Discourses of Distribution: Anchoring Educational Leadership to Practice

by *Roberto Serpieri[1], Emiliano Grimaldi and Emanuela Spanò*

Abstract: The paper deals with the fashioning idea of distributed leadership and the related issue of education ecology democratization. The analysis of distributed leadership theories is carried on using two interpretative dimensions: discourses as regimes of truth and ontological and epistemological presuppositions. This first dimension refers to the classical tripartition between welfarism (bureau-professionalism), managerialism and democratic-critical discourse. The second dimension recalls Seddon's distinction between categorical and relational education contexts and, drawing on Bottery's and Gronn and Ribbins works, exploites it in the light of a focus on both human and practice ontologies.

The paper shows three conceptions of distribution. The first one is recognisable through the connection between the ontology of practice and the welfarist discourse (*distributed leadership in practice*). Another conception could be called *delegated*, more than distributed, *leadership* because it stresses this idea from a managerialist perspective grounding on a human ontological basis. The third one refers to different conceptions such as *dispersed* or *ecological* leadership or to the anchoring of leadership practices to the social division of labour and to the power relationships in the field of education.

The anchoring of leadership theories to the ontologies of practice, it is argued, is crucial to 'discuss' the idea of distribution in a *democratic* perspective.

Key-words: Distributed Leadership, Discourses, Educational Contexts

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Introduction

The reforming of the education system has increasingly represented a key issue in the Western Societies' political agendas. Different and often conflicting political discourses have been struggling for the definition of the "best way" to reform education and define its role in the broader social system. Many aspects differentiate those discourses, the main seeming to be the conception of the State and the definition of its role in education. The traditional struggle between liberalism and social-democracy has become more complex due to the progressive affirmation of the neo-liberal perspective, the efforts of compromise of the Third Way and the strenghtening of its critics' voices. In such a context, opposing rethorics have flourished, traditional boundaries have been blurred and discursive complexity has increased. Nonetheless some ideas, although re-contextualized, seem to play a crucial role in many national education reforms across the western world. Leadership is one of those "tyrannic" ideas (Ball, 2007).

Leadership has been defined by neoliberal discourses as one of the most relevant levers of change. Neoliberal reforms have increasingly focused on processes of "leadership design" (Gronn, 2003), using them as "dispositif de distraction" (Gunter, 2005) from the pursuing of egalitarian and democratic practices of schooling.

This paper deals with the fashioning idea of distributed leadership and the related issue of education ecology democratization. The last decade has seen the flourishing of a wide debate on distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006), which seems to have significant 'political' and theoretical implications. Different discourses have co-opted this really fashionable concept, emphasizing one or another semantic interpretation the adjective 'distributed' could imply. The results has been the development of a complex labyrinth of ideas, definitions and theories.

In this scenario, we focus specifically on the works by Spillane and Diamond (2007), Harris (2008a; 2008b) and Leithwood, Mascall and Strauss (2009). It is our opinion that they represent some of the most relevant recent developments about distributed leadership and, at the same time, are a good sample of the diverging understandings of the concept.

The aim of this paper is to analyse those works in order to construct a classificatory and interpretative map[2] that allow differences (and similarities) in the conceptualizations of distributed leadership to come out. Our objective is to show how this idea has been re-contextualized within distinctive discursive frames and ontological and epistemological conceptions. Moreover, the 'political' implications of this framing will be highlighted.

Discourses and contexts of distributed leadership

The analysis of distributed leadership theories is carried on here using two interpretative dimensions: the discursive regime of truth and ontological and epistemological presuppositions. The discursive dimension referes to the classical tripartition between welfarism («bureau-professionalism», see Clarke and Newman, 1992), managerialism (Thrupp and Willmott, 2003) and democratic-critical (Grace, 1995; 2000) discourse. The second dimension recalls Seddon's (1994) distinction between categorical and relational education contexts and, drawing on Bottery's (2000) and Gronn and Ribbins (1996) works, exploites it in the light of a focus on both human and practice ontologies.

Many critical scholars have used foucauldian discourse as heuristic device to analyse education policies (Ball, 2006; Gewirtz and Ball, 2000). It allowed them to focus on power, cultures, values and ideologies and their influence on the production and enactment of policies. As Ball (2006, p. 2) suggests, discourse is a «polymorphic, supple and adaptable» tool and enables us to give a thick account of the interplay between the cultural and structural aspects of social life and the agency of human and non-human actors. The conceptualizations of distributed leadership will be classified using discourse as analytical tool.

In this perspective, it is possible to identify three different discourses within which distinctive conceptions of distributed leadership have been developed. The *bureau-professionalism*, or *welfarism*, which emphasizes both the requirements of formal and procedural rationality and the legitimacy and autonomy of professional expertise. The *managerialism*, which promotes the introduction of efficiency and quasi-marketization in

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[2] Another relevant and interesting effort of mapping leadership theories is due to Gunter and Ribbins (2003).

the provision of public services and the management of public administration. The *democratic-critical discourse*, whose distinctive features are progressively emerging as a reaction to the neo-liberal policies promoting the managerialist turn in the public sector. While the first discourse understands leadership as a professional practice and the managerialist one conceiveis it as a matter, a resource that could be devolved or delegated (distributed), the democratic-critical discourse re-interprets it as a metaphor. In such a way, the recontextualization of the idea of distributed leadership leads to the possibility of challenging the legitimacy of the concept of leadership in itself. More specifically it questions its hierarchical nature, that is its understanding as a function exerted by one or more actors taking organisational roles and enacting formally delegated powers. On the contrary, the metaphorical interpretation offered by the democratic-critical discourse suggests that the distribution of leadership has to do with both its processual constitution (the process of its making) and its 'natural' instantiation within heterogeneous networks of both human and non-human actors.

The regime of truth whithin which they are framed is not the only distinctive feature of the different conceptions of distributed leadership we are going to analyse. Ontological and epistemological presuppositions differ as well. Further we consider such presuppositions very relevant in the light of the lack of "ology" (Fitz, 1999) that characterizes the most part of leadership conceptions. In the construction of our classificatory matrix we propose to intersect the three discourses with the notion of context. Gronn and Ribbins, drawing on Seddon's work on education contexts (Gronn and Ribbins, 1996; Seddon, 1994), propose to define contexts as conceptual frameworks that enable to understand the leadership phenomenology. Contexts allow to take into account both the biographic evidence and its diacronic and relational dimensions, delved through ethnographic methodologies.

Following Serpieri (2008) and his further elaboration of the idea of context, we distinguish here between two different types of contexts:

a)   *interactive contexts*, where the focus is on social interactions among human agents;

b)   *network-practices contexts*, where the subject is decentred in favour of an ontology of praxis and the re-production of practice is understood as a complex process in which human agents, institutions, cultures and material artifacts intertwin and influence each other.

Figure 1 – Discourses and contexts of educational leadership

Discourse Context	Welfarist	Managerialist	Democratic-critical
Interactive		**Distributed:** **to be distributed?** (Harris, 2008a; 2008b)	
Network- **practice**	**Distributed:** **in practice** (Spillane, 2006; Spillane and Diamond 2007)		**Distributed:** **as division of labour** (Gronn, 2000, 2003) **Hybrid leadership** (Gronn, 2009) **Democratic** (Woods, 2005) **Ecological** (Bottery, 2004) **'*End of leadership* *tyranny*'**[3] (Ball, 2006, 2007)

 (source: Serpieri, 2008, p. 24).

    The map presented in Figure 1 allows us to classify texts and interpreters of distributed leadership through the intersection of discourses and contexts. Such a map could represent a sociologically and politically-oriented guide through the labyrinth of distributed leadership.
    Starting from the map, in the following sections the paper shows three conceptions of distribution. The first one is recognisable through the connection between the ontology of practice and the welfarist discourse (*distributed leadership in practice*). Another conception could be called *delegated*, more than distributed, *leadership* because it stresses the idea of distribution from a managerialist perspective, grounded on an ontological basis of the human. The third one refers to different meanings such as *dispersed* or *ecological leadership* or to the anchoring of leadership practices to the social *division of labour* and to the power relationships in the field of education.

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    [3] Ball does not offer any definition of leadership. On the contrary, he wishes for the end of its tyranny, at least as managerialist device.

The anchoring of leadership theories to the ontology of practice, it is argued, is crucial to 'discuss' the idea of distribution in a *democratic* perspective.

Distributed leadership in practice

   The most representative scholar of leadership distribution in schools is certainly Spillane, who during the last decade coined a well-structured theoretical framework (Spillane, 2006).
   Spillane's distributed perspective is intended to reflect a conceptual innovation or better to overtake Leithwood's transformational approach to leadership who has dominated the theoretical debate during the '80s and '90s. Spillane's work can be easily located at the intersection of the network-practices context whith the professional discourse. This approach in fact emphasizes a thick account of educational leading and teaching practices.
   For Spillane and his critics distributed leadership, in this sense, is not a blueprint for making school leadership more effective and it is not a prescription for better leadership but a description of how leadership actually works. According to Spillane, distributed leadership is «best thought of as a framework for thinking about and analysing leadership» (Spillane 2006, p. 10).
   Thus, Spillane referring to the effectiveness of distributed leadership in changing the educational practices remains ambiguous underlining both the positive and negative changes that the application of this approach could have in managing schools. Anyway, as Spillane points out, it is not possible to associate a distributed perspective on leadership with democratic and collaborative leadership, because from his point of view a distributed perspective can «coexist with and be used beneficially to explore hierarchical and top-down leadership approaches» (Spillane 2006, p. 103).
   Distributed leadership in itself does not mean innovation, as it happens within the managerialist approach. However, as noted by his critics (Maxcy and Nguyen 2006), Spillane's contribution is marked by a strong lack of power and micro politics dynamics.
   According to Spillane for the distributed perspective, three elements are essential: «leadership practice is central and anchoring; leadership practice is generated in the interaction of leaders, followers and their situation; each

element is essential for leadership practice; the situation both defines leadership practice and is defined through leadership practice» (Spillane 2006, p. 4).

Moreover, it is not sufficient to equate practice simply with the actions of individual leaders. It is essential to pay close attention to interactions: «interactions, in fact, are critical to the study of practice, and we need to observe it from within a framework if we are to understand the internal dynamics of practice» (Spillane and Diamond 2007, p. 6).

It is also important to interpret the distribution of leadership as something more than what individuals in formal leadership positions do, as something that goes beyond what is defined as "Leader-Plus Aspect". The leader-plus perspective, in fact, recognises that leadership responsibilities are distributed across people in formal designated leadership and management positions and those without any such roles. In this way, leading and managing transcend formal positions (MacBeath 2006; Spillane and Diamond 2007). However "Leader Practice Aspect" pushes one step further than the leader-plus approach, focusing the attention not just on leadership roles and function but on the interaction of leaders, followers and situation. Thus the focus «is not whether leadership is distributed but how leadership is distributed» (Spillane 2006, p. 15).

The distributed leadership approach permits to close the distance between schools as network of practices and the external context. Nonetheless it seems to forget the importance of social, cultural and economic contexts lacking political and critical issues. For this reason, it is not a coincidence that Spillane has recently moved close to a relevant managerialist discourse's exponent: Alma Harris.

Leadership: something to be distributed?

Before analysing Harris's perspective, considered as an example of reduction and appropriation of distributed leadership inherent to the managerialist discourse, it is necessary to discuss briefly the arguments of Leithwood.

Transformational leadership is a theoretical construct that has showed a very significant influence during all the years '80s and '90s. Nowadays Leithwood is trying to revise "his" leadership perspective through a process

of co-optation and transformation of the emerging distributed leadership theory (Leithwood et al., 2009)[4].

At the beginning of the '90s Leithwood fully develops his concept of transformational leadership, focusing on its fundamental role in improving school contexts through professional expertise and innovation. He takes the view that a transformative leader, simply defined, is a person who can guide, motivate and influence others to bring about a fundamental change. This is a conception that still presents a large amount of "voluntaristic" and "heroic" individualism, focused on a leader who aims at developing a shared organisational vision. But Leithwood, being a "good" managerialist, does not abandon the intention of "recycling" this idea in the most recent explorations of distributed leadership. As a matter of fact, he tries to pin his label on this innovative approach in his most recent handbook with an introduction entitled "New Perspectives on an Old Idea" (Leithwood et al., 2009). The old idea is nothing more than the process of sharing already reported in his transformational leadership approach and now readapted to the distributed perspective. For this reason he frantically tries to distinguish between normative and descriptive perspectives and to bring together, with a perfect "categorical style", several discussions of the positive or negative effects of distributed leadership approach. Nevertheless the context approach is always the "usual": the same survey, the same questionnaire, the same Likert scaling.

Another effort to "appropriate" distributed leadership has been made by Alma Harris (2008a; 2008b). This author, in the last period, has explicitly marked the distance from the "excesses" of managerialism. This marking implies a contextual and a distributing shift. In fact, on the one side, Harris tries to re-connect her understanding of distributed leadership to the broader socio-economic and political environments, highlighting their influence on the nature, the outcomes and the performances of schools. On the other, she shows herself as the "champion" of distributed leadership.

Nonetheless, as we try to show, her conception of distributed leadership seems strongly influenced by the main underpinnings of the managerialist discourse. Not by chance Harris, following a functional and pragmatic

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[4] A significant aspect of this author approach concerns his tolerance for "critic" points of view that he has also hosted in the handbook he edited in 2006. As Thrupp and Willmott (2003) argue, referring to this Leithwood's handbook, he seems pleased to offer this hospitality but, at the same time, tries to avoid every kind of critical arguments against neo-liberal politicies and managerialism.

approach, adapts distributed leadership to education policies actually focused on external accountability, standardisation and schools competition as levers for improvement. Nonetheless, a careful examination of her extended works highlights how those shifts regard the "surface" of her conception of distributed leadership. Their heuristic potentials seem to be undermined both by the unquestioned underpinnings of the managerialist discourse within which her works still remain framed and by the categorical ontology (although it seems more sincerely interactive with respect to Leithwood's individualism).

In the case of the contextual shift, Thrupp and Willmott sarcastically criticize Harris's effort to re-contextualize distributed leadership arguing how her recent works «exhibit the [...] tension of promoting the importance of context while presenting a largely decontextualized analysis» (Thrupp and Willmott, 2003, p. 102). The same seems to happen in the first chapter of her last work where the "sounding" initial statements about the relevance of some social and political issues (recalled by Spillane in the introduction of the book on the "educational apartheid" in the globalized world) remain underdeveloped in the following chapters. Intentionally or not, leadership seems to become the end rather than the means, and more specifically a depoliticized and decontextualized end.

The distributed shift presents some interesting features as well. Harris's conception of distributed leadership actually differs ontologically and epistemologically from Spillane's one. Distributed leadership is not conceived in terms of practice (Spillane, 2006), that is as interactive processes among human actors (both leaders and followers) and non-human actors as routines, tools and so on, that *mediate* interactions themselves (Gronn, 2000). On the contrary, Harris relates distributed leadership to the interactions among leaders and followers where the latters become "holders" of "bits" of leadership, on the basis of a desirable explicit process of design by the leader herself. What emerges at the end is what we could call a *delegated* conception of leadership, a new device of organisational design that focuses and stresses the positional aspects of social structure, roles and procedures. Thus, distributed leadership continues to be conceptualized within a functionalist frame as a response to the organisation's needs. Leaders are asked to recognize them and delegate, may be sometimes distribute, small amounts of leadership to informal leaders at the right time and in the right way.

Hybrid distribution: towards a democratic leadership

New paths of developing the idea of "leadership distribution" could be found in the theoretical realm derived by the intersection of the network-practice context with the democratic-critical discourse. In this respect, Gronn's arguments seem worth to be recalled. He has recently translated the somewhat ingenuous faith in distributed leadership in a more conscious and sophisticated idea of hybridization between potential forms of leadership (Gronn, 2009). In terms of our classificatory map, we could define his proposal as an effort to bring distributed leadership in the frame of a democratic-critical discourse on the basis of the ontological and epistemological presuppositions we have referred to the network-practices context.

Gronn (2000, 2002, 2003) has been one of the first authors to highligh the hybrid nature of distributed leadership, and the complex overlapping in its conceptualization of individualistic and distributed approaches. According to Gronn this was due to the substantive changes in the work of educational leaders and in leadership practices implied by the neo-liberal and managerialist school reforms.

Gronn adopts in his work the heuristic devices of the Activity System approach (Engeström, 1987). Nonetheless he seems to be aware of the misrecognition of the political nature of leadership practices this approach could imply, as well as of some its "apolitical" uses in the field of distributed leadership (Maxcy and Nguyen, 2006). Gronn (2000) aims to remedy for this lack, recovering a meso-analytical dimension and the processes of influence inherent to leadership itself. According to Gronn, power is only understandable looking at the fluidity of the emerging connections between actors and actions. The ultimate aim of democratic-critical discourse on leadership is to disclose the nature of power and subvert its logics. As he argues, «one implication of emergence is [...] that some actors are likely be more influential than other (their actions carry greater consequences for all concerned)» (*ivi*, p. 331). His work brings then to reconsider from a critical standpoint the fashionable concept of distributed leadership, recognising those complexities the managerialist interpretations tried to erase (Gronn, 2009).

As we already claimed, Gronn could be then considered as an interpreter of a democratic-critical discourse of leadership. A discourse that, as Grace

(1995) argued, is probably less consolidated and coherent if compared with the welfarist and the managerialist ones. Notwithstanding, the democratic-critical discourse clearly distinguishes itself for the constant attention to social and political aspects in the framing of leadership issues and educational matters generally.

What is clearly stated is the need for educational leadership to cope with both the social and political arena within which it is embedded and with its (unavoidable?) dissolution within a network of practices. Educational leadership, then, always questions itself and is permanently questioned, in the professional debate as well as in the wider democratic arena. From this point of view, leadership can disappear, at least when intended as one of the rethorical, ideological and structural devices used by managerialist discourse in its effort to assume a dominant position within the field of education. Or to use Ball's words (2007) its "tirrany" must come to an end.

Ball himself some years ago first focused on micropolitics of leadership in a by now "classical" research (Ball, 1987). It is our opinion that he opened a stream of theoretical reflection on democratic leadership in education whose later exponents could be considered authors such as Bottery and Woods.

Bottery (2004) identifies some "killing labels". Recalling Hodgkinson's point that these labels – or these adjectives – "charm rather than clarify" on the meaning of leadership (Bottery, 2004, p. 2), he claims for their dismissing. Woods (2005) underlines how the managerialist-informed perspectives on distributed leadership offer a vision that does not take into account adeguately the actual asymmetries in the distribution of power. Those perspectives remain entrapped in an instrumental logic and then differ significantly from the democratic-critical vision of leadership.

Woods argues that the distinctive feature of democratic leadership is its commitment against the dominance of instrumental rationality and the alienating character of social order and its involvement in the other challenges of modernity. This is what makes it meaningful for the educational world. On the contrary, distributed leadership is characterized by an implicit normativity: «distributed leadership is formally neutral towards issues of private or public ownership, markets and democratic control, and other such issues. However, it lends itself to being uncritically harnessed for the pursuit of goals and values which are contestable and in contention with humanist values of education» (Woods 2005, p. 44).

Democratic leadership challenges the «power differences that are legitimated by self-interested exchange (typically the market) or by rational authority (modern bureaucracy)» in order to pursue two main objectives: «enabling the positive potential of people – creative autonomy and reintegration of human capacities" and "contend with the dominating forces of modernity» (*ibidem*).

Conclusion

This paper has shown three conceptions of leadership distribution, highlighting differences and similarieties in their discursive framing and ontological and epistemological presuppositions. The construction of a classificatory and interpretative map and the in-depth analysis of the works by Spillane (2006), Spillane and Diamond (2007), Harris (2008a) and Leithwood et al., (2009) have enabled us to show different and diverging re-contextualizations of this fashionable idea, as well as their 'political' implications.

The first one has been called *Distributed leadership in practice*. It is recognisable through the connection between the ontology of practice and the welfarist discourse and is well represented by Spillane's work (2006). This conception has a descriptive emphasis (a description of how leadership actually works) and according to Spillane, represents «a framework for thinking about and analysing leadership» (*ivi*, p. 10). Although a marked emphasis on the dimension of practice, we highlight how Spillane's contribution does not pay enough attention to power and micro politics dynamics. It seems to forget the importance of social, cultural and economic contexts, and in doing this a slippage towards a managerialist perspective is recognisable.

The second conception has been called *delegated*, more than distributed, leadership because it stresses this idea from a managerialist perspective grounding it on a human ontological basis. Although Harris's efforts to limit the excesses of managerialism through a contextual and distributed shift (Harris, 2008a), we have shown how distributed leadership is still conceived as a resource, 'something' to be distributed in the interactions among leaders and followers. Thus, distributed leadership is thought in a functionalist perspective, as a new device of organisational design aiming at answering to organisational needs.

The third one refers to different conceptions such as *dispersed* (Woods, 2005) or *ecological* (Bottery, 2004) leadership or to the *anchoring of leadership practices to the social division of labour and to power relationships* in the field of education (Gronn, 2009). We have argued that the anchoring of leadership theories to the ontologies of practice is crucial to 'discuss' the idea of distribution in a democratic perspective.

This perspective challenges the ingenuous faith in distributed leadership, highlighting the hybrid nature of processes of distribution (Gronn, 2009). Processes of influence inherent to leadership itself are focused on, with the aim to disclose the nature of power and subvert its logic. Then, while the managerialist-informed perspectives on distributed leadership offer a vision that does not take into account adequately the actual asymmetries in the distribution of power, this third conception re-contextualizes the fashionable concept of distributed leadership from a critical standpoint. In doing so, it recognises both the relevance of the social and political aspects and those complexities the managerialist interpretations tried to erase.

Further, another distinctive feature of the democratic perspective is the recognition of both the complexities of the social and political arena within which leadership is embedded and its (unavoidable?) dissolution within a network of practices. In such a way, the democratic-inspired re-contextualization of the idea of leadership distribution unfolds the possibility of challenging the legitimacy of the concept of leadership in itself. In such a frame, educational leadership always questions itself and is permanently questioned, in the professional debate as well as in the wider democratic arena.

To conclude this illustration of distributed leadership theories, we could argue that when a hierarchical nature of leadership is implied, very often the issue of power and the political struggles are removed from the educational arena[5]. On the contrary a processual interpretation of leadership offers the interpretative tools to recognise and disclose such issues. As Spillane's work demonstrates, a distributed conception embedded in a mere welfarist discourse it is not sufficient. The adoption of a critical standpoint is needed if democratic engagements (Woods, 2005) of educational leadership are to be pursued.

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[5] Another example of the lasting of a hierarchical leadership perspective could be found in the works on System Leadership by Hopkins (2007) and his colleagues.

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