


Analisi Focus

Focus Analysis





Servant-leadership as an effective model for teacher leadership

La leadership di servizio (servant leadership) quale modello effettivo per la leadership degli inseg- nanti (teacher leadership)

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ABSTRACT

This brief article aims to explore current approaches to teacher leadership in an attempt to advance its practice and energize the collective leadership of teachers. Leadership is not vested in one person who is assigned to a formal position of power or authority, but, rather, is a reciprocal process that enables participants in an educational community to construct meanings for a shared purpose of schooling. First, I acknowledge the teacher's role in leading improvement at both classroom and school levels. I, then, suggest that applying servant leadership to teacher leadership may serve as an opportunity to improve teaching practices.

In questo breve articolo l'autore si propone di esplorare gli attuali approcci alla teacher leadership nel tentativo di avanzare la sua pratica all'interno delle istituzioni scolastiche italiane e di incoraggiare processi di leadership collettiva nel corpo docente. La leadership non è riferita ad una persona che riveste un ruolo formale di potere o autorità, ma, piuttosto, ad un processo interattivo che consente agli attori di una comunità educativa di costruire significati per un comune scopo educativo. In primo luogo, l'autore riconosce il ruolo guida dell'insegnante per il miglioramento scolastico; successivamente suggerisce come l'adozione del modello servant leadership (leadership di servizio) alla leadership degli insegnanti (teacher leadership) possa rappresentare un'opportunità per migliorare le pratiche di insegnamento e di formazione.

KEYWORDS

Teacher Leadership, Educational Leadership, Servant-Leadership, Italy, Teacher Development.

Teacher Leadership, Leadership Educativa, Leadership di Servizio, Italia, Formazione Docenti.

*The servant leader is servant first.
It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve.
Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead...
The best test is: Do those served grow as persons?
Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous,
more likely themselves to become servants?*
Robert K. Greenleaf

Introduction

Research on school leadership remains mainly oriented toward headship (Harris et al., 2013). However, this article draws on the idea that leadership is not the preserve of an individual (head of school), but a fluid or emergency 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, Halverson & Diamond, 2001, p. 20). At the same time, given the current Italian educational reform process, heads of schools are experiencing an increased workload: they are subject to demands, not only from the education authorities, but also from other quarters, such as parents and the whole community (Serpieri & Grimaldi, 2015; Paletta & Bezzina, 2016; Bezzina, Paletta & Alimehmeti, 2017). For example, while the White Paper entitled *La Buona Scuola* (The Good School), which was published in 2014, formally recognized distributed leadership within the education system, Italian school leaders are facing the challenges of the remarkable hybridization of their role. In fact, the attempt to introduce decentralized forms of leadership to coexist with the tightening of hierarchical ties, has led to a peculiar form of centralized decentralization (Serpieri & Grimaldi, 2015).

A distributed view of leadership implies interdependency and embraces how leaders of various kinds, and in various roles, share responsibility. Ostensibly, it is becoming more difficult for any single individual to possess all the skills and abilities required to competently lead organizations today (O'Toole, Galbraith & Lawler, 2002). In this sense, if leadership is conceived as a collective social process emerging through the interactions of multiple actors (Uhl-Bien, 2006), teachers hold a pivotal position in the way schools operate, as the quality of teaching most strongly influences levels of pupil motivation and achievement, as well school improvement (Fullan, 2001). After all, school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on student learning (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008).

Taking this view, leadership is about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge, collectively and collaboratively (Harris, 2003) – and I would add – by serving each other. However, it is very challenging to view teachers as leaders with the clear demarcation of roles and responsibilities within the hierarchical school system. In contrast to the majority of the traditional leadership literature (Northouse, 2004), my view is that leadership is not vested in one person who is assigned to a formal position of power or authority, but rather it is seen as a potential capacity of both teachers and heads of schools.

Given this premise, the main aim of this article is to briefly discuss current approaches to teacher leadership in an attempt to advance its practice and to energize the collective leadership of teachers as they collaborate to make improve-

ments, developing a strong culture of collaboration, which is the foundation of educational change (Crowther, Ferguson & Hann, 2009).

The article is structured as follows. First, by focusing on the conceptual background of teacher leadership, I argue that teachers play a crucial role in leading improvements, both at classrooms and school levels, and I will acknowledge their roles as change agents (Van der Heijden, Geldens, Beijaard, & Popeijus, 2015). Second, I connect this perspective to a particular model of leadership – the servant leadership model – and I will highlight some important tenets, which I offer as a guide to those who are open to its invitation and challenge. In fact, servant leaders develop people by providing learning and growth opportunities for their followers. I, then, conclude by considering the implications of this analysis for practice.

1. Teaching leadership

The literature on teacher leadership is extensive (see Muijs & Harris, 2003; Wenner & Campbell, 2017 for a review). In both the US and UK, teacher leadership is a well-accepted form of leadership activity (Harris, 2003) and several programmes and initiatives have been established with the aim to prepare practicing teachers for leadership (Smyle & Eckert, 2017). Despite the extensive literature on teacher leadership, there is widespread confusion concerning what teacher leadership is, as it has been defined from a wide variety of perspectives. Crippen (2005) writes that once one assumes the mantle of teacher, one becomes a leader in the classroom and then in the school and learning community. Furthermore, teacher leaders have the capacity to influence, encourage the sharing of best teaching practices, assist new teachers, collaborate with others, and take on leadership responsibilities to influence the whole school community. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) define teacher leaders as: «teachers who are leaders within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher learners and leaders, and influence others towards improved educational practice» (p. 17). In a more expanded view, Crowther, Kaagar, and Hann (2002) define teacher leadership and its contribution as «action that transforms teaching and learning in schools, that ties schools and communities together on behalf of learning... teacher leadership facilitates principled action to achieve whole-school success» (p. xvii). According to the seminal literature review of 140 studies on teacher leadership from 1980 to 2004, York-Barr, & Duke (2004) conclude that «the lack of definition may be due, in part, to the expansive territory encompassed under the umbrella term teacher leadership » (p. 260). In the same vein, based on York-Barr & Duke's work, Wenner & Campbell (2017) conducted a recent examination of the empirical research that has occurred in the last decade. The most salient findings highlighted that although rarely defined, teaching leadership focuses on roles beyond the classrooms, supporting the professional learning of peers, influencing policy/decision making, and, ultimately, targeting student learning. Finally, they defined teacher leaders as «teachers who maintain K-12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities, while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside the classroom» (p. 140). When it comes to teacher leadership, we need to consider the potentially disparate contexts that exist within schools and schools internationally. In the understating I am offering, teacher leadership can be practiced by all the teachers who take part in the educational community of the school. Thus, I propose a holistic perspective on the study of organisational work, in which leadership can conceive to be grounded in the

activity (more generally labeled as the 'leadership practice') rather than in a position or role. My position resonates with the suggestion proposed by Lambert et al. (1995), according to whom, leadership could be understood as «the reciprocal processes that enable participants in an educational community to construct meanings that lead toward a shared purpose of schooling». Hence, the opportunities for exercising leadership are not limited to hierarchical and structural positions, but rather this view reflects the idea that every person, in one way or another, can demonstrate leadership (Goleman, Boyatzis & Goleman, 2002). However, this does not mean that everyone is a leader, rather everyone has leadership potentialities and has «the right, responsibility and capability to be a leader» (Lambert, 2003, p.423). This view seems particularly meaningful in empowering teachers to become involved in the decision-making process and to actively participate in the life of the school. Wenner and Campbell (2016) identify four reasons for advancing the concept and practice of teacher leadership, which I will briefly elaborate on.

- 1) *Benefits of employee participation.* When teachers share in decision-making, they become committed to the decisions that emerge. In this sense, there are some important connections and overlaps between distributed leadership and teacher leadership (Harris, 2003). Hence, as suggested by Harris (2003), «we need forms of leadership that support and nourish meaningful collaboration among teachers» (p. 322) while we need to design models of leadership that enhance the possibilities for teachers to lead development work in schools. In addition, Barth (2000) argued that the process of decision-making represents the best possible learning opportunity for teachers.
- 2) *Expertise about teaching and learning.* This reason acknowledges the unique contribution of teachers to educational improvement. In addition, current reforms are opening up the old, cellular organization of schools, and teaching is, by far, not an insulating profession. Within a learning organization, teachers share, reflect, and build a vibrant professional community (Watson, 2014).
- 3) *Acknowledgment, opportunities, and rewards for accomplished teachers.* Teacher leadership may represent an opportunity to break from the routine of the classrooms and engage with colleagues and senior leaders to exercise creativity through collegial work (Barth, 2001).
- 4) *Benefits to students.* After all, teaching is about relationships and investment in students and their futures.

2. Servant leadership

Peter Northouse made an important statement that I would like to continue with: «Because leadership is a complex process, there are no simple paths or guarantees to becoming a successful leader. Each individual is unique, and each of us has our own distinct talents for leadership» (2012, p. 36). Learning is a way of life and teachers need to express a love for learning by sharing and critically interrogating their «practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way» (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 229). Teacher leaders need to play an important role. Here, too, they need to “walk the talk.” In fact, Blanchard, O'Connor & Ballard argue that «genuine success does not come from proclaiming our values, but from consistently putting them into their daily action» (1997, p.73). I believe this to be a critical point that highlights the importance of moving away from preaching down to people and living what you believe in.

To address this challenge and to enhance teacher leadership, applying the principles, values, and practices of *Servant Leadership* to teaching can make a profound difference on the impact of learning and on the whole school community (Hays, 2008). In this sense, in *Modeling meaning in life: The teacher as servant leader*, Herman & Marlowe (2005, p. 175) discuss the need for teacher leaders to shift from a 'classroom' to a 'community' mindset, thanks to which teachers can build a strong culture of collaboration. This emphasizes the moral sense of concern for others, the moral development, and the service and the enhancement of the common good.

The term "servant leadership" was introduced by Robert Greenleaf (1904-1990), and the servant leadership model begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first and then learn to lead as a servant. Greenleaf wrote: «The great leader is seen as a servant first» (p. 32). This challenging quote, a fragment of the essay *The Servant*, captures the essence of the concept of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 1998). Through this oxymoron, which is the combination of two contradictory categories (servant and leader), Robert Greenleaf questioned the very nature of leadership. The old, authoritarian models are about the power connected to the role, not about the service. Leadership without service is less substantial, more ego-driven, and selfish, instead of being community-centered, altruistic, and empathetic. This is particularly true for teachers. Servant leadership identifies serving others – including students, parents, colleagues, other member of staff, and communities – as the number one priority. True leadership emerges from those whose primary motivation is a deep desire to help others. Describing the traits of the servant leaders, Soderquist (2006) highlights their capacity for believing in, and feeling responsible for, the development of others; their possibility to share not only the responsibility, but also the recognition for success; their will to build relationships based on mutual respect and trust on all levels; their particular dedication to caring about, and looking for, ways to meet the needs of everyone they come into contact with. Hence, servant leadership extends beyond the act of "doing" and reflects a specific way of "being" (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Operationally, the developmental commitment of the teacher as a serving leader is no longer that of controlling or managing energy in others, but rather inspiring creative energy in one's students and colleagues (Bowman, 2005). If we believe in servant leadership as a way of life, then we must reflect on what it will take to nurture such a context where we can relate and grow together. In this respect, servant leadership becomes a guiding philosophy, an institutional model (Bezzina, 2009).

Applying servant leadership to classroom contexts serves as an opportunity to improve education by positively impacting student learning and development, and deepening the student-centeredness of instruction (Noral & Richards, 2015).

Based on Greenleaf's writings, Spears (1998) developed a list of ten characteristics of a servant leader, which can be applied in the classroom and in the whole school community, to help them widen their sphere of influence. This will make the school community a learning space in which a generative approach to learning can occur. In fact, servant teachers understand the importance of building a community in and outside of the classroom. The list of ten characteristics (Tab 1) – which I have adapted to the teaching experience – serve to communicate the power and promise that this concept offers to those who are open to its invitation and challenge.

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| Listening | Servant teachers seek to listen receptively to what is being said (and not said) by students, colleagues, or other stakeholders |
| Empathy | It shows a deep understanding of students or colleagues by communicating acceptance and recognition of their uniqueness. Students or colleagues can express their beliefs and thoughts. |
| Healing | Learning to heal is a powerful force for transformation and integration. Many students or colleagues may have broken spirits and may have suffered from a variety of emotional hurts (self-confidence, emotional problems, failures...) |
| Awareness | Servant teachers reflect on their practice and think strategically. Self-awareness strengthens the servant leader. Teachers learn from their mistakes and develop a humble approach. |
| Persuasion | Rather than using one's positional authority, the servant teacher seeks to convince others, rather than coerce compliance. |
| Conceptualization | Servant leaders seek to nurture their abilities to "dream great dreams." |
| Foresight | Foresight is a trait that allows servant leaders to understand lessons from the past. Teachers learn from their mistakes and develop a humble approach. |
| Stewardship | Seek to improve the community and the profession. Teachers commit themselves to the good of the school. |
| Commitment to the Growth of People | The servant leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything within his or her power to nurture the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of all members of the community. |
| Building Community | Servant leaders have a strong sense of school community spirit and work hard to foster it. They make proposals, and have high levels of commitment. |

Tab. 1. Ten characteristics adapted from Spears (1998)

Conclusion

This brief article introduced readers to the ideas of teacher leadership and "teachers as servants," suggesting that servant leadership can be adopted as a framework and as a guiding philosophy to school development. This principle can offer possible routes to humanistically reinterpret the Delors' (1996) *Four Pillars of Education* and, in particular, address the 'learning to live together' principle, which was regarded as the most important of the guiding principles. The embodied ideas may seem idealistic and larger than life to some. In fact, servant leadership theory tends to be too idealistic. However, research evidence shows that servant teaching impacts student outcomes and school climate (Noland & Richards, 2015). As such, there is the need for research into Italian educational institutions for evidence of existing servant leadership practices and how these can be improved/implemented.

It is my opinion that leadership is a vocation. This implies loving what you get to do, getting to care for and serve others. The goal as teacher leaders is to form the human person, and so by forming *the person-in relationship*. It is through these educational values and servant-leadership principles that we, as individuals and as a community, become capable of meeting with, entering into dialogue with, and working together with other persons. To conclude, I believe that the

model of educational leadership that will make a difference in the current reform process is one that focuses on character, on presence, on connections, and on servant leadership values (Bezzina, 2008).

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