Discourses of Distribution: Anchoring Educational Leadership to Practice

Roberto Serpieri - Associate Professor - University Federico II, Naples, Italy
Emiliano Grimaldi - PhD - University Federico II, Naples, Italy
Emanuela Spanò - University Federico II, Naples, Italy

profrobertoserpieri@gmail.com
emilianogrimaldi@gmail.com
emanuela.spano@hotmail.it
Underpinnings

• Education policies are enacted between a “war” (Tamboukou 1999) of conflicting discourses;

• Thus, we argue for a critic of leadership as one of those “tyrannic” ideas (Ball, 2006; 2007) introduced by the neoliberal discourse as one of the most relevant levers of change;

• We could talk of “leadership design” (Gronn, 2003) as “dispositif de distraction” (Gunter, 2005) from the social and political issues affecting education policies.
Aim

Discussion of Distributed Leadership (DL) as differently conceived by three conflicting discourses and through two educational contexts.
Three discourses

1. The bureau-professionalism, *(welfarism)*,
   - formal and procedural rationality
   - legitimacy and autonomy of professional expertise
   - understanding of educational leadership as a professional practice, both of leaders and teachers.

2. The neo-liberal, *(managerialism)*,
   - efficiency and quasi-marketization.
   - leadership as a matter, delegated (distributed) by the leader to the followers.

3. The *democratic* discourse,
   - a critical reaction to the neo-liberal policies,
   - metaphorical interpretation
     a) processual construction
     b) questioning of its hierarchical nature.
Educational contexts

• Then we consider the lack of "ology" (Fitz, 1999) that characterizes the most part of leadership conceptions.

• In order to face such ontological and epistemological lacks, Seddon’s (1994) distinction between categorical and interactional educational contexts (Gronn, Ribbins, 1996, Bottery, 2006 and Serpieri 2008) has been exploited.
Two contexts

A further elaboration (Serpieri, 2008) distinguishes between two different types of contexts to go beyond the ontological and epistemological lacks.

1. **Interactive** contexts,
   focus on social interactions among human actors.

2. **Network-practices** contexts,
   decentering the subject towards an ontology of praxis;
   focus on complex processes of intertwining and influence between human and non-human actors.
The labyrinth of distributed leadership

Our focus is on relevant and recent developments about distribution as selected from the labyrinth (maze) of ideas, definitions and theories about educational leadership.

The map presented allows us to classify texts and interpreters of distributed leadership through the intersection of discourses and contexts:

1. distributed leadership: *in practice* (Spillane, 2006; Spillane and Diamond 2007)
2. distributed leadership: *to be distributed*? (Harris, 2008a; 2008b)
3. distributed leadership: *as hybrid metaphor* (Gronn, 2009)
## Three conceptions of distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse Context</th>
<th>Welfarist</th>
<th>Managerialist</th>
<th>Democratic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactive</td>
<td>Distributed: to be distributed? (Harris, 2008a; 2008b)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Distributed leadership in practice (1)

• Spillane and Diamond (2007): a thick account of educational leading and teaching practices, especially focusing on interactions.

• Three essential elements:
  
  *practice* is central and anchoring;
  
  *interaction* of leaders, followers and their situation;
  
  *situation* both defines and is defined (Spillane 2006, 4).
Distributed leadership in practice (2)

- Distribution of leadership beyond the “Leader-Plus Aspect”.

The leader-plus perspective, in fact, recognizes that leadership responsibilities are distributed across people in formal designated leadership and management positions and those without any such.

- “Leader Practice Aspect” one step further:

  leadership, role, and function                               the interaction of leaders, followers, and situation.
Distributed leadership in practice (3)

- Thus the focus “is not whether leadership is distributed but how leadership is distributed” (Spillane 2006, 15; ours italics).
  - not a prescription for making school leadership more effective
  - but a description of how leadership actually works; a framework for thinking about and analysing leadership” (Spillane 2006, 10).

- Distributed leadership in itself does not mean innovation, as it happens within the managerialist approach.

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, 103).
Distributed leadership in practice (4)

• A strong lack of power and micro politics dynamics.

• Forgetting the importance of social, cultural and economic contexts.

• His cooptation onto the managerialist discourse.
Leadership: something to be distributed? (1)

- Appropriation of DL made by Harris (2008). But ontologically and epistemologically different from Spillane’s.
- DL as interactions among leaders and followers
  - “holders” of “bits” (small amounts) of leadership,
  - a desirable explicit process of design.
- DL as a managerial device of delegation focusing on positional aspects of structure, roles and procedures, explicitly dismissing power and politics.
Leadership: something to be distributed? (2)

- Harris marked the distance from the “excesses” of managerialism.
  - a contextual and a distributing shift
  - nonetheless, those shifts regard the “surface” of her conception.

- The contextual shift

  "the [...] tension of promoting the importance of context while presenting a largely decontextualized analysis" (Thrupp and Willmott, 2003, p. 102) undermines her idea of leadership distribution also.

- The distributed shift:

  - a functionalist frame as a response to the organization’s needs.
  - distribution of small amount of leadership to informal leaders at the right time and in the right way.
Distributed leadership as hybrid metaphor (1)

- Gronn (2009) claims for a more conscious and sophisticated idea of hybridization towards potential forms of leadership.

- The neo-liberal and managerialist school reforms:
  - provoke a greedy work of educational leaders
  - reinforce the actual division of labour.

- Recognition of those contradictions the managerialist interpretations tried to erase and especially of the processes of influence inherent to leadership itself.

- Democratic-critical discourse on leadership:
  - understands the fluidity of the emerging power relations between actors and action
  - discloses the nature of power and subverts its logics.
Distributed leadership as hybrid metaphor (2)

Gronn (2009)

• Focus on social and political aspects in the framing of leadership.

• Distribution of leadership as permanently questioned, in the professional as well as in the wider democratic debate.

• The hybrid metaphor enables us to distinguish between “killing labels” of leadership (Bottery, 2004) (i.e. DL, Transformational) and “potentials for leadership” (i.e. Democratic (Woods, 2005), Ecological (Bottery, 2004) even the end of the Tyranny (Ball, 2006; 2007)).
Distributed leadership as hybrid metaphor (3)

An example of the distinction between a killing label and a potential for leadership:

- "DL 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).
Conclusions (1)

• We have tried to show three conceptions of leadership distribution, highlighting differences and similarities in their discursive framing and ontological and epistemological presuppositions.

1. The first one has been called DL in practice, where descriptive aims are prevailing, lacking attention to power.

2. The second conception has been called delegated, more than distributed, leadership and it stresses the normative managerialist approach to design leadership.

3. The third one refers to different conceptions of leadership where the hybrid nature of distribution is disclosed unfolding potentials for ecological and democratic explorations.
Conclusions (2)

• When a hierarchical nature of leadership is implied, very often the issue of power and the political struggles are removed.

• On the contrary a processual interpretation of leadership offers the tools to describe and recognise leading practices. However a mere welfarist discourse it is not sufficient to disclose political aspects.

• The adoption of a critical standpoint is needed if democratic engagements (Woods, 2005) of educational leadership are to be pursued.
Thank you for your attention!