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# Leading schools from the Middle. Middle leadership in a context of distributed leadership

## Middle leadership nella scuola del 21° secolo: un'evoluzione necessaria. Una prospettiva educativa internazionale in un contesto di distributed leadership

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### ABSTRACT

Current education reforms have resulted in enhanced responsibilities and accountabilities for all schools while leadership responsibility is now stretched over a range of different actors. Following with this, the centrality of distributed leadership reinforces the importance of the middle tier to generate improvement and to influence teaching and learning processes in schools. Unfortunately this is not the case of Italy, where any attempt to introduce and recognize intermediate layers of management have been unsuccessful. In this sense, Italy lacks an organizational component that the literature has identified as crucial to improving the quality of education. By reviewing international studies in the field of school leadership, the author will discuss middle management in schools in relation to the current discourse on distributed leadership in the attempt to pave a debate on middle leadership in Italy.

Le recenti riforme in materia d'istruzione hanno condotto a una crescente pressione su tutte le scuole e allo sviluppo di processi di distribuzione di leadership. La centralità di questa tendenza rafforza l'importanza delle funzioni intermedie di management per generare positivo cambiamento e influenzare i processi d'insegnamento e di apprendimento nelle scuole. Purtroppo questo non è il caso dell'Italia, dove ogni tentativo d'introdurre e riconoscere giuridicamente ed economicamente funzioni intermedie di gestione e risultato non del tutto efficace. In questo senso, l'Italia non dispone di una componente organizzativa che la letteratura internazionale ha identificato come cruciale per migliorare la qualità dell'istruzione. Attraverso una review degli studi internazionali nel campo della leadership scolastica, l'autore rileva l'importanza del middle management in relazione all'attuale scenario di leadership distribuita nel tentativo di sollecitare un dibattito sulla middle leadership in Italia.

### KEYWORDS

Middle Management; Educational Leadership; Italy; Distributed Leadership; Education Reform.  
Leadership Educativa; Italia, Leadership Distribuita; Riforma Scolastica, Funzioni Intermedie.

## Introduction

Education over the last 30 or so years has been reformed through neoliberal policy agendas that have increasingly subsumed it to economic imperatives. The role of education in national economic fortunes has assumed primacy over its individual, civic and social benefits (Reid et al., 2010; Starr, 2014) leading to a major transformation of state education systems. Common to this transformation there has been the dual emergence of the self-managing school and mandated accountability back to local and national forms of government (Smyth, 2011). Increasingly, government are devolving authority and responsibility to the level of schools, to facilitate educational improvement, increase student learning attainment and raise standards (i.e. OECD, 2010). Along with the emphasis on performativity, standardization and managerialism, there has been an intensification of tasks and a subsequent wider distribution of work and leadership responsibility across professional leaders in schools. In contrast, opponents are cynical about advocating a default of institutional autonomy, claiming such devolved authority is “perceived to create a center periphery power structure, relegating the position of education leaders to that of perfunctory middle managers with little time or incentive to pursue institutionally inspired major change” (Starr, 2014, p. 273). For example, just to cite the case of the Italian school system, paradoxically the attempt to introduce decentralized forms of governance coexists with the tightening of hierarchical ties, leading to a peculiar form of *centralized decentralization* (Serpieri & Grimaldi, 2014).

Generally, leadership discourse has been plagued by ideological and political disputes and I do not intend to engage with this debate. Rather, while it is widely accepted that current education reforms have resulted in enhanced responsibilities and accountabilities for all schools, in this article I would like to connect the current discourse on distributed leadership to a particular layer of management (middle management) and its pivotal role to generate positive change and improvement. In effect, while far greater attention has been paid to headteachers, as formal leaders, in empirical studies, the available evidence suggests that middle leaders have a direct and positive effect on the quality of teaching and learning (Sammons, Thomas, & Mortimore, 1997). In addition, as recently point out by Harris & Jones (2017) research literature highlights that middle leaders play a pivotal role in securing better learning outcomes for students, resulting from their direct and positive influence on teachers’ classroom practice (Fleming 2013; Leask & Terrell 2014).

Given these premises, since distributed leadership involves extended leadership responsibility beyond formal leaders and it is stretched over a range of different actors in the school context, middle managers are directly involved in the distribution of power and authority within and across organizations. Unfortunately this is not the case of Italy, where any attempt to introduce and recognize intermediate layers of management have been unsuccessful (Pirola, 2015), with no formal legitimization of middle management roles. In reference to the Italian context, within the umbrella term *middle management* the roles of “*funzione strumentale*” (Petrucci 2002; Fischer, Fischer, & Masuelli, 2006) could be encompassed - that is, designated teachers who are selected to undertake specific leadership roles, (subject or department coordinator, teachers with specific responsibilities, etc.) - as well as the role of *assistant head* (site manager or deputy head teacher). Overall, the aim of this article is pave a debate on middle leadership in Italy by exploring international literature in the educational leadership field. In effect, as rightly pointed out by Paletta & Bezzina (2016), “Italy lacks an organizational component

that the literature has identified as crucial to improving the quality of education” (534). Following with this, the knowledge base on middle leadership is thin despite the clear implication that leadership at this level can have a positive impact upon school development and student learning outcomes.

The article is organized as follows. First, based on a review of international studies in the field of educational leadership, I will present the current model of distributed leadership which has received renewed interest and enthusiasm within the leadership field. Second, I will explore the contribution of middle managers and their important strategic role within a school. Third, I will discuss middle manager's roles in relation to the distributed leadership model. Finally, I offer a brief commentary on the evidence from the review as well as suggestions for further research.

### 1. Distributed Leadership under the spotlight

In education leadership trends towards standardisation and prescriptive practice, performativity and accountability, and the subsequent intensification of work have led to a movement away from simply focusing on person-centric approaches in traditional leadership theories (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009) to an increased interest in new “forms of management” (Pearce et al., 2010) and more systematic perspectives, whereby leadership is conceived as a collective social process emerging through the interactions of multiple actors (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Sergiovanni (2001, p. 55) ascribes this shift to a disillusionment with the “superhero images of leadership”. In a similar vein, Fullan (2001, p. 2) states that charismatic leadership can at most result in “episodic improvement” and eventually “frustrated or despondent dependency”. This idea is encapsulated in the idea of post heroic leadership: “ ... post heroic leadership re-envision the ‘who’ and ‘where’ of leadership by focusing on the need to distribute the tasks and responsibilities of leadership up, down, and across the hierarchy” (Fletcher, 2004, p. 650). Implicit within this re-framing are different concepts, like ‘shared leadership’ (Pearce and Conger, 2003 for a review), ‘co-leadership’ (Heenan and Bennis, 1999), ‘collaborative leadership’, and ‘participative leadership’, which according to the Leithwood, Mascall & Strauss (2009) normative perspective can be incorporated in the “catch all descriptor” (Harris, 2013b, p. 53) concept of distributed leadership - with some other authors, including Spillane, Gronn and recently Young (2012; 2014), instead rejecting distributed leadership as a one-size-fits-all concept, arguing for its distinction from other forms of leadership.

Notwithstanding the popularity of the term, attempts to agree upon its meaning have been less than successful (Bennet et al, 2003; Lakomski, 2008; Mayrowetz, 2008) with some scholars from the education sector claiming its formulations are too loosely employed (Hartley, 2007) or uncritical (Youngs, 2014). Distributed leadership remains an ‘eternally contested’ (Grint, 2005) and “free floating concept” (Young, 2014), considered to be multi-dimensional and beset with a growing prevalence of perceived overlapping definitions (Flessa, 2009; Ritchie & Woods, 2007). Bennet et al. (2003, p. 2) suggested that distributed leadership, could be conceived as “a way of thinking about leadership,” rather than another technique or practice. The liberality and the proliferation with which the term, distributed leadership, is used, has left it vulnerable to uncritical acceptance; hence identifying what distributed leadership is proves to be problematic, given its conceptual confusion and the degree of debate within academic and professional discourse. At the core of this concept of distributed

leadership is the idea that leadership is not the preserve of an individual, but a fluid or emergent property rather than a “fixed phenomenon” (Gronn, 2000, p. 24), “stretched over the work of a number of individuals where the leadership task is accomplished through the interaction of multiple leaders” (Spillane et al, 2001, p. 20). Described as the “leadership idea of the moment” (Harris, 2009, p. 11), it would seem that distributed leadership is an idea whose time has come (Gronn, 2000, Hartley, 2007), an area of study in an adolescent stage of development [...] experiencing a growth spurt that would do any teenager proud” (Leithwood, Mascall & Strauss, 2009, p. 269).

To understand the concept of distributed leadership in the context of school leadership, Jain & Jeppesen (2014) proposed a threefold perspective: 1) a functionalist model, focusing on specific leadership functions: providing and selling a vision; obtaining resources, encouragement and recognition; adapting standard operating procedures; monitoring the improvement and handling disturbance; 2) a neo-institutional model considering leadership as a quality of an organization rather than the province of a few people in certain parts of the organization; 3) an interactional model. According to a review of studies commissioned in UK by the National College for School Leadership, Bennet et al. (2003) argued that distributed leadership is based on three main premises: 1) leadership is an emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals and it is seen as concertive action or conjunction action (Gronn, 2000); 2) there is openness to the boundaries of leadership with “multiple sources of guidance” (Harris, 2004), as well as multiple leaders and followers (Timperley, 2005); and 3) varieties of expertise are distributed across the many, not the few. Based on her experience on schools in the UK, Harris (2005) suggested three reasons to explain the widespread interest of distributed leadership in the practitioner and research communities: 1) the descriptive power of the concept which captures the forms of practice implicit in professional learning communities and communities of practice; 2) its representational power in the fact that obsolete organizational structures of school simply do not fit the requirement of learning in 21st century; 3) its normative power: the growth of what Gronn (2003) termed “greedy work” in schools has required leadership to be actively shared within the school. Harris’ work (2013b) aimed to show a position of acceptance arguing that distributed leadership, in the form of collective expertise, carefully constructed through professional collaborations, can positively influence learning and teaching. Another reason for this shift could be that contemporary evidence increasingly points towards a positive relationship between distributed leadership, organizational improvement and student achievement (Leithwood, Mascall, & Strauss, 2008).

Research on distributed forms of leadership is still at its early stages (Spillane & Diamond, 2007) and Harris (2009) described this literature as being “theoretically rich, but empirically poor” (254). More evidence is necessary to assess the effect of more distributed patterns of leadership on educational outcomes and to examine differences between rhetoric and reality. Distributed leadership may merely be a managerial outcome of school modernization reforms simply reinforcing old managerialism in a contemporary guise. It’s not a “friend or foe”, (Harris, 2013a) but as any form of influence, authority, or power it can be used or misused. A more critical perspective has been advocated (Young, 2009; Bolden, 2011) and Gronn critiques how distributed leadership has erroneously become positioned as a ‘post heroic’ alternative to individual leadership claiming for a ‘hybrid configurations’ of leadership (Gronn, 2009) which may help to shed light

on the important balance between individual, collective and situational aspects of leadership practice and, importantly, when and why particular configurations are more effective and/or desirable than others (Bolden, 2011). Moreover, Young (2014) rejects distributed leadership as a unitary concept and argues for a shift to distributed forms of leadership which, when understood through contextual and socio-cultural lenses provide a more realistic understanding of day-to-day practice.

## 2. Middle leadership in schools

The literature on school leadership is criticized for apparently overlooking important functions of middle leadership and its ambiguity (Blandford, 2006), ignoring the contribution middle leaders can make to strategy and staff development (Gunter, 2001). There is a growing realization of the centrality of middle-level leaders in making a vital contribution to school improvement and implementing education reform. According to Fleming (2013), “Middle managers in schools constitute a layer of management between the senior management team and those at the chalk face” (2). In schools, they function as faculty leaders, key stage managers, heads of departments, teachers in charge of subjects, and team Leaders (Piggot-Irvine & Locke, 1999). Wong, Wong, & Peng (2010, 63) define middle leaders in Hong Kong as teachers with formal administrative responsibilities, and in Australia, Gurr & Drysdale (2012, p. 57) define them as leaders with ‘significant responsibility’. In China, the middle leaders are ‘experienced teachers’ who enjoy a respectable position with long-term professional commitment to one school (Tam, 2010, p. 374).

The definition of an educational middle leader is largely related to the hierarchical organizational structure of schools. For example, with reference to the Head of Department, Busher and Harris (1999, p. 306) explain that, “...in hierarchical terms ... he or she is not part of the senior management team, responsible for the overall strategic development of a school, but someone responsible for the operational work of others, namely classroom teachers”. Middle leaders can be thought of as providing the bridge between the teaching staff and the executive staff within their school. According to Cardno (2005, p. 17) middle managers in the educational sector have two key roles: they “work at the interface between teaching and managing the resources of teaching”. However, the definition of middle leader is very variable. For example, in a secondary school a head of a department would be a middle-level leader, yet within a school system, it could be argued that school principals are themselves middle-level leaders (Crow, 1992).

According to several studies (Blandford 2006), middle management in education is increasingly being called middle leadership. This shift in terminology reflects the dominant discourse which is now about leadership (not management) and distributed or shared leadership where anyone in an organization can function as a leader outside their formal position. This is supported by Starrat (2003) who states that leadership can be also viewed as unique among types of administration and management, so middle managers or middle leaders are uniquely placed to have a major impact on an institution and the quality of its teaching and learning

Middle managers are key resources that promote school effectiveness (Brown & Rutherford, 1998). As Blandford (2006) suggests, the key function of

middle managers is to maintain and to develop conditions that enable effective learning to take place. Middle manager's roles have become increasingly more complex, varied, and demanding and they include for example: monitoring student achievement; evaluating programmes and plans; coordinating staff and programmes; monitoring student achievement; teaching designated classes; developing and implementing plans; appointing and appraising staff; developing staff, procedures and programmes; running meetings, communicating and monitoring procedures (Cardno, 1995, p. 17).

Role conflict, role ambiguity and tensions are frequently observed characteristics of this duality in the work role (Bennett et al., 2003; Wise, 2001). An awareness of the importance of middle leaders within a school's organizational structure is on the rise (White, 2000) and the influence of middle leadership positions needs to be considered, especially in relation to school development. Weller (2001) asserted that department heads, as middle leaders, have the potential to be the most influential people in a school's organizational structure. In addition, middle leaders can play a vital role in whole school planning and decision-making (Brown, Boyle & Boyle, 1999).

Middle leadership development in schools has received less attention in particular in relation to the exercise of middle leadership itself. Positions in middle management are increasing in number as well as complexity, yet middle managers are being appointed to the positions without the relevant support or training. For example, in a recent research (Thorpe & Powell, 2014) on the views of leadership needs in secondary school middle leaders, coaching and mentoring were rated highly as a method of development and middle managers expressed a need for further training in the techniques of leadership and management.

### 3. Middle leadership and distributed leadership: tensions and challenges

According to Harris (2013b), to be most effective, distributed leadership has to be planned carefully and deliberately orchestrated. Therefore, who occupies formal leadership positions plays a key role in creating the right kind of cultural and structural conditions for its effective implementation. Some variables emerge from a systematic literature review (Woods et al., 2004) highlighting the significance of 1) both internal and external context, in terms of organisational culture and importance given to trust and equity; 2) control and autonomy, concerning how an organization constrains or enables different organizational members to take initiative and contribute to development of practice; 3) sources of change and development, such as external initiatives or, the presence of a strong or charismatic leader within an organisation; 4) the dynamics of team working which occur within organisations; 4) institutional and spontaneous forms of distributed leadership; and 5) the way in which a conflict is managed, in other words, the conflict resolution. Although not directly referred to middle management, these factors can be relevant to understand the development, nature and impact of distributed leadership with varying implications for middle management roles in the schooling sectors.

Research evidence underlines that distributed leadership is unlikely to flourish or be sustained without the support and the facilitation of formal leaders in schools (Day et al., 2009). Such conditions include the redistribution of power and authority as well as the building of trust relationship. In distributed leadership settings, formal leaders should also be considered as gate keepers by encouraging or discouraging others from leading. As indicated by Harris (2013a), distributed lead-



ership is not a “friend or foe” but as it refers to the complex interplay of dynamics of power and authority it can be used or misused (Lumby, 2013).

What the interest in distributed leadership typically ignores is the middle leadership level that exists in schools, people such as heads of departments/programs, curriculum coordinators, assistant heads, year-level coordinators and so forth. Therefore, while there has been notable research on the role of heads of school, middle management has been relatively unexplored. Harris’ study highlighted the changing nature of middle-level leaders in schools and the reciprocal influential relationship existing between leaders and followers. She assumed that if middle-level leaders are to be the co-producers of leadership, so principals will need to provide empowerment and encouragement of teachers to become leaders and opportunities for continuous professional development (Muji & Harris, 2003). As effective department leaders foster a climate of collaboration and collegiality, middle managers can be considered as educational leaders rather than just implementers or managers of decisions taken by the senior management level.

It is also true that there can be some tensions in middle management roles. In fact, the extent to which collegial and distributed management models can promote more effective teaching and learning has been questioned. For example, Kirkham (2005, p.160) suggests that collegiality is often an aspiration rather than a reality. Besides, in the case of distributed leadership, formal leaders can be of impediment when, for example, they tend to choose or encourage only those who support their particular agenda: this selective inauthentic attempt to distribute will prove to be counterproductive. To distribute leadership does not mean adopting a laissez-fair approach, or abdicating to responsibilities: in effect, as pointed in a recent Belgian study, leaving teacher teams to work alone, without the Principal’s regular supervision may lead to low effectiveness (Hulpia et al., 2012). In the same vein, rather than distributed leadership, Youngs (2009) highlights the existence of a “distributed pain”(7), where distributed leadership equates with work intensification. As Jarvis (2012) pointed out, the major issue is that collegiality is too often viewed as a model of leadership and management, rather than as a power relationship; in fact, true collegiality must occur within the context of an organization that is hierarchical and asymmetrical in its distribution of power (Busher, 2006). In Jarvis’ research (2012) in the UK, the participating subject leaders, by lacking essential power, were mostly forced to work in situations that were not always susceptible of direction or control; thus, they were forced to mobilize whatever power resources were available to them to assert some measure of authority and influence. Finally, Jarvis, the researcher argues that collegiality can be seen not as a philosophical choice, but as a straitjacket imposed by the severely circumscribed power resources of the subject leader.

Gurr & Drysdale’s (2013) review of research in Australia shows middle-level leadership’s potential to make a significant impact on school and student improvement although so far this is often unrealized: “the lack of professional preparation and leadership development by individual middle-level leaders, and underdeveloped professional knowledge and capability contribute to a missed opportunity to make a difference in schools” (67). The work of middle-level leaders is heavily dependent on how their roles are constructed and the capacities, abilities, and attitudes of the leaders. Dinham’s (2007) study indicates that heads of departments can make a difference, but the crucial point is the support and the high expectations from the leaders of the school (particularly the principal), and the capacity and aptitude to be leaders. Too often some or all these elements are missing. Further, the current focus on distributed leadership seems unhelp-

ful and may indeed be exacerbating the problems as people who do not want to be leaders, nor who have the skills, attitudes or aptitudes to be leaders, are being forced into roles that have leadership as an expectation.

## Conclusion

This article introduced readers to the crucial role of middle management in a context of distributed leadership. International studies pertinent to middle leadership are growing. However, in Italy, the knowledge base remains inadequate to meet the needs for understanding this vital role in educational administration. It is my opinion that the introduction of a specific and well-defined layer of management could represent an opportunity that affects career development for all of the teachers in Italy (Calidoni & Weyland 2009). In fact, the Italian school system traditionally does not provide pathways, which promote meritocracy among teachers, while the only recognized career path is that of seniority, which economically and psychologically mortifies professionals within schools (Pirola 2015). Overall, future research is needed to explore this neglected layer of management, which influences schools' effectiveness. In effect, further studies are necessary to provide thinking and research about the ways in which the middle management function might be developed. Such issues therefore raise profound questions about how we conceptualize schools as organizations. In fact, in our current scenario of accountability reforms, the middle tier could take on greater responsibility for the day-to-day running of their schools since middle manager could have a crucial role in managing the teaching-learning process.

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