

# Distributive Leadership within School Organizations: The Role of inclusive school leaders

Flavia Capodanno<sup>1</sup>, Paola Aiello<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Humanities, Philosophy and Education, University of Salerno;  
fcapodanno@unisa.it; paiello@unisa.it

**Abstract:** This paper explores how schools are organized and the role of middle management within them. It examines how certain systemic figures influence decision-making within schools. It specifically looks at how certain systemic figures, (school leaders) influence decision-making in schools, focusing on their role in promoting inclusion. The discussion centers on the concept of distributive leadership, where these figures play a key role in fostering high-quality inclusive practices. The paper argues that inclusive school leaders should have a diverse set of skills, including both technical and non-technical abilities like agency, reflexivity, and a willingness to enact change. By empowering teachers to be agents of change, with awareness and intentionality, this leadership approach can facilitate the development of inclusive processes in schools.

**Keywords:** Distributive leadership, inclusive school leaders, School organization

## 1. Introduction

According to scholars like Weick (1976) and Brundrett, Smith, & Burton (2003), schools are seen as complex organizations that have the important task of meeting the diverse needs of modern society while staying true to their educational goals. They can be described in different ways: as places where learning happens (learning organizations) or as communities where people share skills and knowledge (communities of practice), (Argyris & Schön, 1978); Senge 1990; Wenger, 1998; 2006). In the first case, schools are seen as places where learning happens, not just through formal lessons but also as an ongoing process. In the second case, they're seen as communities where everyone works together towards a common goal, sharing a sense of belonging and common values. This creates a strong bond among everyone involved in the school, leading to shared practices rooted in the school's context. In this situation, it's important to view the school as a system designed for learning, functioning on different



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<sup>1</sup> The article is the result of the scientific collaboration of the authors. However, the attribution of scientific responsibility is as follows: Flavia Capodanno is the author of all the paragraphs in this paper; Paola Aiello is the scientific responsible for the work.

levels, both organizational (Petrucci, 2000; Bochicchio, 2017) and educational. To achieve this, schools should align with recommendations from international documents that emphasize the importance of inclusion for quality education (EADSNE, 2009; 2012; 2014). Considering that schools are essentially systems where members interact based on shared values, attitudes, and opinions, it's important to focus on how the organizational and educational aspects of schools can promote inclusive practices and cultures (Booth & Ainscow, 2014). This paper will explore how middle management within schools influences decision-making and will then delve into the practical aspects of promoting inclusion. For this purpose, the paper will initially examine the development of different views regarding schools as organizations and the involvement of middle management in decision-making processes within schools. This includes understanding how systemic figures influence these mechanisms. Subsequently, the focus will shift towards exploring practical strategies known as school leader for promoting inclusion (Pirola, 2015; Paletta & Bezzina 2016; Bufalino, 2017; Agrati, 2018). These strategies providing a comprehensive understanding of how inclusion can be effectively fostered within school environments. Specifically, it will attempt to reflect on the construct of distributive leadership promoted by such figures to foster quality inclusive processes. This intention arises from a reflection on the consideration that the inclusive school leaders, holding a pivotal role in the school organization, should possess a protean habitus of competences, combining technical and non-technical skills (Aiello, 2019), including agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Priestley, Biesta, Robinson, 2015), reflexivity (Schön, 1987; 1993) and a transformative posture (Mezirow, 1991; 2003;). These competencies enable teachers to become agents of change (Hattie, 2003) by fostering awareness, decisiveness, and intentionality. This, in turn, facilitates the implementation of leadership focused on promoting high-quality inclusive processes (Leithwood & Jantzi2009; Ainscow & Sandill 2010).

## 2 Inclusive school leaders in the School as an Organization

Over time, studies on how schools are organized have followed different theories. It began with focusing on how work was organized, like in Taylorism and Fordism (Taylor, 1967). Then, it moved towards understanding how people interact within organizations, known as human relations theories (Mayo, 1963). Finally, there's been a shift to studying schools as complex organizations. Initially, schools were seen as tightly structured systems following a professional bureaucracy model (Mintzberg, 1996), but that view has changed over time. Initially, schools were seen as rigid systems where individuals were confined within their professional roles. Then, a more open perspective emerged, viewing schools as natural systems with various human and relational aspects. Eventually, schools came to be seen as open systems, interacting with and being influenced by their surrounding environment. They're seen as small parts of the larger social system. This shift in perspective reflects a growing interest in understanding and addressing the diverse educational needs of the context (Romei 1986, Benadusi & Serpieri 2000). As the organizational model shifts from viewing schools as natural systems to open systems, theories emerge focusing on how knowledge is shared within the organization. Maslow's motivational theory (1954) is one reference point. Additionally, Chris Argyris and Schön explored organizational learning and reflective practices among organizational members (Argyris & Schön, 1978). In these studies, it is observed, in correlation with organizational learning in-

tended as a tool for knowledge dissemination, also the dimension of organizational culture, seen as a humus of values and knowledge shared among the various protagonists of the organization. In these studies, organizational learning is seen as crucial for sharing knowledge within the organization. Organizational culture also emerges as important, acting as a foundation of shared values and knowledge among the organization's members. According to Schein (1990; 1984), organizational culture develops from fundamental assumptions formed by the group over time to deal with external challenges and internal relationships. These assumptions are considered valid because they have proven effective and are passed on to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel about such issues. Organizational culture is deeply ingrained in an organization and stems from collective learning, known as organizational learning. This perspective is internalized through socialization processes involving all members of the organization. Components of organizational culture include agreements on approved and disapproved behaviors, clear rules for dividing roles and responsibilities, both vertically (in terms of authority and hierarchy) and horizontally (in terms of division of labor and specialization), and socialization of procedures for specific tasks. In essence, the combination of norms, roles, structures, and formal and informal procedures forms the unique culture of each school. In the organizational system of a school, the culture, formed by its vision and mission, acts as the glue that binds relationships together. Weick described in the 1970s this bond as "loose coupling," (Weick, 1976) emphasizing that in complex organizations like schools, reality is shaped by creating sense and meaning among stakeholders who are loosely connected. This implies that the culture of the school organization serves as the primary relational node, forming the basis of human relationships within the organization. Then, it's important for various stakeholders to share values and ideas. In Italy, discussions about the organizational dimension of schools have led to the introduction of regulatory measures promoting school autonomy, such as Law no. 59/97, DPR 275/1999, Law 107/2015, and the CCNL 2016. These measures align with the principles outlined in the Maastricht Treaty (1993), which emphasized the importance of intervening in the organizational aspects of educational systems. Italy's approach to schooling encompasses actions across different levels, from teaching methods to organizational structures. These two sectors, teaching methods, and organizational structures, are closely intertwined, with the success of one affecting the other. In this context, it's important to focus on how organizational culture is disseminated and promoted within schools, particularly by key figures known as school middle management. These individuals play a crucial role as intermediaries between teachers, parents, and the school principal. School middle management, although more prevalent in Anglo-Saxon countries, has become an increasingly important topic for institutions and professional associations. In the Italian context, following the law on school autonomy, there has been a transformation in the roles of middle management from "system figures" to "objective functions," and finally to "instrumental functions" (middle leaders). Initially, the term "system figures" was defined in the CCNL 1995-97, article 38, referring to Objective Functions. These functions encompass four areas of competence outlined in Annex 3 of the National Collective Labor Agreement (CCNL) of 1999: coordination of teaching, in-service training, the reception and orientation system, and relationships in the territory. These areas aim to create a fully integrated educational environment by managing the Educational Offer Plan, supporting teachers, providing interventions and services for students, and

implementing educational projects in collaboration with external entities and institutions. Later, the four areas of competence were consolidated into two key areas of competence include disciplinary, psycho-pedagogical, methodological-didactic, organizational-relational, documentation and evaluation, and research sectors (National Labor Contract, art. 23 of 1999 and art. 25 of 2003; art. 26 2006-2009) (Agrati, 2018). Law no. 107/2015 expanded these figures, allowing the school principal to designate an additional 10% of teachers from the autonomy staff to carry out specific organizational and didactic support activities. However, the specifics regarding the number, structure, and duties of such figures are not clearly outlined (Pirola, 2015; Bufalino, 2017). In Italy, instrumental functions are designated by the Teachers' College based on proposed candidates with professional experience in the relevant area. However, there's no formally recognized professional figure or clear responsibilities and remuneration for these roles. In terms of inclusion, a construct recognized for its significance at both scientific and political levels (EADSNE, 2012; 2022), middle leaders (instrumental functions) in this area should play a crucial role in fostering genuinely participatory inclusive processes involving all stakeholders. These support figures, viewed as agents of change (Hattie, 2003) or catalysts for inclusive processes, could drive effective and concrete participation of teachers in school decision-making mechanisms. By engaging in this approach, teachers would become active participants in promoting shared values like equitable and inclusive education, both in teaching and organizational aspects. This would lead to a desired collaborative management of both teaching and organizational processes within the school, fostering a strong and widespread organizational culture aligned with international documents advocating for inclusion and accessibility. To meet the demands of equity and sustainability while staying true to the values of inclusive teaching, it's important to consider a new profile of teacher competencies. This professionalization should include a diverse range of skills enabling teachers to address the varied needs of their community. Alongside technical expertise, there's a need for emotional and relational competencies (Aiello, 2019), grounded in the dynamics of workplace learning (Engstrom & Middleton, 1996; Bonometti, 2012) and the concept of a learning organization (Weick, 1997; Toivainen, 2007). These competencies are crucial in understanding the complex organizational and professional aspects of inclusive education (Perla & Agrati, 2018, p.242) Therefore, it's essential to develop a comprehensive framework of competencies for all teachers, especially those in middle leadership roles. Indeed, precisely they, and in our specific interest, the instrumental functions for inclusion, must put into play all their baggage of knowledge, competences, and skills to be able to promote, in an intentional and aware manner, the involvement of all colleagues in the didactic and organizational dynamics of the school. From a regulatory point of view, in Italy with the D.P.R. n. 80/2013, the L. n. 107/2015 has emphasized the need for a new guise for the professionalization of the teaching body. Subsequently, then, with the D.M. n. 797/2016 the National Training Plan (PNF) of the teaching staff for the triennium 2016-2019, inaugurated a new training course for teachers, in line with national and European indications (Agrati, 2018; Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017). In this context, middle leaders in the area of inclusion play a crucial role as educational leaders who actively support governance and colleagues in fostering a fair and inclusive school environment. They should embody dynamic leadership by initiating strategic actions to promote an organizational culture aligned with inclusive principles. Through collaborative efforts with managers, colleagues, and the com-

munity, instrumental functions for inclusion can promote distributive leadership aimed at fostering equitable and inclusive processes of improvement and empowerment.

### 3. Inclusive school leaders as promoters of distributive leadership

Several studies and theoretical models explore leadership across different fields, including education (Bennett et al., 2003; Hallinger, 2003, 2005; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005; Neumerski, 2013; Tian et al., 2016). In education, various leadership styles have been examined, each reflecting a particular view of the relationships among stakeholders within the school organization, including principals, middle management, and non-teaching staff. The initial model of managerial leadership, influenced by Taylor and Fayol's studies, established a hierarchical and bureaucratic structure within organizations. In this model, power is centralized in the leader, resulting in a closed bureaucratic hierarchy (Leithwood et al., 1999). However, a shift towards a model emphasizing human relations within schools emerged later, particularly after the 1930s (Murphy, 1995). This change was driven by the incorporation "of social sciences such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and political science into the study of educational administration" (Jacobson and Cypres, 2012, p. 219). This new model focused on the relationships between school leaders and the rest of the staff (Candoli et al., 1997; Gumus, Bellibas, Esen et al., 2018, p. 29). From these beginnings, various interpretative paradigms of educational leadership emerged. Initially, there were leadership types focused on teaching competencies—didactic leadership—and on the leader's role in curriculum design—curricular leadership. Curricular leadership was especially common in countries where curriculum management is decentralized. In these models, the Principal's role as an effective leader crucial for enhancing teaching practices and student outcomes is emphasized (Chase and Guba, 1955; Edmonds, 1979). Despite numerous theories, defining leadership remains challenging (Leithwood and Riehl, 2005). There's no single definition in the literature (Yukl, 2002; Bush, 2008). Kruse (2013) defined leadership as "a process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal(p.2)" (Gumus, Bellibas, Esen et al., 2018, p. 26), highlighting that leaders often possess fewer subject-specific competencies than subject teachers (Cuban, 1988). As a result, there's been a growing recognition of the need for a theory that distributes leadership authority more broadly. In recent years, there has been reflection on the idea that leadership shouldn't be solely the responsibility of the Principal. This has led to the development of the distributive leadership model, where all staff members are involved in the school's organizational mechanisms. Distributive leadership is often referred to by various terms in the literature, such as "shared leadership," "collaborative leadership," "delegated leadership," and "dispersed leadership" (Spillane, 2005). Research on distributive leadership among teachers, which originated in North America in the 1990s and gained traction in England in the 2000s (Harris, 2004), emphasizes the active and influential role of the entire teaching staff in both teaching and organizational matters. This perspective considers leadership competence as a willingness to collaborate and act collectively (York-Barr and Duke, 2004; Harris, 2004). In a school context, distributive leadership occurs when teachers participate in decision-making processes, share experiences, ideas, and values, and work together to enhance the school, "leadership is about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively" (Lambert, 1998, p. 5). It emphasizes



learning together and collectively constructing meaning and knowledge. Distributive leadership involves engaging all staff in decision-making and collaboration to effectively coordinate work and address organizational challenges. Teacher leadership, on the other hand, recognizes that teachers play a central role in school operations and the core functions of teaching and learning (York-Barr and Duke, 2004). This occurs when teachers participate in decision-making, contribute to professional development, share experiences, and generate ideas for school improvement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000).

Given the aforementioned points, it's fitting to link the promotion of distributive educational leadership with middle leaders of inclusion. These individuals, as previously emphasized, should actively advocate for inclusive teaching and organizational processes that cater to the diverse needs of students. Central to this is their intentionality to act in this direction, which involves understanding the context, identifying the needs of all students, and responding effectively. In this sense, "Intentions are assumed to capture the motivational factors that influence a behavior; they are indications of how hard people are willing to try, of how much of an effort they are planning to exert, in order to perform the behavior. (Ajzen, 1991, p.181). Indeed, the school as an organization must strive to respond adequately to the demands of the context, especially considering the needs of all students, including those with special needs. (Pijl & Frissen, 2009, Van Miegheem, Verschueren, et al. 2000). To underscore the potentially inclusive nature of distributive leadership, it's pertinent to reference international studies (Loreman, 2007; Ainscow and Sandill, 2010). These studies highlight the correlation between distributive leadership and the promotion of inclusive principles, as well as the importance of fostering trust and cooperation among stakeholders for school effectiveness. From these reflections, it becomes evident that both the leadership of the Principal and the distributive leadership facilitated by middle leaders, and subsequently by all teaching staff, should collaborate in decision-making and adjust their daily practices to support inclusion, despite its challenges (Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004; Loreman, 2007; Ferguson, 2008). When school leaders and teachers engage in constructive dialogue mediated by competent middle leaders, focusing on inclusive values and management methods at both organizational and instructional levels, it becomes more feasible to agree on solutions or intervention strategies for positive inclusive change (Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004). Furthermore, research suggests that the professionalization of school team members can positively impact their attitudes and help address concerns related to teaching students with disabilities (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Van Miegheem et al., 2000; 2018). Given this, it's essential to emphasize the importance of professionalizing teachers, particularly inclusive school leaders, to foster active engagement among all school stakeholders. These competencies range from disciplinary to systemic, especially within an organizational framework of the school. Various training approaches have emerged in teacher professional development, aligning with the knowledge generated by school organizations and the development needs of the educational communities involved (Fabbri et al., 2021). In this context, it's relevant to mention the concepts established in the scientific field concerning transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), reflexivity (Schön, 1987; 1993), and the capacity for judgment and action (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015). These competencies enable teachers to "agire la propria agività"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> act their own agency

(Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Aiello, 2018, p.5), which refers to their ability to act intentionally and consciously by recognizing and seizing the opportunities presented by the context, known as affordances (Gibson, 1979). From these reflections, it becomes clear that leaders for inclusion, who are attentive to the context, reflective in their actions, open to change, and capable of responding unforeseen challenges while charting new paths, can significantly influence school processes. Their impact lies particularly in fostering an organizational culture grounded in the value of inclusion.

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