terms of the Middle leaders, they’ve all been accountable together and it’s been significant; so the Heads of Faculty, the Heads of College; they have driven forward everything; all the strategies that we’ve put in place”. Denise noted that the leaders of larger teams such as Heads of Faculties were “the ones on the ground that are absolutely tenacious with seeing those things through”. Denise described a systematic approach to shared accountability at Hillstream, where accountability was disbursed across teams of Middle leaders such as Heads of Faculties and their associated teams with greater teacher autonomy.

The Headteacher set a vision of high standards and ambition for all students at Hillstream, regardless of their ability. This vision was shared by all of the leadership team in setting high standards of expectations for staff and in the accountability of staff to ensure that students achieved well. Shared accountability of leaders and staff included the progress of students, where when sharing this accountability across the academy Justin commented that “it’s the most wonderful feeling; students are outperforming what would be expected”. Justin and Denise indicated that Hillstream Academy had been recognised by the DfE for its Progress 8 score, due to the academy’s performance being above the national average. Both participants

commented that this progress was despite 56% of the academy's student being disadvantaged. Justin explained that as part of the pilot scheme introduced by the DfE, Hillstream would be hosting and leading on an "area disadvantaged day focused on progress and best practice". He linked the importance of accountability for progress within student attainment, indicating that attainment at Hillstream had improved consecutively over the past three years.

Denise claimed that all leaders at the academy had been committed to setting higher standards, with leaders and staff accountable for higher expectations of student achievement. She said that the accountability for standards led to improved progress and attainment of students. Mike stated that students had achieved "the highest number of A's and A\*'s in 2017 in GCSE science". He suggested that the increase in attainment in science was linked to the strategy of a reward programme that he and the science team had created, designed to celebrate student progress towards targets. Denise noted that "overall, we had an 18% increase in the headline figures, with excellent progress for both disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students". Denise commented on the strategy of quality teaching impacting student attainment that had contributed to Hillstream's results, as "the teaching driving children's achievement". She claimed that teachers were supported and developed through a central strategy. Denise identified that staff were both supported and accountable individually and together as departments for the quality of teaching, which had led to Hillstream achieving improved results. Other participants echoed that this central improvement strategy of achieving higher expectations through shared accountability had led to improved GCSE results. For example the Hillstream GCSE results of 2017

demonstrated that English results had increased by 29% and maths results by 17%, leading to an overall increase in both progress and attainment for all students.

John supported the focus on accountability for the quality of teaching. He indicated that determination was needed to find practical ways to ensure that students received the best teaching that was possible, despite a lack in some instances of specialist teachers. John stated that he had regularly provided training sessions to a team of non-specialist maths teachers to ensure that support was given alongside department shared accountability for standards of teaching. John identified that the combination of support and shared accountability of staff in his department had helped him to ensure improved standards in maths outcomes. He suggested that the approach to planning, delivery and training of the non-specialist team resulted in a 17% improvement in maths results in 2017. Denise remarked that for teachers to drive student achievement where possible, teamwork was important, as was individual and shared accountability. The headline figure for GCSE results of students at the academy increased by 18%, evidencing an improvement in GCSE results. Participants perceived that improved GCSE results were the main effect that the distributed leadership through shared accountability at Hillstream Academy. Furthermore, student success was demonstrated through GCSE English results, which increased by 29% from the previous year, and maths results which increased by 17% from the previous year. This led to an overall increase in both progress and attainment for disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students.

#### **4.4.4 Distributed leadership theme - culture of success**

Participants identified that building a culture of success at Hillstream was an important strategy that enabled the academy to improve from its Ofsted rating of 'RI' to 'good' in 2016. Three out of four participants noted that it had been the Headteacher who had established the culture of success, together with a distributed leadership team model. They suggested that he had displayed a determination and expectation of putting students first to increase student ambition and aspiration. Justin described the focus on students as "relentless", while Denise described the Headteacher as being "passionate about the experience that our students have, putting the students first and providing the best experience so that they improve their life chances".

Denise recounted that building the culture of success at Hillstream was "part of the journey of the academy in coming out of the Ofsted judgement of 'RI' to receiving its 'good' rating". She claimed that the academy was undergoing a transformational change that had impacted the students, the staff, and the community in establishing the vision of higher standards and greater student ambition. Denise suggested that the students had noticed the difference in the academy. She stated that

"The students have seen the difference that some of the changes have made and they have been amazing. They have responded positively and the taste of success has helped them to build their aspirations. We have worked hard as a leadership team to really help our students to have greater aspirations. We have done this

through assemblies, special events and through the way that we have approached each and every day at the academy with them.

The effect that this approach has had is that each year we have had really good results, and we've improved. The results we had last year were amazing”.

The focus on building success at key stage 3 was also commented on relating to student achievement. Denise remarked that “seeing their success and seeing them getting certificates as well, the culture of the school has helped drive that success and the students are now really proud”.

Justin suggested that an important part of building the culture of success was that the community needed to be proud of the academy. He stated that he had developed his commitment to ensuring that student celebration events routinely included parents, he had developed “a pride in Hillstream that extended into the community”. While the Headteacher (Justin) set this standard, Mike referred to engagement with parents through celebration events as an example of building the culture of success. He identified that the Headteacher encouraged him to ensure that the invitation to parents was as “widespread as possible” in planning the science reward event to celebrate student success. Each participant at Hillstream gave examples of a focus on parental engagement as a part of the strategy to increase the culture of success. Mike stated that it was important to celebrate the academy’s success regularly with

students and parents “so that the students saw themselves as being successful”. He suggested that

“the more we promote parental engagement with our students, through regular events, the more students expect to involve their parents in their learning and progress and so it becomes an expected part of academy life. The students expect that quite regularly, parents will be invited in to either attend a parent-student information event or to celebrate progress that students have made”.

The strategy of focusing on student success, recognising student achievement, and building an ethos of pride in students was noted by Denise. She commented that “the culture of the school has helped drive that success; student blazer lapels are covered in badges for all kinds of things that they are proud of”. The focus on student success stemmed from a clear vision and direction given by the Headteacher. Justin claimed that the focus on student success was a priority; team discussions in leadership meetings included clarity and detail of planning for students. The plans explained the purpose of the actions, which were then communicated to all staff. Denise suggested that commitment to these new ideas from students and other stakeholders was essential to get students and parents on board: “everyone knows why we are doing it which helped to build a family ethos that is linked to success”. Participants acknowledged that there had been a cultural change towards a greater focus on the academic success of students, resulting in increased parental support for the work of the academy. Denise commented that

“the taste of success for staff has been absolutely paramount in driving the school forward and improving our results and with the parents; having a waiting list of 100 students and running appeals really demonstrates the real change in culture and how the school is viewed. There has been a real academic drive of the students”.

The influence on student achievement that was demonstrated by the leadership team and staff creating a culture of success was that students displayed “a positive, can-do attitude” (John). John identified that a positive attitude enabled students who attended interventions that the academy provided after school hours to be focused on additional learning, through a willingness to engage and to value the opportunity. A similar influence on student attainment was acknowledged by Mike regarding the recent GCSE science results, which had improved to 57% A-C grades, up from the previous year. He noted that there was an upward trend in student attainment, with four years of improvement. He gave a further example of students achieving the highest number of As and A stars in their science double GCSE results. He stated that a significant number of students who had already achieved four levels of progress in science in other year groups including year 10, were achieving five levels of progress. Justin claimed that students were outperforming what would be expected from their starting points in student achievement across the academy. Denise recognised that student attendance and pride had increased as students were proud of a range of different achievements, signified by different visual rewards displayed on student blazers. Good student behaviour, with low exclusions, was also

identified by Denise and Justin as a demonstration of the success culture created by the leadership team.

#### **4.4.5 Distributed leadership theme - moral purpose (ethos and shared values)**

The vision and ethos of the academy included the moral purpose of ensuring that disadvantaged students achieved well and disadvantage did not become a barrier to learning and achieving. Mike commented on the moral purpose and moral leadership of the Headteacher in his “relentless championing of the achievement of disadvantaged students”. Denise echoed this element of the moral leadership of the Headteacher, commenting that “he has kept that focus on addressing disadvantage from day one; everything we have done has lived up to our moral imperative. It has had a huge impact on student experiences. Students are now going to grammar school sixth forms”. Denise identified that the moral purpose of the leadership team meant that “even small things count, like when year 11 students can’t get to school and we get them a bus ticket to get here or go round to students’ houses and get them out of bed when the parents can’t”. Denise remarked that “the Headteacher has highlighted the culture of our moral purpose, and although sometimes we can have heated debate, we are passionate about moving the school forward and putting these students first”.

Justin claimed that a focus on disadvantaged students was integral to the work of the moral leadership team at Hillstream Academy, suggesting it was a moral imperative. He claimed that the academy had been successful in achieving progress that was

above the national average for disadvantaged students. Justin explained how this success had led to the development of Hillstream disseminating best practice associated with disadvantaged students by becoming a DfE pilot hub for the local area. He commented, "I am so immensely proud of what we are achieving at Hillstream for disadvantaged students; to be asked to be a pilot hub for the DfE and to share best practice to local schools; I am so proud of Hillstream". Similarly, Denise commented that "we are running a day for the area to focus on best practice for the achievement of disadvantaged students, for Headteachers and top people from the DfE, and we are being asked to go out and deliver to other schools; we are all so proud".

A family ethos of engaging students and parents was important to the leadership team. Justin and John believed that parental engagement helped to develop this family ethos. Justin commented that the ethos of the academy was part of the academy's increased success, and that reaching out to the community had been an important part of engaging people more. Mike stated that he placed importance on "influencing the community and being a support for those within the community". Mike identified that the collaborative nature of the distributed leadership team had been key in influencing the change in the culture.

The leadership shared value of parental engagement was demonstrated through the distributed leadership strategy of parent support sessions. Hillstream provided parent maths sessions over six months to help parents to support their children through examinations; there was an additional offer for parents to access a regular parent

maths class. John, who occupied both middle and senior leadership posts, demonstrated that all year 11 students at Hillstream had accessed the additional two-hour after-school maths intervention sessions: “all of them; the whole year group. Seventy were consistent attendees. We did as much as we could; importance was placed on the strategy of maths interventions and a culture of success”. Similarly, Mike identified a regular science strategy ‘parent and student session’ celebrating student progress, which he indicated helped to raise parental expectations of higher grades and maximising student potential. Denise commented that “the students get on board with every strategy we put in place; focusing on their learning for 75 minutes in lessons; real pride with their uniform and books; adopting the interventions, especially with our disadvantaged students”. Denise claimed that the “taste of success has really helped them [students] build their aspirations”. She noted that “the success of the students is really important to us; we will not let students fail themselves”. John suggested that “every child does matter”, in reference to previous Government policy, ‘Every Child Matters’ (DfE, 2003), which focused on five outcomes considered to be of the most importance to the health, safety, enjoyment, achievement and economic well-being of children and young people. Furthermore, he claimed that “a postcode and a family background do not always mean that you are going to get a Grade 4 in maths; factors like home life or being a single parent influence outcomes”.

#### **4.5 An unexpected emerging theme common to Portside, Riverview and Hillstream academies**

During the data collection, time constraints became an unanticipated issue for participants. Individually, each Headteacher of the three academies declined the invitation for participants to reflect upon and discuss the initial emerging findings from their academy. The Headteachers as gatekeepers had each allowed the participants in their academy full access to take part in the individual, semi-structured interviews. However, even though the group fora were planned and communicated at the start of the study, the Headteachers did not allow participants further time to take part. The time constraint placed on the leadership teams by the Headteachers may have been as a result of the pressures associated with accountability within each academy. Therefore, the unexpected, emerging theme of leadership time for the group fora forms part of the findings, because it may relate to the accountability of the leadership teams. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the limitation of the time constraint and the solution to meet the need for participant reflection, allowing an element of co-construction from participants to form a collective view.

#### **4.6 The emerging themes of each academy and emerging themes common to Portside, Riverview and Hillstream academies**

The initial findings of each academy were presented on feedback sheets and emailed to participants of each relevant academy. By emailing the emerging themes from the initial findings, members had the opportunity to check the emerging themes and thereby confirm the initial findings from the semi-structured interviews. This co-

constructed element to this part of the research process allowed participants to give a preference to the order of priority of the top three themes for distributed leadership and student achievement, based on their perceptions from the semi-structured interviews. The feedback sheets of the top three themes from each academy were then collated. The example below (Table 9) illustrates the top three themes of distributed leadership and student achievement, placed in preferred order of priority by each participants of Portside Academy, to develop student achievement.

**Table 9: Example of the top three themes placed in preferred order of priority by each participant of Portside Academy**

Participant 1

The top three themes placed in preferred order of priority by each participant of Portside	
<b>Emerging themes from distributed leadership</b>	<b>Emerging themes from student achievement</b>
1. Trust	1. Achieving MEGs and academic attainment
2. Collaboration	2. Attendance to school
3. Shared accountability	3. Personal development

Participant 2

The top three themes placed in preferred order of priority by each participant of Portside
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<b>Emerging themes from distributed leadership</b>	<b>Emerging themes from student achievement</b>
1. Shared accountability	1. Achieving qualifications and MEGS
2. Moral purpose	2. Independent learning
3. Trust	3. Personal development

Participant 3

The top three themes placed in preferred order of priority by each participant of Portside	
<b>Emerging themes from distributed leadership</b>	<b>Emerging themes from student achievement</b>
1. Collaboration	1. Personal development
2. Trust	2. Academic attainment
3. Honesty	3. Independent learning

Participant 4

The top three themes placed in preferred order of priority by each participant of Portside	
<b>Emerging themes from distributed leadership</b>	<b>Emerging themes from student achievement</b>
1. Trust	1. Personal development
2. Shared accountability	2. Attendance
3. Moral purpose	3. Independent learning

Each participant returned by email, the feedback sheets presenting the top three themes for their academy, placed in preferred order of priority for both distributed leadership and student achievement to develop student achievement. From these returned feedback sheets, the themes were collated according to the most common themes at Portside, Riverview and Hillstream Academies. The example below (Table 10) illustrates the three most common themes at Portside Academy.

**Table 10 Example: Summary of the three most common emerging themes placed by each participant of Portside Academy in order of priority to develop student achievement.**

The three most common emerging themes in priority order from participants at Portside	
<b>Emerging themes from distributed leadership</b>	<b>Emerging themes from student achievement</b>
1.Trust	1.Personal development
2.Shared accountability	2.MEGs and academic attainment
3.Collaboration	3.Independent learning

Following the participant's returned feedback sheets from each academy, the most common themes were collated and the composite main themes emerged. These are presented below in the conclusion to chapter 4.

## **4.7 Conclusion**

The main distributed leadership themes from the interviews with the participants that were common to the three academies were: trust, collaboration, shared accountability and moral purpose. The main student achievement themes relating to distributed leadership that were common to the three academies were: academic attainment, progress, wider curriculum opportunities; personal development of student and parent engagement. These themes will be considered in the discussion in Chapter 5. There was evidence from participants from each of the Academies that the participants thought that distributed leadership as a structure supported the leadership capability and capacity for students achieving, and this was illustrated through the examples given. Fullan (2001), on leading cultural change, suggested that while structure does make a difference in a school or academy, it is however, not the main point in achieving success.

Participants acknowledged that shared accountability was a strength of the distributed leadership teams and the perceived influence on student achievement. Participants in the study operated distributed leadership models, albeit with some differences. However, each participant demonstrated collaborating within distributed leadership, initiating and sharing actions, referred to by Jefferson and Anderson (2021) as developing agency, evidenced as part of each of the leadership team's working practice. Fullan (2007) describes working and relating together as a team as intelligent accountability, built up internally. The leaders felt that together they had a positive influence on a broad range of student achievements. The variety of student achievements included academic achievements, extracurricular achievements,

social achievements, and those relating to personal development. Chapter 5 follows and will discuss the findings and present the major themes that emerged to influence student achievement, as the distributed leadership elements of trust, collaboration, shared accountability and moral purpose.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Discussion**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the major themes from the findings presented in Chapter 4, their significance in relation to the literature, where there is accord and how the findings differ from the literature. Literature has been added into this discussion chapter where discussion on a certain point led to revisiting the literature. The main themes, as stated in Chapter 4, comprise the composite distributed leadership elements that emerged from the three academies. These interrelated elements created the qualities of leadership agency, influencing student achievement through the interdependency, interconnectivity and flexibility of distributed leadership. Therefore, the discussion focuses on the four main themes of trust; collaboration; shared accountability and moral purpose (ethos and shared values) which are presented later in the thesis as an emerging working definition of distributed leadership Chapter 7, 7.3.1. Student achievement and the supplementary emerging theme of a hybrid adapted methodology are also discussed.

#### **5.2 Distributed leadership theme - trust**

Participants emphasised the importance of trust within their distributed leadership teams, developing Crawford's theory that 'in order to share leadership around a team, trust is an essential component' (Crawford, 2014, p. 89). Participants identified that trust between the distributed leadership team was fundamental in influencing student achievement, rather than being viewed primarily as an essential element to

leaders supporting each other in distributed leadership. Participants considered that by trusting in each other's work they created greater agency among the leadership team that built on student achievement together, rather than competing against each other; for example, they worked on specific student issues together to benefit student achievement.

### **5.2.1 The components of trust**

Trust between distributed leaders was reciprocal. Davies (2009) and Gratton (2000) both argue that trust is an essential element of strategic school leadership, needing to be built up to increase the commitment, motivation and engagement of staff towards a long-term vision and ambition. Two different kinds of trust emerged as being equally important in influencing student achievement. To illustrate this, at Portside Academy, Graham recognised that being trusted by someone was a different component of trust than trusting others, commenting that being trusted or trusting others takes time to build up between people. This was echoed by Anne, the Headteacher of Portside, who also acknowledged that trust takes time to build. She noted that when she was first appointed "Portside Academy was not like it is now, and a more direct leadership approach was necessary at first". Anne's initial approach was more hierarchical in accord with Davies (2006), who suggests a short-term leadership strategy may be employed by a new Headteacher to ensure that school effectiveness is not compromised. However, Davies also recognises the need to plan for a longer-term, sustainable strategic leadership, which Anne implied she developed as distributed leadership over time, alongside her initial hierarchical approach. Critically, this finding aligns with Bush (2020), who justifies a Headteacher

leading with hierarchical power simultaneously with a distributed leadership model due to the 'legal authority of the Headteacher' (Bush, 2020, p. 44). Therefore, I argue that Anne's comment, "a more direct leadership approach", suggests developing from a hierarchical leadership style, where she felt the need to direct leaders more, to distributed leadership at Portside. Importantly, Anne identified that a higher level of trust over time had enabled a different way of working among staff that was more distributed and collaborative, increasing effectiveness. Jefferson and Anderson (2021, p. 207) refer to this creation of greater capability of staff as 'agentic potential' as it 'increases the power to initiate action'. I argue that a higher level of trust at Portside Academy enabled leaders to increase their agentic potential and to trust each other to initiate increased shared actions.

### **5.2.2 Trust and empowerment**

Participants recognised that in being trusted, they became empowered, aligning with Harris (2004) who suggests that empowerment within distributed leadership, increases the leaders' capacity to generate success more intensely. Not surprisingly, participants noted that empowerment often permeated among their teams.

Therefore, building on Harris (2004), participants in this study perceived that distributed leadership empowered them in teams across their academy and primarily centred on increasing student achievement in its broadest form. Participants were empowered to create regular engaging celebration events and assemblies, develop breadth in their PSHE curriculums tailored to student need and construct several intervention programmes to increase attainment and progress for different groups of students in a range of subjects. The elements of trust, empowerment and the

leadership structure were important in developing leaders in a distributed leadership model, in accordance with Coles and Southworth (2005), with leaders focused on successful student learning and achievement. Exploring this, Richard at Riverview claimed that by empowering staff to share best practice across subject teams, they had evidenced better progress of the bottom five students in achievement in each subject. Through distributing improvement strategies across the academy, leadership focused on grade improvement or progress increase, and members of staff in different subject areas were empowered to lead and execute subject-specific strategies. These strategies were based on best practice, which made a significant difference to student attainment or progress. It is possible, as Busher (2006) suggests, that empowerment primarily led participants to a feeling of ownership. The increased empowerment of staff evidenced through distributed leadership in this study, leading to influencing student achievement is in alignment with findings from the international study of Taysum et al. (2020). They argued that moving from a hierarchical leadership structure to a mark of distributed leadership increased staff empowerment and student engagement. As such, through whole school participative inquiry student outcomes improved between 17% and 27%.

The sense of ownership and empowerment are identified in the NCSL (2001, p. 2) leadership framework. One of the aims of the NCSL framework was to seek to 'delineate leadership functions and positions' to Middle leaders to enhance student learning and achievement through the increased capacity of distributed leadership. However, going beyond this, participants in this study developed the NCSL notion of the relationship between empowerment and distributed leadership. They illustrated that trust and empowerment in a distributed leadership team led them to be proactive

collectively, in congruence with the NCSL referring to the collective nature of distributed leadership as opposed to individual leadership.

Participants felt that trust was a motivator and enabler of their leadership and I argue that element of trust increased the quality of their leadership agency. For example, the trust of the Headteacher and colleagues within distributed leadership teams empowered participants who interpreted that trust was a driving, proactive element of distributed leadership. This form of trust emanating from the Headteacher and leading to empowerment contrasts with the theory of Giddens (1990), who proposes that due to a prevailing risk culture within institutions and organisations, where the focus is constantly on the future, education exhibits distrust in professionals. Furthermore, distrust is regarded as a symptom of the risk culture as suggested by Castells' (1997) theory of the emergence of distrust in institutions within low-trust management styles, such as in Western societies. Therefore, I argue that contrary to Castells' theory of the prevalence of distrust, this study demonstrates the significance of trust and empowerment through collaboration among distributed leadership teams.

### **5.2.3 Trust, honesty and the resolution of problems.**

Participants identified the elements of trust and honesty relating to one another, partially identifying with Fink (2013, p. 3), who considers that 'the three components of trust are honesty, reliability and caring'. However, the finding differs from Fink (2013) as the participants strongly related trust and honesty with enabling student achievement rather than demonstrating reliance or caring together. Interview

question 3 asked participants what they valued most about being a part of the leadership team. In the responses, it was evident that the trust within the distributed leadership teams allowed participants to share their vulnerability, being honest with each other in problem solving, and focusing on student achievement in a safe team environment. In one example, Linda at Portside Academy revealed that the trust between leaders enabled the effective resolution of issues leading to better practice. Harris et al. describe this characteristic of trust as 'authentic, open relationships' (Harris and Bennett, 2005, p.170). Linda suggested that through having honest conversations, the level of trust developed leadership practice within the team without fear of criticism, stating that being as honest as possible about issues the academy was facing was not "malicious or nasty" (Linda). This level of trust was necessary to work in depth together as a team bringing clarity to issues, leading to more effective practice, especially in influencing student achievement.

The ability of distributed leadership teams to solve issues through a deeper degree of trust between team members builds on Robinson's (2018) theory of constructive problem talk, where Robinson identifies the significance of creating a 'no blame culture' in seeking to solve problems and in developing trust. She stresses the importance of leaders being able to openly discuss the evidence for perceived problems with the intention of continuing conversation, as opposed to shutting it down. The study evidenced the resolution of issues through distributed leaders trusting each other, including resolving a lack of student transport; a lack of student personal organisation; addressing weaknesses in student progress and providing better study facilities. In solving student problems, participants emphasised the importance of enabling better student engagement in a broad range of activities

through improved student behaviour. Critically, I argue that Robinson's (2018) theory of constructive problem talk may seem in contrast to the principle of Appreciative Inquiry which considers building on positive examples of organisational practice. However, it should not be the case that the Appreciative Inquiry Methodological approach excludes problem solving, as participants considered this element positively affected student achievement. Participants thought that greater trust between leaders led to an increase in student achievement; for example, at Hillstream, John commented that "the result of the distributed maths team, where staff trusted me and each other, was that the attainment of all students rose by 15%, with the number of students achieving a Grade 4 plus in GCSE maths rising from 45% to 60% in the current year".

At Portside Academy, Jonathan commented that a deeper level of trust and honesty assisted the distributed leadership team in the strategic focus of addressing student weaknesses through a detailed plan over time, to sustain improvements. He claimed this strategic focus, built on a deeper level of trust and honesty between team members, made the difference, increasing student attainment through a greater number of students achieving their GCSE minimum expected target grades and more students making better progress. At Riverview Academy, the importance of creating a trusting environment had been key within the 18 academies taking part in the local maths partnership project. Andrew made the connection between trust and leaders being honest about the challenges within their academies and the problems that they faced, suggesting that he had "created a trusting environment where teachers and leaders felt that they could be open enough to admit what the issues were within their schools". This trusting environment leading to the discussion of

issues at each academy influenced the success of the maths project, which increased student attainment and progress. At Hillstream the study evidenced that building a better trusting relationship between teachers and leaders influenced student achievement. For example, Denise suggested that trust among the leadership team and staff was “driving children’s achievement”, noting that overall, Hillstream Academy had an 18% increase in the GCSE headline figures. The GCSE results in 2017 demonstrated that English Grade 4 plus results had increased by 29% and maths results by 17%. Therefore, these results led to an overall increase in both progress and attainment for all students.

Participants from each academy evidenced that trust was essential to them in securing a broad range of successful student achievement. This finding develops the notion of how fundamental trust is to the relationship between distributed leadership and student achievement. According to Ryan and Soehner (2011), defining or measuring achievement is not easy, but they argue that it can be interpreted as any student learning defined by a curriculum. Extending this idea, examples of academic student achievement (presented in Chapter 4) included academic subject achievement, evidenced through GCSE attainment and increases in Progress 8 scores. Perhaps unsurprisingly, participants demonstrated that the progress made by students was important, as well as students achieving at least their minimum expected GCSE grades in academic attainment. The study evidenced a strong focus on academic achievement in the core curriculum subjects of maths, English and science, but significantly, participants considered personal development, independent learning and wider curriculum achievement within their definition of student achievement. For example, positive student contributions to sports events,

national competitions, the arts and assemblies were considered important as wider student achievements as well as recognition to improvements in student behaviour, attitude and attendance. These important elements of student achievement were perceived by leaders to be important foundations that enabled students to develop more broadly as successful young adults beyond the academy.

#### **5.2.4 The impact of team trust on disadvantaged student achievement.**

Portside and Hillstream participants believed that a high level of trust within their distributed leadership teams meant that participants influenced disadvantaged student achievement, which would not be possible without this high degree of trust within their teams. The significance of this finding is that these two academies experienced a higher percentage of disadvantaged students (50% and 56% respectively) than Riverview Academy (13%). This finding concurs with Bryk and Schneider's (2002) research, presenting evidence of 'high-trusting' relationships in school improvement as important factors in increased student achievement. Significantly, participants felt that because of the high level of team trust they could freely raise any problem relating to disadvantaged students. They believed that the trust of leadership colleagues was at the core of their team, so that there was no fear of feeling undermined by sharing student information that may have seemed inconsequential. Therefore, examples such as getting a student out of bed to attend school were presented without embarrassment alongside seemingly more complex issues such as the underperformance of students in English or math. This trust at the centre of the leadership teams allowed for detailed analysis of every issue, developing the notion of a collective sense of responsibility that Bryk and Schneider

(2002) attribute to contribution through a high-trusting relationship. However, the finding differs from Bryk and Schneider (2002), who identified that through a high-trusting education environment, teacher risk-taking through classroom innovation enabled student achievement to increase.

From the evidence presented in this study, I argue that from the perception of the participants, it was specifically the trust between members of the distributed leadership team that enabled the teams to operate effectively. This level of trust within the team created a strong focus together, especially in relation to the achievement of disadvantaged students. For example, Denise at Hillstream commented that “this degree of trust and honesty with the team has really helped move the academy forward, especially with the high level of students that we have that are disadvantaged at the academy”. At Riverview Academy, the distributed leadership team sought to improve the progress of disadvantaged students in English and maths first, which then led to best practice being distributed across other subjects through distributed teams. There was evidence of an increase in the progress of disadvantaged students in maths from the 18 schools taking part in the teaching alliance maths project, as well as a demonstration of increased progress of disadvantaged students in the maths project over the previous two terms during 2017. Participants linked their success directly to the trust within their distributed leadership teams. Andrew stated that on average “there had been a 7% closing of the gap between the expected progress in maths of disadvantaged students compared to non-disadvantaged students”.

### **5.3 Distributed leadership theme – collaboration**

Participants operated largely through a collaborative approach within a distributed leadership model. According to Kouzes and Posner, collaboration “is a master skill that enables teams to function effectively” (2007, p. 242). The Headteacher at Portside, Anne, evidenced this view, emphasising the importance of the leadership team working together in collaboration with staff was to trust and empower staff in order to achieve the academy’s goals. Anne suggested that these goals were to enable students to fulfil their full potential academically, personally and socially and to increase their aspirations. She also gave examples of leadership and staff working collaboratively to regularly celebrate a variety of student achievements both academically and in extracurricular activities, such as sporting achievement and whole-school, student-led assemblies. These initiatives introduced by the distributed leadership team were a significant part of the positive culture evolving at the academy, brought about by leadership, staff and students collaborating.

Surprisingly, participants from Portside commented that before adopting a more collaborative approach through the distributed leadership model, negative student attitudes and behaviour prevented large scale events such as assemblies and student celebrations from regularly taking place. Perceptions from participants proposed that the leadership team were not focused on working together on common aims and illustrated that negative student attitudes and behaviour were the result of a more fragmented leadership team. They claimed that a collective leadership approach focused on developing student attitudes and behaviour positively over time significantly improved these student aspects. As such, Graham

commented that there had been a noticeable change in student attitudes, behaviour and attendance, linked to a new whole academy strategy to praise and reward of students. He believed that this collaborative working together of leadership and staff resulted in a broad range of student achievements, such as students leading academy assemblies and celebration events. This collaborative, distributed leadership aligns with Harris' (2008) theory of different characteristics of distribution. She identifies that distributed leadership exhibits three aspects of distribution where leaders are collaborative, with several leaders carrying out one task, or where leaders work separately but interdependently, or where leaders work sequentially. It may have been the case that Harris' (2008) three collaborative aspects of distributed leadership were present within the distributed leadership teams. However, developing Harris' tripartite model of distributed leadership, participants identified three main characteristics of their collaborative approach that were instrumental in their success at relating distributed leadership to student achievement. The distributed leadership characteristics proposed by participants were collaborative teams, hybrid distributed leadership teams, and collaboration through buy-in to the vision.

Macbeath and Mortimore (2001, p. 152) suggest that collaboration is a necessary part of what they term as a 'change profile' of an academy. At Hillstream, Denise and Justine claimed their collaborative leading impacted student achievement and culminated in achieving a 'good' Ofsted rating in 2016. This changed Hillstream's profile as an academy from the Ofsted category of 'requires improvement' as student achievement increased. Other participants echoed the claim from Hillstream, identifying the increased student achievement noted in the 2016 Ofsted inspection

and subsequent 'good' Ofsted judgement as a unique moment for their leadership team. Furthermore, the Hillstream 2016 Ofsted report highlighted this collaborative approach, identifying in particular, the shared expectations of the leadership team.

Unsurprisingly, Hillstream Academy participants recognised a purpose of wanting the academy to move out of the Ofsted category of 'requires improvement' and to achieve a 'good' Ofsted rating. This aligns with Middlewood, et al.'s (2018) view that collaboration is not an end in itself, but a means to achieve a defined purpose. They suggest that the need for schools to improve often provides the necessary motivation for leaders to collaborate. In developing this idea, I argue that improvement, motivation and collaboration are inextricably linked. For example, leadership collaboration included the leadership team covering the lessons of absent colleagues to ensure the best quality of lessons could take place; this was agreed as important, as students knew the member of the leadership covering the lesson, and this generated better behaviour to encourage deeper learning than the provision of an external cover teacher. At Hillstream, Denise commented on the academy's achievement of a 'good' Ofsted rating as "a very proud moment and three years as a team of sheer hard work together". Therefore, in alignment with Middlewood, et al.'s view, (2018), Hillstream Academy leadership had worked in collaboration to achieve the purpose of improving student achievement and subsequently receiving a 'good' judgement from Ofsted. However, participants identified that having a successful academy meant more to them than an Ofsted rating, suggesting that having an academy where students wanted to come each day and the majority wanted to achieve well was highly important to them.

Portside displayed a strong collaborative team approach. Jamal asserted that due to the challenges faced by the academy, it was not possible to work in isolation, but only as a team. He commented that “you can’t do it in isolation in this school. We’ve got very strong teams that work very closely together”. Furthermore Anne, as Headteacher at Portside suggested that a collaborative team approach was “being part of a team and being in it together; part of something special and being a family”. Anne believed that over time, there was evidence of a stronger practice of working collaboratively, than when she was first appointed; other participants also recognised the shift over time in both the collaborative approach and the ethos.

Participants at Riverview Academy linked a collaborative team approach specifically to student success, suggesting that through teamwork there was a focus on the specific needs of every student. This finding builds upon the work of Kydd et al. (2009), where collaboration is noted as a value that is shared within a workplace culture. They suggest that the collective action of leaders and teachers leads to a greater sense of responsibility towards a better quality of educational outcomes and academic goals. In an example of collaboration, Andrew commented that on joining the leadership team at Riverview Academy, “I could tell that every single member of the team had contributed to the student success and it wasn’t down to one or two people; there was a real sense of team and of that team’s achievement together”. Furthermore, Richard suggested that the sense of working as a team through collaboration was a routine activity, similar to the notion of the distributed leadership suggested by Gunter as collective and routine (Bragg, Gunter, Hall, 2013). Richard offered insight into his perception of what a collaborative, distributed way of working meant in practice. Richard stated: “I am very proud of the team, I think we work as a

team, collaboratively, really well, day in day out. We are aware of each other and we support each other”.

### **5.3.1 Emotional intelligence**

This study found that participants perceived that emotional intelligence within the leadership team was significant in developing a collaborative team approach, developing Crawford’s notion of understanding the importance of the emotional intelligence of leaders working collaboratively together (Crawford, 2014). For example, at Hillstream, Denise stressed the importance of how the collaborative leadership team “had absolutely stood together in moments of elation and moments of sadness”. I propose that the depth of emotional intelligence in the collaborative leadership evidenced, extended beyond the personal competency or leadership competency of emotional intelligence suggested Goleman, (1998). Participants at Hillstream demonstrated the connection between relationships and emotional intelligence aligning with a more nuanced interpretation of Fullan (2001), compared to the competencies suggested by Goleman (1998). This argument is borne out in examples of emotional intelligence from Hillstream and Riverview. For instance, Denise suggested a deeper, more collaborative level of emotional intelligence where the distributed leadership team exhibited a closeness in their collaborative leadership. She believed that this closeness developed an emotionally intelligent way of leading within an ongoing, everyday style of distributed and collaborative leadership. This view was similar at Riverview, where participants recognised a typical, daily style of working together, attributed to a collaborative way of working, where participants were very aware of the importance of relating together

professionally. However, going beyond the link between relationships and emotional intelligence presented by Fullan (2001), participants at Riverview suggested that working closely together daily enabled them to consistently focus on details of student performance, with a view to continually improving student progress and attainment. This expression of emotional intelligence portrayed at Riverview Academy develops Blackmore and Sachs' (2007) position that emotional intelligence is interwoven with cognition and inextricably linked to the values of self as well as being embedded into the culture of an organisation.

### **5.3.2 Hybrid distributed leadership**

Collaborative distributed leadership teams developed as hybrid teams through the qualities of the flexibility and interconnectivity of leadership working across different teams facilitated by hybrid leadership positions. This flexibility was a more organic, key quality of distributed leadership; leaders moved between teams according to different delegated leadership foci that needed attention, recognising that examples of movement could be either for strategic or operational reasons. Therefore, this finding differs from Davies' (2008) distinction between middle and senior leadership. Davies suggests Middle leaders focus more directly on day to day task management, and suggests that Senior leaders adopt a more strategic leadership role. For example, the teams of each academy included Middle leaders in hybrid positions, built into the leadership model and occupying a dual role of Middle and Senior leader (as previously illustrated in Figure 1, Chapter 4). Participants in hybrid leadership positions defined their posts well and suggested that they did not find the flexibility

and interconnectivity of their unique positions confusing. For example, Tracey commented that

“I’m in the data team collaborating with the leadership within this team; I have my English Faculty but then I have this area which is a fundamental part of the school. I can have an impact across the school. I have come from a point where I was the Head of a Faculty and then I became a Head of Faculty who was attached to leadership”.

Each academy had developed its own hybrid version of distributed leadership necessary to meet its academy aims according to its context. This finding reflects and builds upon Gronn’s (2003) suggestion that leadership is hard to categorise and a hybrid version of leadership may be the best fit, for example, in seeking to solve problems within an educational context. These distributed hybrid positions also develop Townsend’s (2015) suggestion that these forms of distributed leadership are more sophisticated than a binary choice of leadership between one type of leadership or another. I argue that several examples of a more creative approach to distributed leadership were presented, where hybrid leadership provided greater flexibility than a simple binary choice between a hierarchical or distributed leadership model and facilitated increased leadership agency. Participants valued their interconnectivity of different teams developing Gronn’s (2009) theory of changes in leadership patterns and formations within distributed leadership, where flexibility is

an important component of a hybrid form of distributed leadership. The notion of flexibility in hybrid leadership is further supported by Harris' (2008) theory of moderated distributed leadership, proposing that it is possible to combine an established hierarchical model of leadership with distributed leadership even though the distribution may be moderated, depending on the context of the school. It was the case that moderated distributed leadership enabled less experienced staff to lead on improvements successfully with the support of senior colleagues, increasing the qualities of leadership agency and leadership capability.

I argue that the flexibility to belong and contribute collaboratively to more than one team was significant, because several participants felt that they could use their knowledge and skill in adapted teams and roles. To illustrate this point, at Portside Academy, Linda highlighted interconnectivity within hybrid distributed leadership through a dual role as of Head of a Faculty and Assistant Principal. In acknowledging the interconnectivity of both leadership roles, she commented "I have a kind of a double role; I'm a Middle leader and I'm also a Senior leader". In a further example of a flexible, more hybrid post, Christine from Riverview stated that "I am in a very fortunate role in that not only am I an Assistant Headteacher here but I am also the Director of the Faculty for English as well". Members of each of the academies who had a 'dual role' as Middle leaders within a hybrid distributed leadership team acknowledged the delegation of power that they had been given. This 'delegated authority that is a form of power' (Busher, 2006, p.135) was considered a necessary characteristic in hybrid positions, so that participants as distributed leaders had the authority to lead on their work both individually and collectively. I suggest that this

leadership authority is an authentic characteristic of distributed leadership.

Furthermore, it would appear from the respondents that their experience differed from the suggestion by Tian, Risku and Collin's (2016) that the delegated power that distributed leaders function in, entangles leaders who are otherwise self-motivated and self-fulfilling as individuals. Contrary to this finding, evidence from participants in this study demonstrated that they were clear about their delegated power and had clarity of their function, without any suggestion of feelings of entanglement.

The flexibility and interconnectivity of hybrid positions also develop Bush's (2020) notion that distributed leadership has further scope to increase different leadership patterns in order to impact student outcomes. Participants perceived that this development of a hybrid role within distributed leadership had been positive in influencing student achievement; Christine's role had enabled her as part of a distributed leadership team, to transfer and distribute strategies across departments at the academy. This distributed approach led to influencing student achievement through students' reaching a Grade 5 in GCSE subjects and also led to increasing progress where students were underachieving. At Hillstream Academy, John stated that they had raised GCSE maths results significantly, evidenced by a substantial increase in results, specifically Grade 4 plus. The study has shown that this kind of success, resulting in the opportunity to lead in flexible hybrid distributed leadership teams, enables leadership development, because middle leaders who also occupy a senior leadership post are at the centre of strategic planning.

At Portside Academy, each of the Heads of Faculties of Maths, English and Science were also Assistant Headteachers and members of the leadership team. Linda, Tracey and Jamal held these hybrid leadership positions and gave examples of how their unique leadership positions had contributed to student achievement. In particular, they cited that the focus had been on the progress of every student. Jamal commented that as a consequence of focusing on progress, students in year 7 were making better progress in each subject than had been the case in the previous years of 2015 and 2016. He claimed that this was as a result of specific strategies that he had identified as needing addressing with the senior leadership team, relating to staff having negative attitudes towards some students in year 7. He suggested that negative staff views had arisen because the leadership had failed to provide staff with relevant year 7 information early enough in the autumn term. Jamal facilitated changes relating to year 7 information which increased leadership agency and capability so that more effective communication to staff resulted in student progress increasing earlier.

#### **5.4 Distributed leadership theme - accountability**

The third distributed leadership theme common to each of the three academies was accountability. This is an important distributed leadership element. According to Crossley (2014) further development is needed in changing accountability at different levels within a distributed leadership model, to move away from a dependency model which can often be a negative experience from hierarchical leaders, based on a narrow, performance-based system. In contrast to Crossley (2014), the study demonstrated that the perception of participants was that accountability had not

been a negative experience of leaders who, to the contrary, considered that accountability had been significant in the success of their distributed leadership in relation to student achievement. Moreover, distributed leadership accountability operated on several levels in each academy between different teams of leaders and staff, thus developing Cruddas' (2015) argument that school leaders would become agents of their own accountability. However, by way of a contradiction, some levels of accountability in the study were noted as being more hierarchical; for example, some cases of line management from the Headteacher towards the leadership team, and other cases of line management from the leadership team in relation to middle leaders. Participants largely viewed accountability as a distinctive shared element of distributed leadership, rather than considering accountability as a performance issue, in contrast to the DfE (2020), where accountability is linked to performance-related issues.

#### **5.4.1 Shared accountability**

The study found that participants were committed to sharing accountability amongst their distributed leadership teams. They believed that shared accountability was an embedded part of their practice in relating distributed leadership to student achievement, identifying the importance of shared accountability. Shared accountability can be defined as leaders actively working together in a group to solve a problem (Fullan, 2019); Fullan suggests that shared accountability is a culture that is developed within an organisation that is focused on improvement. In alignment with Fullan (2019), the participants believed that shared accountability focused on improving academic student achievement as well as student success in wider

curricular activities. Participants recognised that their shared accountability of wider student achievement was as important as their accountability for academic success. Examples of student achievement included academic achievement and progress; sporting achievement; behaviour and attendance; and students' effective communication and working collaboratively through presenting assemblies. This broad view of shared accountability for a range of student achievement develops Davies' (2008) suggestion that student success needs to be measured by more than just results from examinations. However, the emphasis that participants placed on students developing skills from a range of wider curricular activities also develops the work of Conneely, Johnston and Murchan (2015). In reviewing key skills of students, Conneely et al. (2015) suggest the need for education to develop further in including certain key skills that are both necessary and relevant for students living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Participants' recognition of shared accountability contrasted with Benavot and Smith (2019), who argue that most accountability reforms do not allow different professionals to contribute in a democratic way to an accountability process that will lead to improved effectiveness of the organisation. However, I argue that participants in the study developed the accountability model, by contributing together through shared accountability. Participants revealed that they felt an ownership for areas of delegation that they were accountable for either individually as leaders, or through shared accountability for collective goals. Importantly, this finding of ownership through a shared accountability for collective goals contrasts with the view of Hutchings (2015), who reports that teachers felt that they were accountable for things that were outside of their control. While this may be the case, this study found

that the participants, as distributed leaders, felt that they had a shared accountability to areas that were within their control, such as teaching, learning and progress.

At Portside Academy, Dean suggested that one example of shared accountability was the delegation to staff through distributed leadership, of the activity of the monitoring of teaching, learning and progress. Middle leaders were responsible for ensuring that monitoring regularly took place across the academy as part of a shared accountability for standards in teaching and learning. The Heads of Faculty recognised an increase in the shared accountability for teaching, learning and progress in their areas than had previously been the case, through monitoring and then being accountable for addressing any issues. This finding of shared accountability also develops the work of Sergiovanni (2000), who suggests a move away from a dominance of a singular accountability structure, to creating different layers of accountability. Through distributed leadership, Middle leaders were involved at a Faculty level in ensuring that standards were consistent throughout their academy. They took a proactive approach in addressing any concerns because they shared in the accountability for teaching, learning and progress, rather than this accountability being delegated to one Senior leader, such as a Deputy Headteacher. To highlight this argument, Laura and Jamal from Portside suggested that sharing the accountability for teaching, learning and progress had led to the year 8 progress score increasing in the recent past to the national average, which was evidenced through internal, organisational and external, national data. I argue that the structure of distributed leadership facilitated a culture of shared accountability demonstrated in this study. As an example, three participants from Portside Academy noted that accountability was spread across the academy through teams and a sense of

teamwork. I acknowledge that shared accountability and teamwork are different elements, however, participants considered that shared accountability and teamwork were closely related together; teamwork facilitated shared accountability.

Participants expected to affect internal factors of student achievement, such as student behaviour; attendance; student achievement of minimum expected GCSE target grades student progress and the success of whole school events, and shared the accountability for them. However, this point differs from the view of Breslin and Moores (2014) who suggest that accountability has increased through external pressure; for example, policy change at a national level. Nonetheless, I agree that Government policy such as accountability measures introduced in 2016, for example, Progress 8 and Attainment 8, seek to drive educational outcomes (DfE, 2020) and argue that in so doing these accountability measures may exert pressure on school leaders, often affecting leadership accountability. I concur with Middlewood et al. (2018, p. 38) who suggest that 'national pressures are on schools to achieve success in what can be seen to be severely limited measurable outcomes'. Furthermore, Bush (2020, p. 65) identifies this relationship between collaborative approaches and accountability at academy level, linked to 'pressure for external accountability' as 'a tension'. I support Bush's notion that a tension exists between the internal goals that participants were accountable for together and the acknowledgement of external pressures that leaders felt accountable for, such as examination results.

There was evidence in this study that participants made a similar connection between shared accountability for their work as a distributed leadership team, and a link to external pressures, such as examination results. For example, Hillstream cited headline GCSE results improving in 2017 by 18% from the previous year. Riverview evidenced an increase in GCSE and A level results, as a demonstration of leaders working together with shared accountability for teaching, learning and progress, which resulted in improved examination outcomes. Portside illustrated shared accountability affecting Progress 8 scores positively. Therefore, from this evidence, I also agree with Taysum (2020, p. 23) who suggests that such policy context is 'one of a crisis of contemporary culture and popularism'. While education policy is largely outside of the scope of this study, I argue that it is not possible to ignore some reference to these external pressures in relation to distributed leadership, student achievement and participants' perceptions of their success through shared accountability.

The study suggests that participants identified a close relationship between collaboration and accountability within distributed leadership, in alignment with the view of Harris (2008) that collaboration and accountability are inseparable. I agree that the two elements of collaboration and accountability are intrinsically linked. However, how the relationship between the two is defined is important in recognising the qualities that increase leadership agency and greater leadership capability. This point is significant as these are transformational qualities (Jefferson, et al., 2021) that relate to school and academy improvement. Participants developed Harris' notion of the inseparability of collaboration and accountability. They gave examples of shared accountability and collaboration leading to an increase in GCSE attainment across

each academy, through greater accountability for teaching, learning and progress. Over time, this led to an increase in results, which participants perceived stemmed from shared accountability of teaching, learning and progress of students.

This study suggests that accountability relating to distributed leadership developed as shared accountability through dispersing accountability to leaders of different level, for example, at a faculty level. Crawford (2014) suggests that Senior leaders within a distributed leadership team are still mainly accountable for leading and managing an academy and for the resulting outcomes within an academy. I agree with Crawford (2014) that the Headteacher and distributed leadership team of an academy have the overall accountability for standards and student outcomes. However, the findings in this study went further than Crawford's suggestion, and as such, I propose that while the accountability largely lay within the leadership team, there was a strong consensus at other leadership levels of shared accountability through the buy-in of staff to the academy vision. For example, there was evidence at Portside Academy that accountability was related to the distribution of the work of teams across the academy; this was in contrast to Bush and Glover's (2012) argument that distributed leadership may evidence the distribution of leadership without a clear system for the accountability to also be distributed. I suggest that rather than distributed leadership leading to a lack of accountability, participants instead took ownership of shared accountability for their work carried out by teams. To illustrate this point, Tracey, Director of the Faculty of English and Assistant Headteacher, commented "I would be letting the team down if I didn't keep up with standards", and Susan, an Assistant Principal, echoed "we share what we are doing; we're all accountable for everything if that makes sense".

#### **5.4.2 Ambiguities between hierarchical and distributed leadership models**

Bush (2020) suggests that there are ambiguities of power due to the overlapping of hierarchical and distributed leadership models. This study revealed that there were differences relating to leaders' perceptions of distributed leadership. I argue that while at Riverview and Hillstream Academies participants identified a belief of shared accountability between leaders, a more formal interpretation of accountability was evident through some line management. As such this meant that accountability in line management was sometimes perceived as both individual and shared.

Furthermore, Christine at Riverview suggested that "there is a lot of pressure and responsibility on middle leaders who hold positions within the academy". Evidence of this argument was demonstrated from participants who recognised the overlap of the two forms of leadership, suggesting that the accountability for student achievement was a pressure on middle leaders, but that it was also shared across the academy. Richard recognised this approach of distributing accountability across Riverview Academy, through regular monitoring activities of the standards of teaching and learning across the academy. He suggested that through distributed leadership, this monitoring activity, and the accountability related to it, influenced student achievement.

At Hillstream, the theme of accountability of middle leaders was less aligned with distributed leadership and more characteristic of a hierarchical leadership model. Hillstream participants believed that they operated a distributed leadership model. However, in contrast to other Hillstream participants, Denise demonstrated a more hierarchical leadership style of accountability through a nuanced top-down

leadership approach that guided leaders through accountability. I argue that this suggests a more hierarchical approach, facilitated by the line management structure. To illustrate this, Denise noted that “the accountability of Middle leaders has been significant; Heads of Faculties and Heads of College have driven forward everything tenaciously, seeing those things through. Staff are accountable”. Therefore I argue that the phrase used by Denise “that accountability of Middle leaders had been significant” also implies a more hierarchical approach to accountability at Hillstream. The implication of a top-down approach to accountability aligns with the view of Crossley (2014), who suggests that schools that are not rated as ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted, are subject to more rigorous accountability. I argue that this was the case at Hillstream Academy. While there was evidence of distributed leadership, the team had the responsibility for steering the academy from the Ofsted category of ‘requires improvement’ to ‘good’, and therefore sought a more hierarchical form of accountability, perhaps due to a greater level of external scrutiny from Ofsted and the local authority.

In contrast to Hillstream Academy, there was a clear perception from respondents that the expectation at Riverview Academy, recognised as an ‘outstanding’ academy by Ofsted, was that all teachers were responsible and accountable for supporting students to secure the best level of achievement. Participants suggested that responsibility and accountability were interrelated. I propose that Riverview participants demonstrated ‘reciprocal interdependency’ in their distributed leadership as defined by Coles and Southworth (2009), defining this as leadership where leaders have some input into each other’s work. The identification of reciprocal interdependency within the Riverview leadership team suggests a strong relationship

between shared accountability and student achievement, with accountability distributed across the academy.

### **5.5 Distributed leadership theme - moral purpose (ethos and shared values)**

Fullan (2001) cites moral purpose as the first of five qualities of leadership, suggesting that it is an intrinsic part of leadership. He describes moral purpose as being 'profoundly built into' leadership qualities (Fullan, 2001, p. 15), therefore implying that moral purpose cannot stand alone. Furthermore, Bush suggests that moral leadership 'based on beliefs and values coalesces into shared norms and meanings' (Bush, 2020, p. 158). He defines the sense of making a difference as moral leadership. He argues that 'the critical focus of leadership ought to be on the leaders' values, beliefs and ethics' (Bush, 2020, p. 156). With this in mind, I argue that where the findings identified moral purpose, this overlapped with participants' perceptions of qualities of social justice, expressed through distributed leadership teams' shared values. This leadership commitment to the academy goals develops the view of Middlewood et al. (2018), who state that collaborative leaders articulate a clear vision that includes a strong moral purpose and a focus on learning, underpinning the values of an organisation.

Participants contextualised their leadership practice, relating moral purpose to an aspect of social justice, such as disadvantaged student achievement. According to Brooks et al. (2015) qualities of social justice can be seen in any context and

situation in educational leadership, especially if the leaders are focused on any aspect of inequity. Along with Bogotch (2002), they argue that there is no single definition of social justice and as such the subject will be contested. Therefore, participants, particularly from Portside, appeared to build their shared moral purpose from the context of their work, specifically serving a disadvantaged community. This relationship between participants' moral purpose and context develops Bellibas, Esen, Gumus and Gumus' (2016) view that the decisions made by leaders with moral purpose display congruence with values and regard for society. I argue that within a distributed leadership team, it is important that participants feel that they can highlight the element of moral purpose relating to their context and practice, so that it is at the forefront of their work and decision making, having the greatest effect on student achievement. This argument is borne out in Dean's response to what values are important to the distributed leadership team relating to the success of students at Portside Academy. He considered that moral purpose was an unquestionable aspect of what leaders did as part of the team, commenting that the shared value of "being a part of something that you believe is morally right for the children and the local area", was important to him and other leaders. The connection made by respondents linking moral purpose with shared values and beliefs develops Davies' (2008) view that leaders need to be 'morally driven' with values and beliefs being inherent in education and demonstrated by students improving individually through learning and displayed in the community and society.

### **5.5.1 Moral purpose and a focus on disadvantaged students**

Several participants at Portside and Hillstream Academies viewed that support to disadvantaged students, in particular, was part of their moral purpose. Bush (2020) suggests that moral leadership is built on the leaders' beliefs, values and ethics which are closely linked to the culture of the organisation. He suggests that such leaders focus on more than the attainment of students. While it may be the case that leaders of other leadership models may also display the characteristic of moral leadership, I argue that in this study, participants specifically from distributed leadership teams emphasised the importance of moral leadership. Therefore, the findings develop Bush's (2020) notion, as participants within distributed leadership teams agreed together on a course of action related to moral leadership. As such, participants ensured that collective plans focused on students achieving well through a range of practice-based examples, distributed across their academy through subjects and whole school events.

The study showed that the participants attributed these outcomes in part to distributed leadership, where distributed leadership teams ensured a focus on student support. Leaders considered that student support was essential, and within this support included student preparedness beyond school and developing the life skill of becoming resilient, independent learners. I propose that while these areas of student support may be evident in other leadership models that purport to focus more strongly on student outcomes, such as instructional leadership (Ezzani, 2019), these participants thought that the distributed leadership model enabled participants to distribute the plans for practice-based examples across their academy, having an

impact of students. Moreover, participants demonstrated a shared commitment from distributed leadership teams to ensuring that students were offered maximum support through a range of academic and extracurricular activities to support student achievement.

Participants believed that the holistic approach from the distributed leadership team ensured that everyone was working together to achieve important goals such as the wider achievement of disadvantaged students, who may not experience such opportunities outside of the academy. I argue that this level of commitment would have been difficult to achieve through a hierarchical model of leadership, such as managerial leadership (Bush, 2015) where there may not always be a consensus on the plans developed by one or two key leaders, where the perception of power is according to their position. This argument is important to emphasise, since Pellicer (2007) suggests that not all leadership decisions are well thought through, and leadership motives are sometimes questionable. This underlines the argument in congruence with Day and Sammon (2014) that the development of moral leadership, especially when dealing with the most vulnerable students, is essential.

In this study, participants attributed a strong focus on disadvantaged student achievement to a moral obligation within their distributed leadership. I argue that this view is necessary as the organisation for economic cooperation and development (OECD; 2012, p.11) found that 'leaders frequently fail to offer a quality learning experience for the most disadvantaged'. Furthermore, a DfE research report (2015c) questioned what schools are doing to improve the performance of disadvantaged

students. This report highlights that the gap between the performance of disadvantaged students in England, compared to students who are not disadvantaged, is one of the largest among OECD countries (DfE, 2015c). On the point of moral leadership, Pellicer (2007) suggests that leaders need to care enough to make a difference to disadvantaged student achievement and argues that the internal value of caring is an authentic human quality associated with moral leadership. Pellicer (2007) suggests that those leaders who genuinely wish to make a difference in the lives of disadvantaged students exercise moral leadership, emphasising the need for leaders to reflect on their values and beliefs. This research found that participants demonstrated that addressing achievement issues of disadvantaged students was considered a part of ensuring the success of all students and related to their collective moral purpose.

### **5.5.2 Ethos**

Ethos and shared values were presented as part of an overarching moral purpose at two of the academies that linked distributed leadership to student achievement. There are contrasting views on what elements combine to define the ethos of a school. For example, Holmes and Pratt-Adams (2021) argue that the ethos of an academy is centred upon the values and beliefs of the academy, which are authentic to it and need to be engaging. Coleman and Glover (2006) suggest that there is a closeness between a school ethos, climate and culture, particularly noting that organisations use these terms interchangeably. Macbeath and Mortimore (2001) define a school ethos as what is presented as ‘as an outward public expression of a school’s norms and values’. In contrast, Alder (1993) links school ethos to student

outcomes, while the DfE guidance on school websites simply states that a values and ethos statement should be presented (DfE, 2014, 2020).

### **5.5.3 Shared values**

There was evidence that seven leaders from Portside Academy and four leaders from Hillstream Academy identified shared values as an important leadership element relating to student achievement at their academies. In both cases, Portside and Hillstream participants believed that as distributed leadership teams, they made a significant difference in positively influencing the lives of students. Participants demonstrated a stronger focus in enabling students to be successful in academic and non-academic achievement through their shared values. This finding is in alignment with the research findings of Gillespie and Mann (2004), who identify the importance of shared values underpinning a team vision and collectively guiding the team's work. Importantly, the findings from Portside and Hillstream Academies (both with a high percentage of disadvantaged students) illustrated similarities in their leaderships' shared values, presented in Table 9 below. Portside shared values included a focus around inclusion and care for students, while Hillstream shared values demonstrate a deeper commitment to enabling student academic achievement.

**Table 11: Shared values identified by participants at two academies**

<b>Shared values identified by participants at Portside Academy</b>	<b>Shared values identified by participants at Hillstream Academy</b>
Making a difference	Raising aspirations
Overcoming negative barriers for students	Disadvantage never becoming a barrier to learning and achieving
Engaging students positively	Student engagement
The positive relationship of Parental engagement	Parental engagement
Student development opportunities	Championing disadvantaged students
Commitment to providing wider curricular opportunities as an alternative to the perceived gang culture and poor social behaviour in the local area	Commitment to providing wider curricular opportunities Supporting students to achieve
A moral imperative as leaders	A moral imperative as leaders

The ethos and values are inextricably linked and relate in an authentic way to the effective practice of an academy. Both the ethos and values inform, in a holistic sense, every practice related to the academy, on a day to day basis (Holmes and Pratt-Adams, 2021). I argue that through the values presented in Table 11, participants of the distributed leadership teams at both academies showed a commitment to an authentic ethos and shared values that were personalised to their

academy's situation, context-specific and focused on engaging students and parents positively.

#### **5.5.4 Shared Values influenced by the characteristic of disadvantaged students**

Portside and Hillstream focused on shared values relating to supporting disadvantaged students alongside non-disadvantaged students as being centrally important to their leadership teams. The findings suggest that shared values were influenced by the criterion of disadvantaged students in these two academies. As mentioned already, these academies had a higher percentage of disadvantaged students (50% and 56% respectively) than Riverview Academy (13%). Riverview Academy had a focus on all students. While I agree that an academy's shared values should reflect all students, I argue that the specific focus on disadvantaged students at Portside and Hillstream aligns with Atkins and Duckworth (2019). They suggest a relationship between social justice elements of research and shared values. Building on Atkins and Duckworth's (2019) views, I argue that participants from Portside and Hillstream Academies demonstrated shared values which related to their social context of having a high percentage of disadvantaged students and were, therefore, context-specific. It is important to highlight the significance of the context of each academy. It appears from the study that distributed leadership teams that recognised their context, demonstrated shared actions that resulted in the outcome of improved student achievement.

Respondents of this research perceived that their leadership actions bore a relationship to the circumstances surrounding Portside and Hillstream academies.

Taysum (2012) identifies that leadership actions as part of evidence-informed leadership can relate to aspects of social justice. I argue that the leadership actions focusing intentionally on the achievement of disadvantaged students can be considered as an example of the type of leadership actions referred to by Taysum. Furthermore, Taysum defines distributive justice, citing Cribb and Gerwirtz (2003) and Fraser (1997) as including 'deprivation, where the material standard of living is not of a minimum standard' (Taysum, 2012, p. 25). She suggests that distributive justice partially aims to address inequalities, such as disadvantage in an educational setting. As such, this finding demonstrates that leaders perceived shared values are an important element in linking distributed leadership to student achievement. I propose that the shared values were manifest through examples such as removing barriers to learning, increasing aspiration and encouraging greater student and parental engagement. These values are distinct and purposeful, fostering student achievement, by taking account of the local community.

Participants articulated that they sought to address any inequalities caused by disadvantage, for example, lack of study facilities, lack of funding for transport to the academy and ensuring a wide range of enriching experiences through wider curricular opportunities. I offer that participants sought to ensure that all students achieved well, through promoting the best outcomes for students in academic and non-academic achievement, supported whether consciously or unconsciously by a nuance of distributive justice. Therefore, I make the case that the shared values identified at Hillstream and Portside Academies, where there were explicitly high percentages of disadvantaged students, build on Cribb, et al.'s (2003) definition of 'deprivation' where the material standard of living is not of a minimum standard. For

example, eligibility to free school meals is used in schools in England as an indicator of disadvantaged students (DfE, 2015b). Therefore, developing Taysum's argument of distributive justice, the shared values identified by participants of distributed leadership teams aimed to address the inequality of disadvantaged students. These specific values, highlighted in this study, were uniquely important to each academy's students, parents and community.

#### **5.5.5 The importance of shared values in relation to the academy's context**

The distributed leadership teams' shared values were unique to their context, with Portside and Hillstream Academies recognising their high percentages of disadvantaged students in their academies' values and vision. This important finding from this study builds on the research of Hallinger (2018), who suggests that there have been no systematic reviews that carefully analyse and distinguish the types of leadership strategies that characterise these different contexts. Contrary to Hallinger's (2018) suggestion that leaders have had to disregard their context, the study revealed that the community context was integrated into the values of each academy. Critically, while I agree with Hallinger's (2018) claim that leaders have in many instances had to ignore their context, I argue that it is likely that this is due to the aforementioned pressures on leaders of national policy such as the performance measures (DfE, 2020). There was evidence in the study that participants developed Davies' (2009) notion of creating a culture of value-based leadership relating to their context (Davies, 2009). Furthermore, this finding builds broadly on Taysum's (2012) theory of evidence-informed leadership, as in this study the participants' shared values were context-specific. In this way, context-specific values supported the

achievement of high proportions of disadvantaged students, thereby recognising all students within the academy's community. Distributed leadership teams were committed to values that underpinned the strategy and actions that the teams felt were necessary for supporting the learning of disadvantaged students and their families. While I argue that distributed leadership strategies pertained to all students, participants paid particular attention to ensuring the engagement of disadvantaged students and their families. For example, at Portside, participants were highly committed to supporting student engagement, parental engagement and creating wider curricular opportunities.

Participants perceived that a broad range of curricular and extracurricular opportunities provided positive activities as an alternative to what they identified as the lure of gang culture and local anti-social behaviour. This finding is important as it contradicts some research on keeping gang culture out of English secondary schools. The research conducted by Irwin-Rogers (2016) has identified that schools and academies are not able to have a positive impact on the gang culture that exists in the community. This notion was identified as a limitation of Irwin-Rogers's (2019) research. Therefore, contrary to Irwin-Rogers (2019), participants in this study demonstrated that they proactively engaged students through curricular and extracurricular activities, recognising the gang culture that existed within the community. Furthermore, research into the early intervention for the prevention of gang culture in primary schools in England found that a gap existed in schools between what is actually being delivered and what evidence suggests is effective. The research proposed that funding and Government-funded programmes were the most likely reason for the identified discrepancy between programme delivery and

effective evidence-based approaches (Jones and Waddell, 2018). This recent research (Jones et al. 2018) builds on a similar argument presented by Kinsella (2011) which also questioned the lack of evaluation of suitable programmes in schools as well as a lack of willingness from Headteachers in English schools to engage with gang culture and knife crime prevention programmes within schools.

At Portside Academy, it was significant, where participants considered the context of their academy to be one where a gang culture was prevalent, that the distributed leadership team made no assumptions as to which students would be vulnerable to the lure of gangs. Moreover, importance was placed on the distributed leadership team's strategy to positively engage all students. I argue that it may be a nuanced point that participants at Portside exercised a shared value that related to a commitment to show students an alternative pathway to that of gang culture; however, it is nevertheless important. As such, the distributed leadership team was committed to a shared strategy to maximise student engagement through all subjects as well as extracurricular opportunities, which was distributed through teams across the academy. I propose that it is the engagement in learning of students that is important, rather than which subjects students connected with. This important team strategy of engagement was evident in the study and illustrated by Ralph at Portside Academy (see Chapter 4) recalling some of the challenges the distributed leadership teams faced in engaging all students in education, away from local social issues such as poor behaviour and gang culture. He recounted a student who had become disengaged and at risk of permanent exclusion and potentially at risk of local gang culture. Ralph emphasised the importance of this particular student and others of a similar profile, engaging positively in a subject to increase

engagement in learning. In this case, the student visited Portside, five years later, to announce to key staff that he had qualified as a dentist.

Participants at Portside considered that distributed leadership developed a strategy where it was important to educate and develop students' personal and social skills as well as academic attainment. They referred to this aspiration as 'educating the whole person' which they believed related to their influence on student achievement. The study revealed responses to a more holistic personal and social education significantly included an emphasis on an education away from gang culture, through leaders explicitly referring to gang culture in learning programmes such as in Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) and Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL). This importantly goes beyond findings reported by Clague, Coldwell and Willis (2013). They suggest that there is a lack of clarity between elements of PSHE and SEAL for students, including the pastoral care and well-being of students. The bespoke approach to PSHE by the distributed leadership team of Portside Academy is presented in Chapter 7, presented in 7.3.1.5, possibility statement 5 on student achievement. This possibility statement considers such an approach to PSHE which ensures that students' personal development enhances their ability to do well in a broad range of achievements.

The research revealed that leaders sought to provide the most impactful curriculum to support students through PSHE, citizenship, sex education and other aspects of personal development. As a distributed team, participants were in agreement to confront real-life issues that were a risk to students, such as the dangers of gang

culture and understanding the risks of this in the local area. This strategy emanated from the leadership team and was distributed out to as many other subjects as possible, where these personal and social aspects were relevant. Therefore I argue that this focus on 'developing the whole person' was a whole school approach where leadership teams demonstrated commitment to students on personal development including social issues, to ensure that, as far as possible, students could become successful adults, able to make a positive contribution to society beyond school.

Participants projected an overarching view as a distributed leadership team that broader student achievement was important to them through their interpretation of PSHE. Campbell and Ryder (2020) suggest that there are many different interpretations of PSHE, rather than one definition. They propose that there is little empirical evidence of its success and suggest that PSHE should promote fundamental values and consider cultural values. I argue that participants of the distributed leadership team at Portside developed Campbell and Ryder's notion, as they identified, agreed and implemented a more developed, personalised, social education, where I argue that they made no apology for reflecting the local social needs of the academy's area. Moreover, it is evident from the findings that through the importance placed on educating the whole person the shared value of making a difference to the lives of students was intended to be as far-reaching as possible. Critically, I assert that the distributed leadership team, along with the Headteacher, led this vision of the PSHE curriculum, developing students positively through this strategy. This was part of the wider shared value of making a difference, within the context of the academy. This was affirmed by Anne, the Headteacher at Portside, who stated that "teachers do not go into teaching because of Progress 8 and results

and hammering everyone to get A stars! Nobody goes into it for that! It's to make a difference and to work with young people". Similarly, at Hillstream Academy, distributed leadership success was related to the shared value of ensuring the achievement of disadvantaged students, concurrently with non-disadvantaged students.

Mike commented on the focus on disadvantaged students and stated that "disadvantage was never a barrier" and Denise suggested overcoming barriers to attainment had "the impact on increasing student life chances". I agree that disadvantage should never prevent students from being able to achieve their full potential so that all students can achieve well. I maintain that leaders should ensure that all students can achieve and as such, if barriers are present that prevent any student from achieving well, then leaders should address the issue, in order to remove the barrier. This argument concurs with DfE documentation (DfE, 2015c) on overcoming barriers to the attainment of disadvantaged students. However, this finding on shared values develops the argument presented by Booth and Higham (2018). They suggest that shared values enable some control at a school level by leaders as opposed to Government or external control. I argue that through a distributed leadership model, participants at Portside developed a more holistic education as an integral part of their work together. While other leadership structures can commit to shared values, I suggest that where leaders work collaboratively through distributed leadership, there may be the opportunity for greater input into developing shared values than is possible within a hierarchical leadership structure. Therefore, as distributed leadership teams, I argue that participants manifest shared values together which affected outcomes; as such, participants claimed that shared

values influenced student achievement positively in areas that included supporting student progress; behaviour; attendance and academic and non-academic achievement.

#### **5.5.6 Student achievement related to the context**

The integration of shared values evident in the distributed leadership team's goal setting, strategic planning and operational delivery in this study is of importance. To illustrate this argument, participants viewed shared actions as essential to encourage and facilitate independent learning through after-school opportunities. They made strategic decisions as a distributed leadership team and agreed to implement those strategic decisions as a team. As an example, the distributed leadership team at Portside gave their commitment to a practical leadership strategy of staffing the academy library themselves for independent learning until 8 o'clock each evening of the week. The increased access to study facilities and support from leaders encouraged a greater engagement with the independent learning of students. Participants suggested that they took this course of action together as many students would be unable to experience independent learning at home, developing Harris et al. and Day's views that distributed leadership success can be evidenced through student academic and non-academic achievement (Harris, 2008; Day, et al., 2006). Anne from Portside suggested that for some students at the academy who did not have a study space at home, the library facility would be the only available space in which students could work.

Participants at Hillstream Academy also demonstrated how their perception of wider student achievement as a distributed leadership team had influenced success in non-academic achievement. As such, the findings of preparing students to become successful beyond adult life develops Davies' (2008, p.12) notion that 'success can be seen in how children achieve academically, socially, spiritually, physically and emotionally, enabling children to be all they can be'. For example, these participants ensured that as a strategic priority of their team, they provided a range of student opportunities within the academy, placing importance on recognising student success in these wider activities. This notion of recognition student achievement through a broad range of curricular and extracurricular success is considered further in Chapter 7, section 7.3.1.5 'possibility statement 5. Therefore, arranging the activities and any funding requirement as well as ensuring that sufficient time was dedicated to them was important in the leadership team's planning and implementation, which included other members of staff. Thanks to this, students had won a national competition in rocket engineering hosted by the UK Aerospace Youth Rocketry Challenge, designing, building and launching a rocket. Furthermore, students from various year groups had also graduated in the Children's University Partnership with Anglia Ruskin University, successfully completing a range of extracurricular personal challenges. Participants also indicated student achievement in sporting events such as having a national boxing champion, two district trampoline champions and district trampoline team champions, as well as further evidence of student achievement in the under-16 boys' football team winning the District Cup.

Taysum states that 'doing the right thing' (Taysum, 2012, p. 122) is an important aspect of 'authentic evidenced informed leadership', where role modelling moral

values may be especially significant to a community. I assert that as the percentage of disadvantaged students at Portside Academy was significantly high, this provided the evidence base for the specific focus of the distributed leadership team on the achievement of disadvantaged students. Therefore, developing Taysum's (2012) theory of moral leadership, participants related their moral leadership to the achievement of disadvantaged students through ensuring that they were emphatically 'doing the right thing'. Participants saw this connection as an essential part of their distributed leadership in serving the community surrounding the academy. Moreover, participants' roles modelled values which were made clear to staff, students and parents. These values included a deliberately strong focus on disadvantaged student achievement, in accord with evidence-based leadership (Taysum, 2012), which was deemed necessary to help to ensure that disadvantaged students achieved as well as their peers who were not disadvantaged.

Portside and Hillstream participants demonstrated a collective commitment to supporting disadvantaged students through agreement to provide whatever a student might need. This finding develops Van der Merwe's (2020, p. 865) notion that where schools are exposed to multiple deprivations 'the leaders have an unshakeable belief in the potential of learners to excel personally and academically, despite adverse circumstances.' While the DfE (2015c) uses terminology such as "closing or narrowing the gap" for disadvantaged students, participants developed extra provision for disadvantaged students, giving instances of really enabling them in practical ways. Therefore, the distributed leadership team initiated practical strategies as a way of supporting students such as "paying for bus fares or visiting student homes early in the morning to get students out of bed, where parents (for

whatever reason) were unable to do so” (Denise) alongside a focus on student attainment. There was evidence that these strategic initiatives impacted positively on student achievement, demonstrated by academic and non-academic achievements. This finding of a collective commitment to supporting disadvantaged students to succeed is recognised by Bush (2020), who suggests that leaders are responsible for cultivating a culture of success in schools. For example, each academy supported students through additional intervention classes in after-school hours learning to maximise students’ ability in academic achievement, including attainment and progress in English, maths and science across a range of year groups.

Each academy also supported underachieving students with weaker progress, through smaller group intervention sessions, developing support for disadvantaged students alongside non-disadvantaged students to sustain the culture of success at both Hillstream and Portside Academies. Participants ensured that resources were available after school hours and that when students needed personal support or financial support for transport, they received it. By contrast, Riverview participants demonstrated a moral obligation to all students, aligning with Dougill et al. (2011), who suggest that there should be less emphasis on whether students are disadvantaged students or not, but rather a focus on all students achieving well. Therefore, Riverview distributed leadership stated that they intentionally focused on each student to secure the best possible student achievement. Participants at Riverview had a strategic approach to engaging parents throughout the entirety of the students’ education at the academy. This point of ensuring regular, practice-based strategic initiatives to develop parental and student engagement is considered further in possibility statement 4, presented in Chapter 7, 7.3.1. 4. Riverview

participants considered that support for students and parents was a routine part of the academy's practice, which promoted and sustained a culture of success. The focus on developing parental engagement progresses the work of Busher (2006) and Dougill et al. (2011), who each advocate that parental engagement should be fully consultative and encourage parents to support their children more widely in academic progress. He suggested that this innovation was part of a strategic, longer-term strategic approach, in the distributed leaderships' commitment, planning and implementation to support students and parents. Therefore, the distributed leadership team either led or took part in a range of strategic initiatives, which they were able to distribute through subject teams across the academy. Examples, identified by participants included examination preparation and revision guidance sessions for parents and students and preparing for option subject choices. Participants at Riverview considered that the agreement from the distributed leadership team, to integrate the strategy of student and parent engagement routinely into the academy, enabled better student achievement, especially in maths, English and science GCSEs. This parental engagement also included the progress of younger students, in years 7 to 9.

Participants at Hillstream perceived that the distributed leadership team's approach to a shared commitment focused on support to disadvantaged students was successful. They claimed that this influence on student achievement led to above-average progress of disadvantaged students over three years to 2017. They asserted that the success of this distributed leadership approach was recognised as disadvantaged student achievement increased, and the academy was designated as an area hub by the DfE; this recognition included the distributed leadership team

leading on education for disadvantaged students and holding training days for local academies. In this way, Hillstream developed the DfE policy on disadvantaged students (DfE, 2015c) of having a clear vision that is focused on enabling every student to excel through an ethos of aspiration for all.

The study found evidence of participants ensuring that problems were solved and disadvantage was not used as an excuse for lower student achievement. However, I purport that this does not suggest that a clear vision alone is sufficient to ensure that every student achieves well, and I argue against this being the case. Moreover, there is little suggestion within the DfE documentation on disadvantaged students (DfE, 2015c) of the critical elements of leadership that would combine to increase leadership agency and capacity. In the study, leadership agency and capacity increasingly solve issues collectively through distributed leadership, where a range of vital skills was critical in assisting in attendance issues; supporting positive behaviour; increasing study opportunities; dedicating financial support to individual needs; assisting with study resources and closely following student progress data to support success. While it could be suggested that other leadership models could demonstrate these skills, I argue that within the distributed leadership model at Hillstream, participants worked with one accord, focusing on solving any problems so that students could achieve well. Participants defined this as 'going above and beyond' as a leadership team. This culture of the distributed leadership team led to Hillstream Academy being acknowledged by the DfE, in becoming a hub for the local area, leading on disadvantaged student work.

## **5.6. A shared culture of success; a broad range of student achievement**

A shared culture of success was important to participants from all three academies. This shared culture enabled students to be supported to become successful adults beyond school, prepared well for the future. This finding is in alignment with the guidance set out in the Ofsted Education Framework (Ofsted, 2021). This guidance presents a quality of education that impacts learners by ensuring that they are equipped for the next stage of their life; for example, higher education or employment. The inspection framework (Ofsted, 2021) also suggests that the personal development of young people should adequately prepare students for being successful in the future. While I agree that it is important to ensure that students are well prepared for a successful future, I argue that there is a lack of practical detail from the Ofsted document on how this will be achieved by academies. Therefore this aspiration is open to interpretation.

At both Riverview and Hillstream's participants recognised the relationship between creating and sustaining a culture of success through their distributed leadership teams and their improvement in student achievement. These academies emphasised that this relationship had been a crucial focus of their distributed leadership teams. For example, at Riverview, participants gave examples of established structures and routines in teaching and learning where the whole academy expected to ensure the best progress of students and grade improvement possible. The work to develop and sustain this culture of success was seen as part of the distributed leadership shared vision. This shared vision was considered to be of particular importance as an Ofsted rated, 'outstanding' academy. The study found

that Riverview and Hillstream participants had created a culture of success through ensuring that, at all times, student achievement was prioritised.

At Portside, participants of the distributed leadership team focused on a strategy of positive student engagement. They planned and implemented a new reward system for students, to improve behaviour and attendance and impact student achievement. The focus on student reward and attendance was significant as there was evidence from the study that increased positive behaviour and improved attendance of students led to increased student engagement in curricular and extracurricular activities. This finding relating student engagement to rewards and attendance develops Davies' (2008) view of achievement including a broad range of student success, as he suggests that if leaders only focused on successful academic outcomes, the focus would be too narrow. Jonathan claimed that through working collaboratively, at regular events such as assemblies, PSHE lessons, tutor times and parents' meetings, the team were committed to continually emphasising the importance of positive engagement and good attendance. The leadership team evidenced an increase in positive behaviour for learning and student engagement through the impact of the reward system over time, and an increase in student attendance over three years, from 93.7% to 95.2%. Participants related improved attendance and better student behaviour to other strategic initiatives; students were keen to attend extracurricular activities and strategic initiatives such as using the academy library after school hours for independent learning. Participants claimed that they had seen more positive attitudes to learning including an increase in the number of students engaging in independent learning after the school day.

Participants at Hillstream Academy related student achievement to the development of a culture of success at the academy, ensuring that students achieved well. Davies (2008) defines wider student achievement as 'softer measures' which he suggests includes achievement in extracurricular activities, attendance, behaviour and student rewards. I agree with Davies that student achievement includes a broader range of success in non-academic activities as well as academic achievement. For instance, the distributed leadership at Hillstream worked together to ensure that they created a culture of success through a shared commitment to regularly celebrating the broadest range of student achievement possible. They encouraged all students and staff to recognise student achievement with regular invitations in each curriculum area to parent and student celebrations. At these events, increases in student progress, GCSE predicted grade improvement, increases in rewards and attendance and sporting success were all considered as student achievements.

Portside participants also presented a broad range of student achievement, considering wider student achievement as a vital part of a successful and sustainable culture. Participants related student achievement more to the social context of the academy, citing as important that students avoided the gang culture and permanent exclusion. As with Hillstream, participants at Portside viewed increases in attendance, rewards and positive learning behaviours, and decreases in poor behaviour incidents as part of their achievements. They also highlighted celebrating student achievement in sporting success, winning different competitions and engaging in the wider aspects of school life, such as themed days and whole

school events, as part of the culture of success. However, at Riverview, participants revealed that the distributed leadership team focused on creating and sustaining a culture where everything possible was done to support students in academic study and wider areas such as sports and performing arts. This strategy was part of the vision agreed by the distributed leadership team and dispersed across subject teams. As such, staff expected to challenge all students to continually improve.

#### **5.6.1 Creating a focus on academic success**

A significant aspect of the distributed leadership team's focus at Riverview Academy was sustaining success. Participants demonstrated that effective leaders are aware of the difference between sustaining and maintaining success, aligning with the view of Middlewood et al. (2018, p. 39), who state that 'sustainability is not maintainability'. As such, distributed leadership ensured 'sustainability' because student progress led to increased student achievement. An emphasis on student improvement also aligns with Fullan (2004) who defines the sustainability of an organisation as demonstrating ongoing improvement. On the one hand, I assert that a distributed leadership team having an agreed focus to maintain achievement will set a standard for students to aspire to. However, more powerfully, on the other hand, I argue that through the distributed leadership teams' collaborative commitment to continuing to improve achievement, there was evidence of students achieving the highest of expectations in curricular and extracurricular achievement. Furthermore, the distributed leadership team demonstrated that it was able to sustain success. One example was that the distributed English team demonstrated

that their collaborative focus on progress, working with the distributed leadership team, had enabled student GCSE English results to improve by 10% to 82%.

The success at Riverview was partly due to the Head of the English Faculty also being a member of the distributed leadership team, thus enabling important continuity between the distributed leadership strategic planning and this being devolved to faculty level. Critically, this distribution was considered important in building a culture of success. There was evidence that Riverview participants worked together to sustain success and as such the results at the academy had placed it in the top quintile nationally based on the Progress 8 measure for student progress.

Leaders at all levels of the distributed leadership teams from Riverview and Hillstream Academies defined their success partially by increases in Grade 4 or Grade 5 passes at GCSE. Recognising improvement in GCSE grades is in alignment with the criteria within the secondary accountability, performance measures (DfE, 2020). In an example from Hillstream, John believed that through being a part of the distributed leadership team, the strategies that were planned and implemented through distribution at the department level led to a successful culture over time. He evidenced this success through presenting an increase in student attainment in maths: “through working together, the maths team raised attainment by 15% in maths; it was just beyond expectation. It was an amazing set of results: 60% Grade 4 plus compared to the previous year of 45%”.

## 5.7 Conclusion

This study illustrates leaders' perceptions of important interrelated elements of distributed leadership and these contribute to a working definition of distributed leadership emerging from the study. The main four themes identified were trust, collaboration, shared accountability and moral purpose, and leaders identified a unique relationship between these four elements within a distributed leadership model. Participants identified the importance of integrated components of trust, namely being trusted and trusting others. Therefore, reciprocal trust was viewed as a driving, proactive characteristic of distributed leadership, contrary to a view that education currently displays distrust in professionals. Honest conversations in a trusting environment were a significant distributed leadership element, enabling participants to raise issues and solve problems, especially concerning the achievement of disadvantaged students.

Collaboration within distributed leadership was important where flexibility, interconnectivity and interdependency of leadership allowed maximum movement between different distributed teams, both strategic and operational, increasing the qualities of agency and leadership capability. Developing hybrid distributed leadership models to suit the needs of the organisations was important in promoting flexibility and interconnectivity within distributed leadership. Changing the pattern of leadership within a distributed leadership model was significant because participants identified that it enabled the distributed leadership team to have the capacity and range of skills to have the maximum effect on student achievement.

Shared accountability of the participants was a distinctive element within distributed leadership teams. Participants identified that shared accountability affected student achievement. However, critically, some accountability was more hierarchical in the context of line management creating a tension in the overlapping of hierarchical accountability and shared accountability within distributed leadership, suggesting moderated distributed leadership practice. Participants considered that emotional intelligence in distributed leadership was important. Moral purpose, including ethos and values, and creating a culture of success were identified as important elements of distributed leadership. In some instances, leadership decisions revealed integration between moral purpose and aspects of social justice. The shared values were unique and original to the leadership team of each academy depending on their context. Importantly, shared values and the shared actions of distributed leadership differed according to the context, and appeared at times to be influenced by some characteristics of disadvantaged students. The commitment to the vision of the academy was important in developing a shared culture and achieving shared goals.

The strategic focus on the personal development of the whole person was significant particularly in the context of academies where there were social challenges in their local community. Personal development included enabling students to be successful as adults beyond school, well prepared for their future and contributing positively to the community and society. Participants developed Taysum's (2012) theory of evidence-informed leadership, through shared values that proactively engaged students towards successful achievement, within the context of disadvantaged communities. Participants considered that by contextualising their collaborative work, they made strategic decisions with a sense of moral purpose, and were sympathetic

to their local community, aligning with Bellibas et al. (2016). In the following chapter, Chapter 6, I consider the impact and influence of my professional practice and my doctoral journey through reflective and reflexive practice. I explore my professional identity and the impact of professional resilience, and consider the dissemination of my research.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **Reflection and reflexivity of professional practice and the doctoral journey**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter considers both reflection and reflexivity of my professional practice and my doctoral journey. Being reflective and reflexive enables a practitioner-researcher to question the interpretation of research and practice and therefore bring about change. This aligns with the view of Coupland, Hibbert and MacIntosh (2010), who state that as part of a progressive process, different elements of reflexivity may be experienced by the researcher at the same time. On the one hand, reflection is considered an important part of educational leadership practice, formed and developed through the cycle of experience, learning and deliberation (Schon, 1983; Kolb, 1984; Kydd, et al., 2009). Reflective practice, identified as the ability to take time to consider one's own practice and to evaluate it, was noted as an important characteristic by four of the participants in this research. Davies (2008) suggests building in reflective dialogue as part of creating a reflective practice within a school, and these participants in this study identified this as an embedded part of their leadership practice. On the other hand, reflexivity has also been an essential part of my doctoral journey, both as a researcher and a practitioner, where especially in practice, new knowledge has influenced how I have led and managed aspects of school improvement and transformation and changed my practice to have a greater impact on others.

I recognise that it is important to develop deeper reflection in order to relate this knowledge to my contribution through professional practice, as part of the doctoral journey. The importance of reflection for doctoral students of education is emphasised by Klenowski and Lunt (2008). They suggest that one primary importance of reflection is through identifying the link between the process of reflection and the development of one's professional knowledge and the contribution to professional practice. Furthermore, reflection is developed to reflection-in-action by Schon (1983), who suggests that 'reflecting-in-action' connects the researcher to the context of the practice. He suggests that 'new theory is constructed from reflecting-in-action in each unique case' (Schon, 1983, p. 68). Therefore, building on this theory, reflection-in-action was considered an important part of this study, since as a researcher practitioner I connected my research to the context of practice. Reflection-in- action has developed through my doctoral journey and is considered a significant part of my professional practice in education.

In this chapter, I reflect on my professional practice and the doctoral journey. I explore the impact of my doctoral journey on my practice and my professional identity. I then consider the influence of reflective and reflexive practice, followed by the impact of professional resilience on my practice. The chapter ends with consideration given to the dissemination of research before concluding the chapter.

## **6.2 Impact on practice and professional identity**

I will consider the last six years of my professional practice and experience, reflecting in particular on the impact of the doctoral study and on how it has developed my professional identity. I will then go on to reflect on the main influences of my doctoral study and the broader impact of my research findings on a wider audience of researchers and educational professionals. I consider my professional development through career opportunities and in particular, I acknowledge that my doctoral study has influenced the development of my professional practice in education. Taysum (2006), citing Gunter (2005), suggests that through the development of critical analysis and reflective skills, students undertaking a doctorate in education, as practitioners, may learn 'different ways of knowing and doing' (Taysum, 2006, p. 2). Furthermore, Taysum identifies that students of the doctorate of education may have experienced an extension or change of professional identity and a broadening of career pathways after their study. Taysum (2006) highlights through empirical evidence in her research study that for doctoral students engaged in the doctorate of education programme, the learning journey is often transformational. Therefore, as I reflect on my own doctoral journey, the implications of my learning journey being transformational are evidenced in a broadening of my career path into wider educational practice, higher education and research. I acknowledge that on my doctoral journey I have increased my critical analysis and reflective skills, which have both deepened my research skills and enhanced my professional work, especially when assessing new situations.

Hooper and Xu (2019) also acknowledge the complexity of professional identity, suggesting that doctoral students who identify as being both a professional practitioner and a student, may experience an identity transition. They assert that this transition is as valuable a part of the doctoral journey as becoming an expert in a certain field. I identify with Hooper and Xu's view as I have been both a professional practitioner and a doctoral student. As such, I have experienced an identity transition. Cunningham (2018) identifies this ongoing development through the journey of the doctoral study, suggesting that it is an evolution in a student's identity. I acknowledge, as a part of my doctoral journey, the expertise that I have as an educational leader but consider that I have developed further as a researcher, with expertise in the field of educational leadership and more specifically, distributed leadership. My experience of the doctoral journey and identity development contrasts with Abbot and Mawson's (2017) suggestion that doctoral students who undertake their doctoral study on a part-time basis while working, can question their identity, since their professional practice identity is stronger than their doctoral student identity. From my own experience of the doctoral journey, my transformation, while ongoing, has taken place over time through deepening my knowledge, skill and intellectual insight of distributed leadership, through doctoral study and my research study. Following both Taysum (2006) and Hooper and Xu (2019), I believe that this level of study has specifically contributed to me gaining wider educational practice opportunities as my learning journey has deepened and my analytical skill set has increased. As such I have broadened my professional identity, while increasing my knowledge and understanding of the elements and qualities of successful distributed school leadership through my research. In my view, this has demonstrated to others that I have invested substantial time in academic study around effective leadership.

Furthermore, I have highlighted to others the seriousness and importance that I place on leadership development through academic research and study. Unintentionally, this may have influenced those from whom I have sought further opportunity, by way of career progression.

In considering career progression, I identify an example from 2017 where I progressed from Headship to a more diverse post, after some 20 years in Deputy Headships, Headships and an Executive Headship. Following a successful interview, I was offered the post of a Director of Education, joining primary and secondary Directors, with specific responsibilities for both quality assurance and improvement in secondary education within a Norfolk trust of 14 academies. In this post I was also asked to develop best practice in safeguarding, supporting the Headteacher of a small rural primary school, thereby enabling the Headteacher to improve safeguarding practice. This divergence into primary academy support was built on consultant Headteacher roles in both secondary and primary settings in the previous year.

Within this Director of Education post, I employed techniques from the Appreciative Inquiry methodology developed throughout my doctoral studies. More specifically, the doctoral journey has given me the opportunity to develop my ability to analyse data and information, and to critically analyse data. The increase in these analytical skills has impacted my professional work, enabling me to explore more successfully elements of staff practice, leadership practice and 'student voice'. I used reflective and reflexive practice, discussed later within this chapter. The summary of the

leadership review and proposals for introducing a distributed leadership model, and 'student voice' work identifying preferred teaching and learning styles, was reported to the Board of Directors of the Trust and formed the basis of an action plan for this academy, which led to initiating change. This culminated in the academy achieving improved A level results; the best GCSE attainment for ten years; improved student attendance and a significant reduction in the persistent absence of students across the academy. The significance of these improvements is that I acknowledge the increased skills development of critical thinking and critical analysis linked to increased theoretical knowledge and practical application. From my doctoral study, the development of these key skills has enabled me to increase a responsiveness to change that is critical in my professional practice.

Following on from this post, I was successful in being appointed as an external expert (EE) to the DfE over a three-year period. Once again, I believe that the progression and quality of my ongoing professional development through engaging in the doctorate programme contributed to this part-time appointment. It enabled me to demonstrate my passion for education, my experience and my commitment to the highest level of relevant study. While it would not be appropriate to expound upon the details or nature of this specialised work, I would suggest that there has been a tenable link between the areas of focus of my review work for the DfE, and my extensive leadership experience which includes significantly developing research, study and analytical skills from my doctoral study. In particular, developing critical thinking, analysing and evaluating skills at the doctoral level has been beneficial in reviewing DfE teaching and learning resources on specialist subjects linked to safeguarding. For example, in reviewing resources it was essential to scrutinise the

text, to challenge any bias and to ensure that each presentation was based on evidence, supported by examples that were relevant and accessible to all groups of people.

Furthermore, evidence of my engagement in research as a practitioner can be demonstrated through many examples. These include my doctoral research project, students from school taking part in local and national university projects, and partnership work developed with ARU which included an arts and literacy project and the Children's University Programme. Examples of staff development have included supporting staff who engaged with any form of research activity or part-time study at university as part of their continuing staff development.

Finally in reflecting upon the impact of the doctoral study on my professional practice, from 2019 to 2020, I became an associate Lecturer on the BA Primary Education Studies course and a Lecturer on the distance learning MBA (Masters in Business Administration) course, delivering the 'developing management systems' module at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. In agreement with the findings of Hooper and Xu (2019), this experience and opportunity have contributed to 'the process of becoming and belonging' in relation to the development of my professional identity within a research community at Anglia Ruskin University (Hooper and Xu, 2019, p. 31). This transition has felt profoundly significant for my professional development, especially having the opportunity to deliver an element of a master's course. I placed enormous value on contributing to the research community in this way, tutoring British and international students as well as students

from a wider global community on the MBA course. In designing some of the material for the MBA module, I was able to highlight some aspects of my findings in the slides that I presented on the course, centred around effective leadership and distributed leadership.

The influence of this focus was echoed in some of the varied assignments from MBA students, where students made differing evidence-based links to effective management systems, systems leadership and effective distributed leadership, referring to the theory that I had presented in my work. Similarly, as a Lecturer on an undergraduate education course, I was able to blend aspects of my vast experience as a school leader and Headteacher with the professional capacity of academic lecturing, exploring theory and relating it to teaching practice. There were occasions where I cited relevant examples and deliberations from my practice as a Headteacher and this, in turn, promoted lively and healthy debate among class members as well as moments of reflection for students as future teachers. From this experience, I suggest that the impact of my doctoral study on my professional practice was partially evidenced in acknowledging my study in a relevant context to my undergraduate and postgraduate students, linking practice to theory and learning. I would explain this occasional recounting from my experience when relevant as 'bringing theory to life', which supports Wrenn and Wrenn's (2009) notion of the necessity to combine theory and practice within education degree study. It needs to be stressed that this interjection was proportionate and occasional. This point is important to acknowledge, otherwise, it could be argued that these actions could have been interpreted as a misuse of power (Symonds, 2020). This would therefore be contradictory to the current shift in higher education towards a greater

emphasis on student-centred learning, with a heightened awareness of the associated transformation of power relationships between student and lecturer (Hoidn and Klemencic, 2020).

### **6.3 Impact on practice – Reflection and Reflexivity**

During the past six years I have significantly developed being a reflective and reflexive practitioner. In accordance with Denzin and Lincoln (2011), who acknowledge that these two characteristics can be used in a similar fashion, I have developed these two aspects simultaneously. I have expanded the reflective process of thinking deeply about a professional issue and enhanced reflexivity through thinking about my own practice and changing my practice. I have applied new knowledge based on successful practice to resolve issues and improve situations, leading to positive outcomes.

Examples of reflexivity in my professional practice in recent years as a Headteacher, Educational Consultant and Director of Education have included developing leadership voice, staff voice or student voice to develop the practice at various academies. Etherington (2004) asserts that it may be possible for the collective voice to increase reflexivity in a variety of professional practices including health and social care and social science. However, building on this assertion, and applying it to educational settings, on each occasion, through a process of reflecting upon issues identified by staff or students, and considering a change to my practice and then change for others, it has been possible to empower others seeking to implement

changes. This development of my reflexive practice has resulted in me leading the construction and implementation of several new detailed time-based action plans to bring about change and improvement in leadership-related issues and staff- and student-related problems.

Successful outcomes generated through this reflexive process have included re-focusing the re-modelling of a distributed leadership team to allow leaders to concentrate on their successful specialist areas. The changes to the leadership model and the subsequent impact of the re-focused leadership practice led to significantly improved academy results as leaders focused on improving specific areas in line with their skill set, as opposed to each leader within the team having a more general remit. I focused small group student voice work on what successful learning felt like for students and what their preferred learning styles were, in line with the Appreciative Inquiry model. In addition, using the notion of student voice, I engaged with students who typically displayed poor attendance to the academy, to try to discover what would help to resolve attendance issues and what their learning preferences were in order to enable these students to engage more in learning. This reflexive work on 'voice' led to this academy demonstrating increased levels of attendance, from 89% to 92%, decreased levels of persistent absence of students from 22% to 15%, and an increase in examination results. Importantly, the academy secured very significant improvements in GCSE results in 2018, where English and maths combined 4 plus grades increased by 10% to 55% and English and maths combined 5 plus grades rose by 7% to 30%. I worked closely with a secondary Headteacher within the trust, on a range of whole- school improvement areas using analytical skills developed on my doctoral journey, increasing my ability to critically

analyse data and information. I believe that through questioning and changing my practice, these critical analytical skills contributed to influencing student life chances through increased success in public examinations. In an internal evaluative report, the Headteacher commented on the impact of my work that

“her work has been very important in helping us to secure very significant improvements in our GCSE results this summer with our English and maths 4 plus grades rising by 10% to 55% and our English and maths 5 plus grades rising by 7% to 30%. We have also seen significant rises in Attainment 8 and the attainment of disadvantaged students” (Headteacher, 2018).

#### **6.4 Impact on practice – Professional Resilience**

I consider that I have developed resilience significantly within my professional practice. As a serving secondary Headteacher of a large secondary academy in Essex, at the beginning of my doctoral journey, the notion of being ‘a resilient Headteacher or a resilient leader’ was not a new concept to me. As Beltman and Mansfield (2018) identify, resilience in education has been acknowledged as necessary to meet the demands of the profession especially in the last decade. In line with the national standards of excellence for Headteachers advice (DfE, 2015a), I have always identified resilience as a personal quality that is needed to meet all of the challenges successfully in headship. Therefore, I have considered professional resilience as a characteristic that has enabled me to be a successful Headteacher,

no matter how challenging the circumstances. My view is that in being resilient, one can master difficulties effectively, whether for example, solving complex strategic and operational problems or promoting learning through intricate curriculum developments. During the years of my doctoral study, I have continued to embrace the quality of resilience positively and actively. I recognise that resilience brings an empowerment and sustainability to allow for professional growth in practice, especially in situations that provide new learning, or physical challenge requiring perseverance. Furthermore, I suggest that resilience combined with ambition can be a very powerful leadership dynamic.

Demonstration of resilience according to Resnick (2018) requires the intrinsic motivation of a person. I view ambition as a quality that is similar to motivation, and a key driver in a person signalling a resilient character. In my experience, resilience can either be professional, or personal, or a mixture of both. This experience differs from Southwick, et al., (2014) who comment that those showing resilience in the workplace do not necessarily demonstrate resilience in a personal situation. Instead, I argue that on occasions, personal and professional qualities become fused together. On reflection, one of the driving forces of my career has been the combination of the ambition for a better education for children and young people linked to my resilience as an educational leader. My experience from professional practice, working alongside others to impact school improvement has demonstrated that distributed leadership combined with ambition and resilience has led to an increase in student achievement. As such, schools and academies that I have either

led or supported have increased in academic attainment and student attendance quite significantly.

I have found that ambition and resilience have increased the agentic power of distributed leadership to enable further school improvement. The ambition of a leader is identified by Collins (2001) as a characteristic that is focused firstly as being ambitious for the cause, the organisation and the purpose of the organisation. Therefore, I agree with Collins (2001) and I recognise in my own professional practice, the powerful combination of a professional ambition for the improvement of the organisation I have been working with and the quality of professional resilience. As such, some examples from the last six years since commencing my doctoral studies, demonstrate the combination of my ambition and my professional resilience in helping to secure academy improvements through distributed leadership and an ambitious vision of school improvement and student achievement. Together these qualities have enabled me to focus on continually trying to improve the life chances of children and staff and build a strong learning community, where research is a part of the learning of students and staff. Furthermore, evidence of a commitment to the ambition of increasing life chances of students can be seen in a variety of significant positive trends in improvements from in-practice evidence.

In one example, I supported a Headteacher of a large academy in the east of England that Ofsted judged 'required improvement'. I reviewed the distributed leadership team with the Headteacher and the senior leadership team, bringing a greater clarity and focus to improve a range of whole school areas. I used critical

analysis skills to influence student life chances, demonstrated through improved public examinations. I believe that resilience has also been a necessary quality in developing as an Associate Lecturer on the ARU, MBA distance learning programme, where I benefitted from the opportunity of delivering the 'developing management systems' module. This professional development and experience also enabled me to discuss aspects of my research with other British and international leaders which I believe helped to shape the critical thinking of others.

Resilience has been an essential quality in combining professional practice with doctoral study. I believe that I have consciously role modelled resilience to others, especially during the challenges presented in my professional practice at the onset of, and during the pandemic between 2019 and 2020. For example, as the pandemic evolved and developed, undergraduate student learning at university moved from 'face to face' lectures to online learning. During this transition, there were many challenges to overcome for both students and university staff and I believe that I role modelled the quality of resilience to students and staff that I encountered and interacted with as a colleague. The quality of resilience was necessary on a personal and professional level, to cope with the difficulties and anxiety experienced by students and staff as the pandemic evolved.

Leppin et al. (2014) argue that resilience is characterised by the need to both manage and adapt to stress. They cite Earovolino-Ramirez's (2007) definition of resilience as 'the ability of individuals to absorb life's challenges and to carry on and persevere in the face of adversity' (Leppin, Gionfriddo, Sood et al., 2014, p. 2;

Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007). With this in mind, I am very proud that undergraduate and postgraduate students that I have taught online during the pandemic period in 2020 also demonstrated determination and resilience. This was evidenced in students being able to finish the trimester and submit their assignments successfully. However, I believe that empathy and a positive, encouraging and sympathetic tutoring style helped to enable students to accomplish as much as they did. While any evidence I have may be considered anecdotal, a high submission rate of assignments from the majority of my students at that time, would indicate that they had the necessary support needed to complete their assignments and achieve well. The support that I was able to provide for undergraduate students is modelled from the support I have received in doctoral supervision. Van Rooij et al. (2019) identify the quality of academic support through good supervision as contributing positively to both academic and psychological factors that support doctoral success. I acknowledge this and I am appreciative of this blend of focus on academic study and enquiry of well-being that I have experienced from my supervisors. I believe that these qualities of academic support and enquiry of my well-being, especially during the recent pandemic, contributed to my ability to remain resilient on my doctoral journey.

I have increased resilience in academic study and I am confident that the Doctor of Education Programme has developed my resilience; for example, through key skills development in research methods, theoretical knowledge and practical application. There were methodological challenges surrounding revisiting participating academy leaders for the second time to present my initial findings and receive further input from participants through group fora. As the Headteachers at each academy could

not allow this planned research activity to take place due to senior leaders' time commitments, an adaptation of my research design was necessary to fulfil this part of the Appreciative Inquiry. These issues developed my resilience to cope with the challenges of academic research, particularly social research with participants and stimulated creative thinking to develop the innovation required to adapt the Appreciative Inquiry model. On the one hand, McNiff (2016, p. 80) states that "humans are by nature creative". She connects creativity to generating original thinking and suggests that the academic research quality of creative thinking takes time. On the other hand, Etherington (2004) links creativity to reflexivity in research as part of her consideration of academic life. The development of original ideas and innovation is presented by Dweck (2006) as a growth mindset. However, Johnson, Whittington, Scholes, Angwin and Regner (2017, p. 317) define innovation as involving "the conversation of new knowledge into a new product, process or service and the putting of this into use". Therefore, I am confident that I have increased critical thinking, creative thinking, a growth mindset and innovative skills during my doctoral journey. Finally, I have become more resilient in the area of deepening critical thinking and critical analysis in relating research to practice, which has impacted my depth of argument construction and intellectual insight. Leshem and Trafford (2008) consider that an intellectual argument is composed of ideas that have been selected and then presented with a specific purpose in mind. Furthermore, I acknowledge that the scholarly art of argument construction through exploring and selecting knowledge "means stepping back from one's investigation, looking for connections, building bridges between theory and practice, and communicating one's knowledge effectively" (Boyer, 1990, p. 16).

## **6.5 Impact on practice – Dissemination of research**

I have begun to disseminate the research at a wider level across the southeast of England and more broadly nationally. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I had made arrangements to disseminate the research findings within the southeast through a training workshop hosted by a teaching alliance. This training workshop provided a unique opportunity to begin to address the gap identified previously through the literature review of the relationship between distributed leadership and student achievement. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this option was not possible, as a period of lockdown in England and the UK prevented this planned workshop from taking place. As an alternative event, I planned and delivered an online CPD leadership workshop for secondary and primary leaders, executed by Zoom conferencing on 16 May 2020. 21 leaders were invited to attend the workshop, through professional networking, of which 19 delegates attended from England and Wales. Delegates were widespread from seven different regions of both England and Wales and included several counties such as Essex, Cambridge, Norfolk, West Yorkshire and Swansea, as well as three London boroughs. The diverse range of leadership posts held by those attending the event included Executive Headteachers, Headteachers, Senior Leaders, Middle Leaders, and Consultants. The coverage of phases of education represented by participants included secondary, primary and all-through academies, from early years to sixth form education.

The workshop comprised a presentation, disseminating the main findings on the relationship between distributed leadership influencing student achievement and

related leadership characteristics from the research findings. The event included reflection on practice, implications of the findings for practice, and a discussion of the implications. Feedback from the discussion and after the event included reflection of leaders on promoting trust as a central characteristic of leadership that then encourages deeper distributed leadership with greater interconnectivity. Delegates noted the emphasis on trust in others as a vital part of the interdependency and interconnectivity between leaders and staff, their shared values and their shared accountability. Following this event, one delegate shared that she re-evaluated her leadership practice and has subsequently delegated more to staff, realising that she was able to trust her colleagues. She recognised the importance of emphasising greater interconnectivity through deeper trust linked to their shared action, moral purpose, shared values and shared accountability. Another delegate reviewed and re-evaluated context-specific shared values experienced in her practice, after moving to a different location, realising that shared values were unique to the location and context. She identified that she had attempted to transfer values from a previous academy that were not the expression of the new academy she had joined and from reflecting after the workshop she addressed this, reviewing the new academy's shared values and embracing those values in her practice.

At the end of this successful event, I set up a 'professional independent network' (PIN) for this group of professionals. The purpose is to provide an ongoing network opportunity promoting dialogue and reflection of practice, sharing ideas, innovation and additional support through this network during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Approximately 12 delegates from the event requested to be a part of this network, and the initial communication circulated by a newsletter focused on

innovation and examples of practice in preparing for the return of secondary and primary students to school during June 2020. Subsequent ongoing networking has enabled smaller groups or individuals to engage in any practice-based topics and issues in a practical way that helped and supported those participating in the early challenges of their academies remaining open through the pandemic.

The research community at ARU has enabled me to make a contribution to knowledge and disseminate aspects of the findings from the study. For example, I presented a poster at the Research Conference in 2015 where my poster was a part of a poster exhibition. I engaged in discussion about my research with conference delegates who were either doctoral students or university academics (see Appendix 6). This early experience within one year of the commencement of my doctoral journey was extremely positive and helped me to quickly feel part of the research community at ARU. I then built on this positive experience in exploring other opportunities to disseminate my research. For example, the theme of the annual Faculty research conference in 2019 was collaboration and innovation, where I presented the innovative methodological adaptation of the 3D hybrid model of Appreciative Inquiry, adapted from the 4D Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) model from my research. Also, in December 2019, I presented this aspect of my research on methodological innovation to a peer review group that I attended regularly, which resulted in thought-provoking discussion on Appreciative Inquiry and distributed leadership.

In June 2020 I shared and disseminated findings from my research at an interdisciplinary postgraduate virtual summer workshop. I also created a space for reflection of practice. The conference theme was 'methodology matters'. Doctoral students suggested that they had benefitted from my presentation, in particular from the methodological adaptation, demonstrating overcoming any problems from the research process and the resulting adaptation of the methodology. Some students confirmed that their learning and understanding had deepened through this part of my presentation as I linked theory and practice closely. Students felt that this dilemma of the methodological adaptation was pertinent to their research design and methodological approach, due to the prevailing COVID-19 restrictions. They were encouraged by the positivity, courage and resilience that I had demonstrated in ensuring a solution was found at the point needed in my own research, which they considered was significant to them during the current, challenging period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In February 2020, I presented my findings and reflections to the ARU Participatory Inquiry Forum (PIF) which included a cross-section of researchers and professionals from the university. A summary of my findings from the presentation was added to the university PIF blog. The blog is accessible to a wide audience of researchers and professionals who are interested in participatory inquiry, Appreciative Inquiry or methodological adaptation enabling them to engage with my findings. The opportunity to consider this knowledge may increase the skill, knowledge or understanding of those accessing the summary, relating to distributed leadership in education and secondary academies. Having my work in the public domain is

affirming and has given me the opportunity for wider visibility and impact in both research and practice.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

On reflection, through the doctoral journey I have developed as an interpretivist and constructivist qualitative researcher. Through several opportunities I have sought to have an impact as a researcher, and the implications of my research are presented in Chapter 7. I have demonstrated the impact of the doctoral journey on my own practice. I acknowledge the significance of creating meaning that participants have brought to their reality through my research and the importance of the qualitative nature of the data that I collected. In particular, I recognise the importance to my doctoral development through employing a methodology that promoted participants' voices and emphasised participants, focusing on their most successful experiences as leaders. Through the development of my doctoral journey as an authentic experience, I have felt a part of a community of researchers. This community of practice is very different from my professional practice and I argue that it is a transitional part of my doctoral journey. Through presenting my findings at different conferences and fora, I have made a contribution to knowledge and sought to influence practice from involvement and engagement with professionals. In presenting the conclusion next in Chapter 7, I provide a research summary and present my contributions to knowledge from my research. I consider any limitations of my research and the implications of it. Within the trustworthiness framework (Shenton, 2003), I consider the transferability of my research rather than generalisability, before finally presenting recommendations from my research.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **Conclusion**

#### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents a research summary, and my original contributions to knowledge. The contributions begin to address the gap identified in the literature concerning the influence of distributed leadership on student achievement. There is also an original contribution, supplementary to the main research findings, in the presentation of a hybrid, adapted methodology of the Appreciative Inquiry model. The summary working definition of distributed leadership linked to the possibility statements in this chapter are a distinctive dimension of this study and are in accordance with the Appreciative Inquiry methodological approach. Together the summary definition and possibility statements offer new knowledge, understanding and in-depth insights from the perceptions of participants taking part in the research. The chapter then explores any limitations of the research, implications for practice and transferability of the research, rather than generalisability. After locating the study within existing literature, the chapter considers the assumptions presented in the research (Hammond, 2013), and then suggests recommendations for further research. The chapter closes with final comments.

## **7.2 Research summary**

### **7.2.1 Aims of the research**

This study explored senior leaders' perceptions of the influence of distributed leadership on student achievement. In order to achieve this, I selected three English secondary academies through purposive sampling with distributed leadership models and different Ofsted categories. This choice was critical in exploring the perceptions of leaders and their influence of distributed leadership on student achievement, as the range of academies covered the Ofsted categories of 'outstanding', 'good' and 'requires improvement'. It was important to select secondary academies claiming to practise a distributed leadership model so that participants could relate their experience of distributed leadership to student achievement. The research was intended to be inductive. It aimed to elicit participant perceptions from their practice as their own lived experience (Kirsch, 1999), through individual semi-structured interviews. The plan was to follow up semi-structured interviews by a group forum in each academy to consider the initial findings and to provide an element of co-construction with participants and the opportunity for member checking to demonstrate authenticity. However, conducting group fora was not possible so I adapted the methodology and research design and I used feedback sheets, emailed to participants for this purpose instead. The study aimed to utilise Appreciative Inquiry methodology which, while it has been employed in research over three decades since 1987, may still be less used as a methodological approach in educational research compared to other fields such as health and social care and

business (Sharp, et al., 2016). The research was intended to be for school and academy leaders and wider educational professionals, increasing knowledge and a new understanding of the influence of distributed leadership on student achievement from the perspective of those in distributed leadership roles. The anticipated value, usefulness and impact of the research was to provide in-depth insight to educational professionals to improve and influence practice, and support the sharing of best practice, contributing to future success.

### **7.2.2 The research question and subsidiary questions**

This thesis explored the perceptions of leaders of distributed leadership and the influence on student achievement. In achieving this, it was necessary to answer a main research question and three subsidiary questions.

#### **The main question**

**What do participants think is the influence of distributed leadership on student achievement?**

The literature review revealed that there was a gap in empirical research into what the perception is of English secondary leaders of the influence of distributed leadership on student achievement. In answering the main question and beginning to address the identified gap in the literature, the perception of participants illustrates that the link between distributed leadership and the influence on student achievement is nebulous. However, participants identified elements of distributed leadership that together increased the quality of agency, and appeared to influence a

range of student achievement. Defining student achievement is itself contentious (Guskey, 2013) and without providing participants with a clear definition as to what is meant by student achievement, participants interpreted student achievement differently, identifying and including a broad range of student achievement.

**Subsidiary questions:**

**What do participants think are the leadership characteristics that influence student achievement?**

**What are the perceptions of distributed leadership held by the leaders of three secondary academies?**

**How do secondary academy leaders perceive that distributed leadership influences student achievement?**

**What do participants think are the leadership characteristics that influence student achievement?**

Participants in this research perceived that specific interrelated elements of distributed leadership contributed to influencing and enhancing improvements in a range of student achievement. These elements emerged from the research as trust, collaboration, shared accountability and moral purpose. These elements are presented more fully in Section 7.3.1.2.

**What are the perceptions of distributed leadership held by the leaders of three secondary academies?**

The study revealed that leaders from each academy had their own unique interpretation of distributed leadership and as such there was not one common interpretation of what distributed leadership looked like. Participants viewed the flexibility of distributed leadership as organic, allowing for the team to change according to student need. Distributed leadership was perceived as a positive leadership model in affecting outcomes relating to a wide range of student achievement. Further detail is presented later in this chapter, in Section 7.3.

### **How do secondary academy leaders perceive that distributed leadership influences student achievement?**

The secondary academy leaders who took part in this research gave a range of examples of how their leadership within a distributed leadership model influenced student achievement. Each academy had in common that their view of student achievement was broad. Participant perceptions of student achievement included a wide range of academic and non-academic achievement that was context-specific; this is presented in the next section.

### **7.3 Contribution to knowledge**

This study has made a significant contribution to understanding the relationship between distributed leadership and student achievement through exploring the perceptions of participants. A summary of my contributions to knowledge are:

- The study identified four interrelated elements to distributed leadership revealed in the research as trust, collaboration, shared accountability and moral purpose that created four qualities within distributed leadership teams that together, led to enhanced student achievement. These elements are presented in more detail in Section 7.3.1-5.
- The four elements enabled the development of the qualities of agency, interdependency, interconnectivity and flexibility of the distributed leadership teams. Combined, the elements and qualities act as a powerful catalyst in enabling transformational capabilities within a distributed leadership team, leading to enhanced student achievement. This is presented in further detail in Section 7.3.1-5.
- This study enabled participants from the distributed leadership teams of three secondary academies in the southeast of England to participate in research exploring the relationship between distributed leadership and student achievement in a way that has not previously been done. Each academy setting was unique and the study of the three academies to explore distributed leadership practice and influence was also original.
- The study brings new insight to the importance of flexibility within distributed leadership enabling middle leadership to occupy dual roles as senior leaders and faculty or department leaders where belonging to more than one group adds agency in influencing student achievement.

- A contribution to knowledge is presented through an emerging summary working definition of distributed knowledge linked to five possibility statements below in Section 7.3.1. The main themes from the research, the four elements of distributed leadership of trust, collaboration, shared accountability and moral purpose, as part of the working definition of distributed leadership are presented as unique statements, along with a statement on student achievement. These possibility statements offer a collective portrait of future possibilities of effective distributed leadership. This contribution to knowledge is discussed further in Chapter 7, 7.9 under recommendations for further research.
- A contribution to knowledge, a hybrid methodology, is presented in further detail as an adaptation of the Appreciative Inquiry model in Section 7.3.1.6.

The contribution to knowledge presented through an emerging working definition of distributed leadership linked to the possibility statements in Section 7.3.1 below concludes the destiny phase of the Appreciative Inquiry cycle, which in this study is presented the third phase, Design and Destiny. These statements contribute to existing knowledge of the relationship between distributed leadership and student achievement through in-depth insights revealed from the study, and in so doing begin to address the gap in the literature by suggesting elements and qualities that

when combined increase the agency of leadership that influences student achievement. In line with the Appreciative Inquiry methodological approach, the possibility statements present the main findings, visioning the ideal future of what may be possible for distributed leadership teams to bring greater efficacy to student achievement.

### **7.3.1 A working definition of distributed leadership presented as possibility statements.**

A working definition of distributed leadership emerged from the findings of this research: 'The four elements of distributed leadership, of trust, collaboration, shared accountability and moral purpose are integral to the shared actions of leaders, increasing leadership agency through the interdependency, interconnectivity and flexibility of distributed leadership'. Each of these elements associated with the working definition of distributed leadership are presented as possibility statements and are an original contribution to knowledge; the statements are constructed to build on the findings revealed in the study (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005; Hammond, 2013). They uniquely offer the optimum vision for each distributed leadership element, and in so doing offer the possibility within distributed leadership of a desired future that may enable further success.

### 7.3.1.1

#### **A working definition of distributed leadership: The distributed leadership element of trust - Possibility Statement 1**

*Definition: 'The four elements of distributed leadership, of **trust**, collaboration, shared accountability and moral purpose are integral to the shared actions of leaders, increasing leadership agency through the interdependency, interconnectivity and flexibility of distributed leadership'.*

*Within distributed leadership, trusting each other is important. Trust is integral to distributed leadership, enabling leaders to focus on better student achievement. A high level of trust creates agency through fostering interdependence and interconnectivity among the team, which is reciprocal. Trust allows leaders to have honest team conversations, directly solving student problems and removing barriers together so that all students, including disadvantaged students achieve well. The trust of the Headteacher empowers other leaders through distributed leadership and results in the empowerment of staff with successful strategies distributed across other teams impacting student achievement.*

The research demonstrated that the element of trust between team members appeared to develop as a result of the distributed leadership model and emanated from leadership interdependency and interconnectivity of sharing. Different

components of trust were important in the relationship between distributed leadership and student achievement; mutual trust, trusting others, and being trusted were equally important and considered integral to securing better achievement for students. The study reveals a new understanding of the significance of interdependence and interconnectivity in the reciprocity of trust. Trust within distributed leadership teams was the foremost important element in solving problems directly relating to disadvantaged student achievement, allowing barriers to student achievement to be removed, and therefore influencing the achievement of all students. Trust enabled participants to collectively share actions creating the conditions for a greater agency, with leaders primarily focused on influencing student achievement. Trust contributed to participants building a transformational capability together in each academy, even though each academy may have been at a different stage of a transformational journey. Significantly, a high level of trust expedited leaders working together, enabling their shared leadership skills and actions to concentrate unequivocally on student-focused strategies. Trust between teams was in contrast to the prevailing culture of distrust among leaders identified in the literature.

#### **7.3.1.2**

#### **A working definition of distributed leadership: The distributed leadership element of collaboration - Possibility Statement 2**

*Definition: 'The four elements of distributed leadership, of trust, **collaboration**, shared accountability and moral purpose are integral to the shared actions of*

*leaders, increasing leadership agency through the interdependency, interconnectivity and flexibility of distributed leadership’.*

*Distributed leadership is collaborative, working together through flexible, hybrid leadership patterns that focus on successful student achievement. Distributed, collaborative teams recognise the broadest range of achievement of all students, with common, shared vision, expectations, values, ethos and goals enabling greater effectiveness of distributed leadership. A deep sense of collaboration among distributed leadership teams fosters working closely together regularly, rather than in isolation. Through a greater collaborative approach, leaders develop emotional intelligence within the leadership team, helping to create the conditions together to influence student achievement.*

The research concluded that participants believed that collaborative teams, with common, shared expectations, values and goals enabled greater effectiveness through shared action. Initiating shared action increased the quality of agency within the distributed leadership teams, where importantly, the focus was on the achievement of all students. It was significant that leaders worked very closely together, resulting in building a shared leadership capability, rather than working in isolation. The collaboration included the interconnectivity of emotional intelligence between participants, where empathy enhanced the leaders’ ability to resolve problems relating to student issues, and supported their shared actions. Empathy

focused on both leaders and students and helped leaders to recognise different perspectives, broadening their understanding of any problems, which facilitated finding solutions. Participants thought that working collaboratively with an increased understanding of solving issues increased leadership efficiency, and considered that this was a factor in the leadership team's ability to influence student achievement.

There was a deliberate attempt to have a hybrid distributed leadership model at each academy, contributing to a new understanding of distributed leadership. These unique patterns of flexible, interconnected leadership enabled leaders to oscillate between teams according to student need. Flexibility and interconnectivity were important qualities in hybrid leadership positions, as some middle leaders occupied Assistant Headteacher roles. This flexibility allowed leaders to have a greater impact by moving between different teams, helping the academies to meet their aims and distributing successful strategies effectively across departments. Therefore, hybrid teams increased the power of agency in initiating distributed leadership action, resulting in influencing student achievement. The research found that there was not a consistent model of distributed leadership at the three academies and that hybrid distributed leadership in some instances was practised simultaneously with elements of hierarchical leadership models as moderated distributed leadership.

### 7.3.1.3

#### **A working definition of distributed leadership: The distributed leadership element of shared accountability - Possibility Statement 3**

*Definition: 'The four elements of distributed leadership, of trust, collaboration, **shared accountability** and moral purpose are integral to the shared actions of leaders, increasing leadership agency through the interdependency, interconnectivity and flexibility of distributed leadership'.*

*Through a strong consensus, leaders of distributed leadership, whether working individually or together, share the accountability for every aspect of student achievement. Leaders' interdependency of shared accountability within distributed leadership promotes a culture of everyone being accountable for everything. The interconnectivity of leaders promotes leaders recognising and acknowledging their shared accountability for distributed leadership across their academies. A strong commitment to the shared accountability of leaders results in influencing student achievement.*

This study reveals a new understanding from the perception of leaders of distributed leadership teams of the importance of shared accountability built across distributed leadership teams. Each leadership team acknowledged the significance of shared accountability through the interdependency and interconnectivity of leaders within

the team. Participants emphasised their commitment to shared accountability for activities that resulted in influencing student achievement. Significantly, a consensus of prioritising student achievement was held across the teams rather than focused on senior management, connecting shared accountability within distributed leadership teams to shared actions across each academy. Such an approach was based on a culture of shared accountability among each distributed leadership team.

#### 7.3.1.4

#### **A working definition of distributed leadership: The distributed leadership element of moral purpose - Possibility Statement 4**

*Definition: 'The four elements of distributed leadership, of trust, collaboration, shared accountability and **moral purpose** are integral to the shared actions of leaders, increasing leadership agency through the interdependency, interconnectivity and flexibility of distributed leadership'.*

*The moral purpose and moral leadership of leaders are integral to qualities of social justice. Leaders do everything possible to enable all students, especially disadvantaged students, to achieve well in a range of academic and non-academic achievements. Leaders' moral purpose links to shared values that are context-specific and make a difference in the lives of students, helping them to become successful adults. A culture of success pervades across teams,*

*increasing impact on students. Practice-based strategic initiatives are continually developed to ensure regular engagement with students and parents together, taking every opportunity to celebrate all student achievements.*

To summarise, from the study respondents perceived that the moral purpose of leaders focused on making a difference to the life chances of children through influencing student achievement; leaders believed that they built a shared moral purpose that related to the context of their work, reflecting their community. This moral purpose often appeared to overlap with aspects of social justice, such as a strong focus on the achievement of disadvantaged students. Importantly, rather than overlooking the context of the academy, the context was an integral part of the moral purpose of leaders, evidenced through shared values of leaders; the moral purpose of distributed leadership was context-specific. In bringing together context-specific shared values and student achievement, the participants, through the research, contribute to a new insight into how integral the recognition of the context of each academy and the distributed leadership team's shared values may be in influencing student outcomes positively. From the participants' perspective, moral purpose and moral leadership in distributed leadership teams enabled leaders to collectively solve problems so that all students could achieve well. Leaders were committed to shared values, including a strong belief that creating a culture of success was essential. This research revealed that leaders taking part in the study perceived that the moral purpose of leaders was expressed through the interconnectivity of purpose and agency of distributed leadership teams, which facilitated students doing well. Combining moral purpose with moral leadership, participants brought new insight to

the importance of leaders taking a strategic approach to parental engagement, providing many opportunities for students and parents to attend regular, informative events and to celebrate achievement together.

#### **7.3.1.5**

#### **A working definition of distributed leadership: Possibility statement 5 - Student achievement**

*Definition: 'The four elements of distributed leadership, of trust, collaboration, shared accountability and moral purpose are integral to the shared actions of leaders, increasing leadership agency through the interdependency, interconnectivity and flexibility of distributed leadership'. Together this increased agency of distributed leadership appears to influence student achievement.*

*Leaders are ambitious for their students. The continual focus of leaders on student achievement ensures that all students can achieve well. Student achievement is recognised through a broad range of academic and non-academic success in both curricular and extracurricular activities. Students are encouraged and enabled through the support of leaders and staff to achieve their very best in all areas of the academy. This achievement is facilitated by a bespoke approach to PSHE, such that all students' personal development enhances their ability to do well in a broad range of*

*achievements. Improved attendance and behaviour, sporting success, contributing to the arts and representing the academy in national and international competitions are celebrated alongside academic improvements. Increased progress in academic performance towards personal academic targets in all subjects results in improved outcomes of public examination grades at GCSE and A level.*

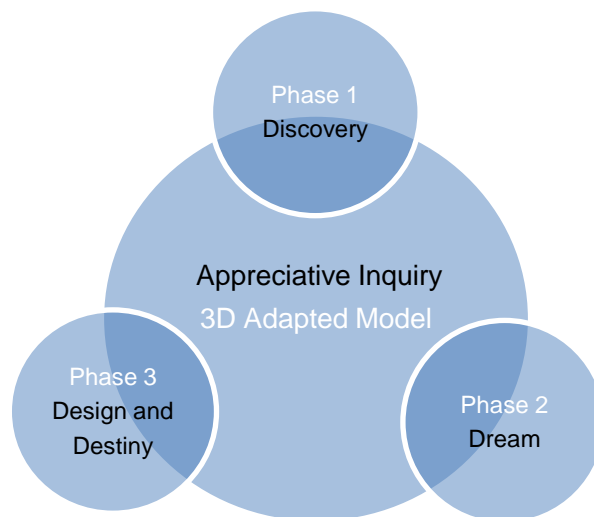
This research concluded that at each academy leaders recognised student achievement through the broadest range of academic and non-academic activities both within the curriculum and from extracurricular activities. Leaders related their input to student outcomes, by adopting highly collaborative approaches to ensure that students had the opportunity to take part in national and international competitions, alongside an academic focus. Distributed leadership teams believed that they were strongly focused on improving the individual academic achievement of students through setting aspirational GCSE targets of one grade higher or setting MEGS (minimum expected grades). Leaders were intentional in their commitment to increasing student progress through innovative successful strategies which were distributed across teams within each academy. Perhaps controversially, participants included improvements in student behaviour and attendance within their definition of student achievement. In planning the research design, I deliberately did not define student achievement, as I felt that an important element of the research was that participants gave their own unique interpretations of student achievement. The most unexpected element of this research was that leaders included aspects of positive social behaviour as a part of student achievement; for example, keeping students out

of gang culture. Where participants considered gang culture to be prevalent outside an academy, a new insight into the relationship between the context of the academy and student achievement was highlighted. Leaders were innovative in creating strategies to encourage greater parent and student engagement in increasing achievement as well as celebrating achievement. It appeared that the overarching aim of each distributed leadership team to focus on student achievement evidenced at each academy transferred into leaders' values. The study brought new insight into distributed leadership demonstrating high levels of trust, collaboration, shared accountability and moral purpose, thus increasing leadership agency resulting in the outcome of influencing student achievement.

#### **7.3.1.6 Contribution to knowledge: Hybrid methodology - adapted Appreciative Inquiry Methodology**

The study adapted the Appreciative Inquiry methodology into a hybrid 3D Appreciative Inquiry model. In this hybrid model (see Figure 11), the Ds signify 1) Discovery; 2) Dream and 3) Design and Destiny combined. This adaptation develops Cooperrider and Whitney's (2005) 4D Appreciative Inquiry model comprising 1) Discovery; 2) Dream; 3) Design and 4) Destiny (Figure 1). Through the adapted hybrid model, I carefully considered the time constraints of the participants at the 3D stage (Design and Destiny). The adaptation was necessary as I sought an efficient time response enabling a co-construction element and allowing for member checking replacing the planned group fora; the need for this adaptation is presented fully within the limitations section of this chapter. In this way, participants could contribute to the final co-construction element of the research and Appreciative Inquiry

methodology through considering the Design and Destiny phases together. Emailed feedback sheets replaced the group fora. An open comment box on the feedback sheet enabled several participants to make affirmative comments. These participant comments expanded on or concurred with the initial findings, supporting the intention of the feedback sheets to form an important part of the methods being demonstrably valid (McNiff and Whitehead, 2009).



**Figure 11: The hybrid 3D adaptation of Appreciative Inquiry Methodology based on the 4D model by Cooperrider and Whitney (2005).**

#### **7.4 Limitations of the research**

This small-scale study encountered limitations concerning access to participants due to time constraints and the scope of the small-scale study. The limitations are explained in detail below and are also addressed through recommendations for further research.

The limitation that emerged at the data collection point of my research was the issue of access to participants, with their time being protected by the Headteacher as gatekeeper at each academy. The pressure and workload in each academy may have contributed to the decision of the Headteachers to only release participants for a specific amount of time. However, this tension was not explored as it was outside of the scope of the research. The unforeseen limitation of access to participants prevented participants from taking part in the proposed group fora. I had designed the group fora to ensure a robust approach to the research design. I had planned to present the initial findings to the participants and elicit their views as the final co-construction element of the research and Appreciative Inquiry methodology and to allow member checking. This intention of the research process had been outlined to each participant at the start of the research through a participant information sheet. In overcoming this limitation, in the absence of the expected group fora, I constructed an emailed 'participant feedback sheet' that collated participants' views of the initial findings at this stage in the process. Furthermore, in resolving this limitation, the final two stages of the Appreciative Inquiry methodology usually presented as 3) Design and 4) Destiny, were adapted and combined into a final 3) 'Design and Destiny' phase of the Appreciative Inquiry methodology.

Another limitation was the scope of this small-scale study and the limited resources available. As a serving secondary Headteacher, this research was undertaken on a part-time basis over several years as part of my self-funded professional doctorate in education studies. This study represents a snapshot in time of three secondary

academies selected through purposive sampling, and the research was conducted by me as a single researcher. Had the research been funded, it may have been possible to fund a research assistant to increase the scope of the research to include more academy leaders from distributed leadership teams from several different parts of England. A longitudinal study may have increased the insights of the research findings.

A further limitation of the research was the scope of the participants in the inquiry. I deliberately chose to explore senior leaders' perceptions of distributed leadership relating to student achievement. In seeking to address the gap in the literature relating to distributed leadership and student achievement, I felt that the starting point to build on existing literature should be a small-scale study inquiry into leadership perceptions of distributed leadership and its influence. Time did not permit me to extend this research to include other stakeholders. By restricting my research to senior leaders, I am confident that my research is robust.

Two further limitations concern interpretation. Firstly, as a Headteacher, I may have interpreted the participants' experiences with my unconscious or inherent bias. While I set out the research question and subsidiary questions as open questions, in a manner that would encourage eliciting the views of participants, I still may have interpreted their responses from my experience as a Headteacher and senior leader of many years. I addressed any inherent bias in my interpretation through a construction element of the research and through member checking. Secondly, I also acknowledge that participants could have misinterpreted or provided interpretations

of their situation or experience that may or may not represent the experience of that moment, or space in time, and could therefore represent a partial context. This may not be the same as how I have interpreted the participants' experience, taking account of my insider/outsider position as an educational practitioner who was not known in a familiar way to any of the three academies or a part of their distributed leadership teams.

The participants may have known that I was a Headteacher, as I had been a Headteacher in the southeast of England for several years. Therefore they may have assumed a power dynamic to the situation of me being both a researcher and a secondary Headteacher and may have been eager to please me. This possible power dynamic may have influenced the participants' interpretation of experience or they may have responded to questions with answers that they believed I would want to hear. There is no way of confirming this possible limitation; however, if the study included more academies, then perhaps it would affirm some responses more than others, if the sample were larger. To address a possible power dynamic, all participants were treated equally and the Appreciative Inquiry approach taken was robust in ensuring that each participant followed the same interview process. The co-constructed element of the Appreciative Inquiry, the third phase, ensured that all participants were presented with the initial findings and were given the opportunity to affirm the findings, and to comment or challenge through member checking.

Finally, reviewing the research practice and considering what I could have done differently, I could have constructed a shared understanding of distributed leadership

to avoid different interpretations of what distributed leadership is. It might have been helpful to participants if I had circulated some pre-research reading to increase a shared understanding of what distributed leadership might be. Had I offered a definition of student achievement to participants, they could have explored their perceptions and experience and presented their interpretations from the starting point of the definition.

### **7.5 Implications of the research**

This research acknowledges the importance of sharing the research findings in education, enabling practitioners to gain a greater understanding of distributed leadership and its relationship with student achievement.

The study has contributed towards addressing the gap between the theory and practice of leaders within distributed leadership models relating to student achievement.

Practitioners may use the study as a reflective and reflexive platform upon which to consider distributed leadership practice.

The study has the potential to open new conversations exploring the extent to which the four elements emerging from this study as a working definition of distributed leadership, of trust, collaboration, shared accountability and moral purpose manifest in their distributed leadership teams. Practitioners can consider how these elements create the environment necessary for a greater level of agency, interdependency, interconnectivity and flexibility to exist within distributed leadership teams at a localised level.

## **7.6 Transferability**

The findings may be transferable to another setting such as distributed leadership teams in other secondary academies to enhance leadership efficiency in influencing student achievement; however the findings are not generalisable. The research may also be relevant to leadership practice of primary academies, all-through (4-18) academies and sixth form colleges. The methodology of the study could be transferred to other educational settings; however, it may be less appropriate to use the Appreciative Inquiry methodology in smaller primary schools, due to the size of the setting.

## **7.7 Locating the study within the existing literature**

This study contributes to the existing literature within the field relating to the distributed leadership of English secondary schools and academies and the perception of leadership influence on student achievement. It concludes that while the influence of distributed leadership on student achievement may be nebulous, distributed leadership has a positive influence on student achievement through the combined elements of trust, collaboration, shared accountability and moral purpose. My research supports other research in the field as this study identifies that combined leadership elements appear to increase the transformational qualities of agency through increased shared action and shared accountability. The study agrees with the existing literature on the importance of moderated distributed leadership and hybrid models to meet needs.

My research differs from other literature within the field in several important ways. The study illustrates nuanced but significant accounts of a wide variety of student achievements that includes academic and non-academic achievement. The study uniquely presents the perceptions of 19 secondary school leaders from southeast England. My study identifies the importance leaders placed on practical ways of addressing aspects of social justice and removing barriers to learning, such as transport to school, anti-social behaviour and poor attendance. While it appears that there is less literature identifying what schools consider to be effective educational programmes that address gang culture, my study is distinctive in recognising the importance of the context of the educational setting. My research is different from other literature within the field as it reveals the significance of a bespoke approach to PSHE and positive student engagement which seeks to address the avoidance of students engaging in gang culture.

My research, therefore, adds valuable insights into the perceptions of secondary academy leaders of their understanding of a broader definition of student achievement. The research also illustrates that flexibility, interdependence and interconnectivity are important in adopting a hybrid form of distributed leadership, and that this flexibility allows leaders to respond in a more organic way to focus on student achievement through working with different teams, distributed across an academy. Therefore the examples of Middle leadership occupying dual roles as Senior leaders and belonging to both Faculty or Department groups and the senior distributed leadership team brings a new insight as to the importance of the flexibility of distributed leadership teams in seeking to influence student achievement.

## 7.8 Assumptions

At the start of this research, I set out some assumptions as a premise for research using the methodological approach of an Appreciative Inquiry. Firstly, the Appreciative Inquiry methodology is based on the assumption that organisations are socially constructed (Bushe, 2013), limited only by the imagination and agreements of those within the organisation. The research displays agreement through collective shared actions of those within the distributed leadership teams, suggesting that consensus within leadership teams was powerful in influencing student achievement. Secondly, Chapter 3 presented Hammond's (2013) eight assumptions (Table 1), that are a part of the Appreciative Inquiry methodological approach. These assumptions are a set of beliefs that a group of people may hold, even unconsciously, within an organisation determining that people conduct themselves in a certain way. Having accepted these assumptions, my choice of Appreciative Inquiry as a methodology challenges these assumptions, as this approach facilitates participants seeing things in a new way and considering new understanding as the first step to organisational change. Each participant was presented with and acknowledged the eight assumptions. Therefore, the key to this inquiry was the patterns of conversation and different perspectives of participants that explored new possibilities, challenging those assumptions. Hammonds' (2013) assumptions (see below) clearly recognise co-construction of knowledge by individuals and groups, the validity of multiple interpretations of events and the importance of reflection for supporting future practice.

- In every society, organisation or group something works
- What we focus on becomes our reality
- Reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities
- The act of asking questions of an organisation or group influences the group in some way
- People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known)
- If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past
- It is important to value differences
- The language we use creates our reality

## **7.9 Recommendations for further research**

Similar qualitative research could be carried out with other stakeholders to explore their perceptions bringing useful insight to distributed leadership and the influence on student achievement from Middle leaders; Heads of Faculties; Pastoral leaders and Student leaders. Future research would develop existing leadership views from the study of the relationship between distributed leadership and student achievement. Future research should also include exploring the perceptions of students and parents to further develop the empirical base of what influences student achievement and to develop the contribution to the knowledge presented in this research.

Another area of research emerging from this study should be the development of students' views of what influences the achievement of disadvantaged students, according to different contexts of schools and academies across the different phases. The data produced may differ if further research explores Ofsted rated academies in other parts of England and the UK other than the southeast and takes account of different social contexts.

An Appreciative Inquiry methodology could be a useful methodological approach in future research exploring successful aspects of leadership in education, as it engages participant 'voice' to elicit their perceptions.

A series of on-line workshops as part of the Early Career Framework (DfE, 2021) for the continuing professional development of teachers could bring useful insights from the contribution to knowledge based on the emerging working definition of distributed leadership and the possibility statements presented in 7.3.1 (7.3.1.1.-7.3.1.4). The workshops, presented in a six week block of two hour sessions should present the four elements of trust, collaboration, shared accountability and moral purpose, mapped to the possibility statements and present 7.3.1.5 student achievement as the final of the series of workshops, before concluding with a reflective and reflexive session. This series of workshops maps onto the Early Career Framework, standard 8 – Fulfil wider professional responsibilities under the following three headings under 'learning to':

- 1) Opportunities for collaboration.

2) Learning from educational research.

7) Engaging in high quality professional development can help teachers improve.

Under heading 7) the workshops also map onto 'learning how to' with reference to learning through evidence based academic research. These 'learning how to' statements also link to the effective management of teacher workload and include:

- Collaborating with colleagues
- Share the load of planning and preparation and making use of shared resources

### **Six Week, 2 hour CPD module**

Week 1, Workshop 1- Introduction and the distributed leadership element of trust

Week 2, Workshop 2- The distributed leadership element of collaboration

Week 3, Workshop 3- The distributed leadership element of shared accountability

Week 4, Workshop 4- The distributed leadership element of moral purpose

Week 5, Workshop 5- Distributed leadership influence on student achievement – optimising the influence on student achievement.

Week 6, Workshop 6- Conclusion and a reflective and reflexive session with consideration given to distributed leadership and influence on student achievement.

Finally, the time-efficient 3D methodological adaptation of the 4D Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) Appreciative Inquiry model may prove to be useful in future research

as it saves time where there is pressure on the amount of time participants are able to be released from professional duties.

### **7.10 Final comments**

The research explored participant perceptions of distributed leadership and the influence on students through eliciting distributed leadership participant voice. The research powerfully illuminates perceptions of successful collaborative leadership practice that participants deemed essential for distributed leadership teams in working together to secure a broad range of student achievement. The agency of leaders appears to influence student achievement through the interdependency, interconnectivity and flexibility of the distributed leadership team. Therefore, the elements of trust, collaboration, shared accountability and moral purpose identified by the participants are integral to the shared actions of leaders and as such, appear to act as a powerful catalyst in enabling transformational capabilities, in particular, through the lens of participants, the efficacy of student achievement. This thesis has presented participant perceptions of examples of distributed leadership practice relating to student achievement, and in so doing makes a significant and insightful contribution to knowledge and new understanding pertaining to distributed leadership and influencing student achievement. The study has provided opportunities for applying theoretical and practice-based contributions from within the field of secondary education in England.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1:

**Table 1: The Ofsted evaluation schedule and grade descriptors for a judgement of ‘outstanding’, ‘good’, or ‘requires improvement’ (Gov.uk, 2018).**

<b>The Ofsted evaluation schedule and grade descriptors</b>	
<b>The evaluation schedule taking account of:</b> The quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Personal development, behaviour and welfare. Outcomes for pupils. Effectiveness of leadership and management. The social, moral, cultural and spiritual provision and safeguarding are included within the judgement of the overall effectiveness of a school.	
<b>Grade descriptors</b>	
<b>Outstanding (1)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is outstanding.</li> <li>■ All other key judgements are likely to be outstanding. In exceptional circumstances one of the key judgements may be good, as long as there is convincing evidence that the school is improving this area rapidly and securely towards outstanding.</li> <li>■ The school's thoughtful and wide-ranging promotion of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and their physical well-being enables pupils to thrive.</li> <li>■ Safeguarding is effective.</li> </ul>	
<b>Good (2)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The quality of teaching, learning and assessment is at least good.</li> <li>■ All other key judgements are likely to be good or outstanding. In exceptional circumstances, one of the key judgement areas may require improvement, as long as there is convincing evidence that the school is improving it rapidly and securely towards good.</li> <li>■ Deliberate and effective action is taken to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and their physical well-being.</li> <li>■ Safeguarding is effective.</li> </ul>	
<b>Requires improvement (3)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Other than in exceptional circumstances, it is likely that, where the school is judged to require improvement in any of the key judgements, the school's overall effectiveness will require improvement.</li> <li>■ There are weaknesses in the overall promotion of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.</li> <li>■ Safeguarding is effective.</li> </ul>	

## Appendix 2:

An example of feedback sheets emailed to participants as co-construction and member checking of initial themes

### **Emerging themes**

<b>Top five emerging themes suggested from interviews</b>	<b>Place colour of perception of priorities from interviews</b>
<b>1.</b>	
<b>2.</b>	
<b>3.</b>	
<b>4.</b>	
<b>5.</b>	

**Note:** Participants are asked to confirm emerging themes and then use colours placed by the side of the emerging theme to suggest order of priority.

**Green** - the highest priority, **Blue** - the 2<sup>nd</sup> priority, **Orange** - the 3<sup>rd</sup> priority, **Yellow** - the 4<sup>th</sup> priority, **Red** - the least or lowest priority.

After confirming the emerging themes and suggesting priority order, the leadership team participants were asked to list three overall themes in priority order. Finally, participants were asked which one theme they felt should be the priority to take the organisation forward.

### **Emerging themes - top three priorities**

<b>Top three priorities</b> – participants to place emerging themes in order of priority to develop organisational success.	<b>The consensus</b> taken from group interviews/emailed feedback sheets. Number of participants in agreement:
---	---

1.	
2.	
3.	
<b>The priority gaining the most consensus:</b> <b>Number of participants in agreement:</b>	

Example of the suggested priority order from each participant from the feedback sheets returned.

**Suggested priority order from feedback sheet returns; examples from participants of Academy A**

<b>Emerging themes from distributed leadership</b>		<b>Emerging themes from student achievement</b>	
1.Trust	3	1.Achieving MEGs and qualifications (minimum expected grades)	1
2. Honesty	2	2.Wider and extracurricular opportunities (e.g. sporting success inside or outside of school, cooking/science/maths competitions, wow days, special events; use of school library and having extra help)	5
3. Shared accountability	4	3. Personal development, being a successful adult beyond school life as a part of society	3
4. Collaboration	1	4. Independent learning	4
5. Moral purpose (ethos and shared values)	5	5. Attendance to school	2

<b>Emerging themes from distributed leadership</b>		<b>Emerging themes from student achievement</b>	
1.Trust	3	1.Achieving MEGs and qualifications (minimum expected grades)	1
2. Honesty	4	2.Wider and extracurricular opportunities (e.g. sporting	4

		success inside or outside of school, cooking/science/maths competitions, wow days, special events; use of school library and having extra help)	
3. Shared accountability	1	3. Personal development, being a successful adult beyond school life as a part of society	3
4. Collaboration	5	4. Independent learning	2
5. Moral purpose (ethos and shared values)	2	5. Attendance to school	5

Emerging themes from distributed leadership		Emerging themes from student achievement	
1.Trust	2	1.Getting MEGs and qualifications (minimum expected grades)	2
2. Honesty	3	2.Wider and extracurricular opportunities (e.g. sporting success inside or outside of school, cooking/science/maths competitions, wow days, special events; use of school library and having extra help)	5
3. Shared accountability	4	3. Personal development, being a successful adult beyond school life as a part of society	1
4. Collaboration	1	4. Independent learning	3
5. Moral purpose (ethos and shared values)	5	5. Attendance to school	4

Emerging themes from distributed leadership		Emerging themes from student achievement	
1.Trust	1	1.Achieving MEGs (minimum expected grades) and academic attainment	4
2. Honesty	3	2.Wider and extracurricular opportunities (e.g. sporting	5

		success inside or outside of school, cooking/science/math competitions, wow days, special events; use of school library and having extra help)	
3. Shared accountability	2	3. Personal development, being a successful adult beyond school life as a part of society	1
4. Collaboration	4	4. Independent learning	3
5. Moral Purpose (ethos and shared values)	5	5. Attendance to school	2

Example of: summary of common emerging themes placed in priority order - participants of Academy A

Emerging themes from distributed leadership		Emerging themes from student achievement	
1.Trust	3,3,2,1	1.Getting MEGs (minimum expected grades) and academic attainment	1,1,2,4
2. Honesty	2,4,3,3	2.Wider and extracurricular opportunities	5,4,5,5
3. Shared accountability	4,1,4,2	3. Personal development	3,3,1,1
4. Collaboration	1,5,1,4	4. Independent learning	4,2,3,3,
5. Moral purpose (ethos and shared values)	5,2,5,5	5. Attendance to school	2,5,4,2

### Appendix 3:

Example of top three themes placed in order of priority by each participants of Portside Academy, develop student achievement.

<b>Emerging themes from distributed leadership</b>	<b>Emerging themes from student achievement</b>
1. Trust	1. Achieving MEGs and academic attainment
2. Collaboration	2. Attendance to school
3. Shared accountability	3. Personal development

<b>Emerging themes from distributed leadership</b>	<b>Emerging themes from student achievement</b>
1. Shared accountability	1. Achieving qualifications and MEGS
2. Moral purpose	2. Independent learning
3. Trust	3. Personal development

<b>Emerging themes from distributed leadership</b>	<b>Emerging themes from student achievement</b>
1. Collaboration	1. Personal development
2. Trust	2. Academic attainment
3. Honesty	3. Independent learning

<b>Emerging themes from distributed leadership</b>	<b>Emerging themes from student achievement</b>
1. Trust	1. Personal development
2. Shared accountability	2. Attendance
3. Moral purpose	3. Independent learning

Example: Summary of the three most common emerging themes placed by each participant of Academy A in ordered of priority to develop student achievement

<b>Emerging themes from distributed leadership</b>	<b>Emerging themes from student achievement</b>
1. Trust	1. Personal development

2.Shared accountability	2.MEGs and academic attainment
3.Collaboration	3.Independent learning

#### Appendix 4: Feedback letter

Dear Head of Academy and leadership team of academy A,

I would like to share with you some of my initial findings from the research that I carried out at your academy through semi-structured interviews with members of your leadership team. The purpose of the research and the data analysis that followed was as part of an Appreciative Inquiry, to see what the main emerging themes were that you felt were successful in your academy so that these may be repeated in future if desired. The two main areas we explored were distributed leadership and student achievement (leaving the definition of achievement up to you).

From analysing the transcripts of your participant interviews, the main emerging themes leaders said are important in distributed leadership are: trust, honesty, accountability, collaboration and moral purpose including ethos shared values.

These initial findings are summarised for you in the Table below.

<b>Emerging themes from student achievement</b>	
Trust	Achieving MEGs (minimum expected grades) and academic attainment
Honesty	Wider and extracurricular opportunities
Shared accountability	Personal development
Collaboration	Independent learning
Moral purpose, (ethos and shared values)	Attendance to school

As participating leaders, you were then invited to feedback priorities from the five strongest emerging themes. Collectively, the most common priorities from the returns of your academy (academy A) were:

#### **Emerging themes from distributed leadership**

- Trust
- Collaboration
- Shared accountability

#### **Emerging themes from student achievement**

- Personal development, being a successful adult beyond school life
- Getting MEGs (minimum expected grades) and academic attainment
- Independent learning

I then triangulated these findings with your feedback comments which asked you to suggest the top three priorities from the five emerging themes, in order of those that you each felt would help you to develop your success in student achievement. The most common three suggested by your returns were:

**Emerging themes from distributed leadership**

**Emerging themes from student achievement**

1. Trust

Personal development

2. Collaboration

Achieving MEGs and academic attainment

3. Shared accountability

Independent learning

Therefore to summarise, the perception of participating leaders from your distributed leadership team suggests that trust, collaboration and shared accountability were seen as the top three priorities.


To develop student achievement further, participants felt that the top three priorities were the personal development of students, MEGs/ academic attainment and independent learning.

Yours sincerely,

Gill Thomas NPQH., MA.

## Appendix 5:

My poster presenting the research proposal, displayed at the 2015 poster exhibition, in the conference hall at the ARU annual doctoral conference.



Anglia Ruskin University

Gill Thomas

**Theory**

The research focuses on the positives of an organisation with the expectation of promoting change

- The researcher is a participant observer at the scene of research
- In getting to know research participants through semi-structured interviews, rich data was produced
- The researcher speaks with and to others rather than for others

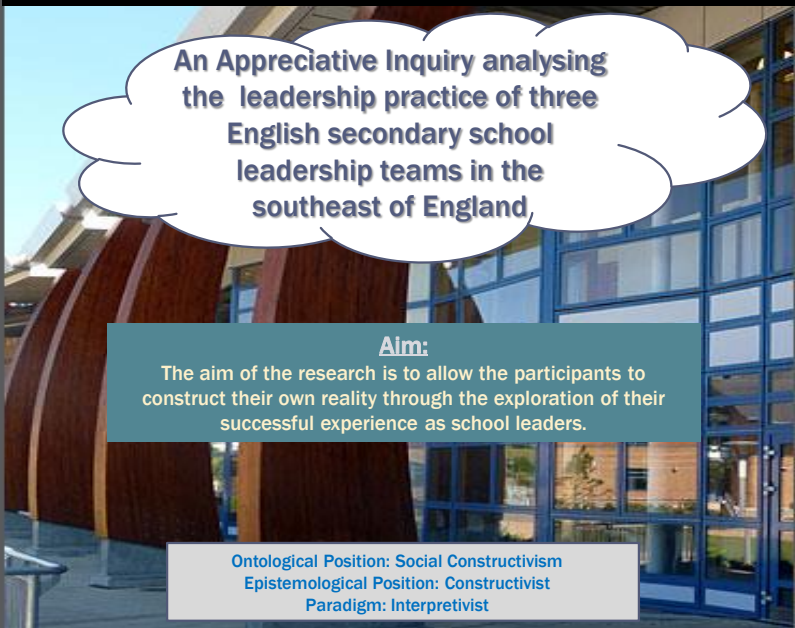
**Position**

As a practitioner, I consider myself an Insider/Outsider Researcher occupying the space in-between, due to a shared familiar professional understanding with the group being researched.

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Faculty of Health, Education, Medicine and Social Care

**Voices of Secondary School Leaders: Perceptions of the Relationship between Distributed Leadership and Student Achievement**



An Appreciative Inquiry analysing the leadership practice of three English secondary school leadership teams in the southeast of England

**Aim:**

The aim of the research is to allow the participants to construct their own reality through the exploration of their successful experience as school leaders.

Ontological Position: Social Constructivism  
Epistemological Position: Constructivist  
Paradigm: Interpretivist

**Methodology**

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) into school leadership as the most appropriate methodology - the views of participants, through semi-structured interviews, considering their views exploring their lived experiences.

**Practitioner Research**

☐ Participant voice

The participants - a purposive sample of school leaders whose voices are of central importance to the study, its value and usefulness

**Methods**

The specific methods of data collection employed are:

- ☐ Semi-structured interviews
- ☐ Group fora
- ☐ Participant feedback sheets

**Supervisory Team:**

Dr. Simon Pratt-Adams & Dr. Nicola Wa