

Democratic school and educational leadership: The case of democratic-distributed leadership

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Abstract

In recent years, neoliberal strategies and practices have dominated contemporary school education. These approaches have shaped educational realities in which schools strive to maximise efficiency through predetermined targets and measurable outcomes. In such an environment, the idea of democracy appears to be fading, along with a sense of responsibility for the common good and constructive dialogue. Today, schools seem to be losing the creative potential of the democratic way of life advocated by Dewey, which transforms students' individualism into participation and collectivity. Therefore, school administration plays a vital role in strengthening democratic schools through the practical application of collaborative and participatory models of educational leadership. In this study, we clarify the concept of the democratic school and show how democracy can be strengthened in the school environment through the democratic-distributed model of educational leadership.

Negli ultimi anni, le strategie e le pratiche neoliberiste hanno dominato l'istruzione scolastica contemporanea. Questi approcci hanno plasmato contesti educativi in cui le scuole cercano di massimizzare l'efficienza attraverso obiettivi predeterminati e risultati misurabili. In questo scenario, l'idea di democrazia sembra svanire, insieme al senso di responsabilità verso il bene comune e al dialogo costruttivo. Oggi le scuole sembrano perdere il potenziale creativo dello stile di vita democratico sostenuto da Dewey, che trasforma l'individualismo degli studenti in partecipazione e collettività. L'amministrazione scolastica svolge quindi un ruolo fondamentale nel rafforzare le scuole democratiche attraverso l'applicazione di modelli collaborativi e partecipativi di leadership educativa. In questo studio, chiariremo il concetto di scuola democratica e mostreremo come la democrazia possa essere rafforzata nell'ambiente scolastico attraverso il modello democratico-distribuito di leadership educativa.

Keywords: democratic school; educational leadership; democratic-distributed leadership; distributed leadership; democratic leadership

Parole chiave: scuola democratica; *leadership* educative; *leadership* democratica distribuita; *leadership* distribuita; *leadership* democratica

1. Introduction

The debate about the democratic nature of schools and the influence of educational leadership on it has intensified in recent years, reflecting the social, political, and pedagogical challenges of the modern era. In particular, neoliberal policies implemented by governments today enable the market to regulate civil society more effectively than state intervention, thereby determining social outcomes directly. As a result, education is now regarded as merely another commodity rather than a social service provided to all citizens (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012; Hursh, 2016). Consequently, education is reduced to its essentials, and the promotion of self-managed schools operating like businesses, the increase in non-public schools, pressure on educators to adopt the self-regulation model, and uncertainty regarding the content of education in citizenship and democracy more broadly are intensified (Hall & Pulsford, 2019). In such a complex educational environment, where schools must meet demands for accountability, inclusion, and professional empowerment, the search for leadership forms that support democracy and a culture of participation becomes crucial (Sant, 2019). The democratic school is no longer seen as merely an institutional requirement, but as a necessary condition for raising active, critically thinking citizens capable of adapting to an ever-changing social landscape (Doddington, 2018).

Educational leadership, especially as addressed in administrative and organizational studies, has long been the focus of theoretical and practical discussions. The traditional hierarchical model, in which the headteacher is the sole decision-maker, is gradually being challenged, as it is considered responsible for limited participation, bureaucratic procedures, and a reduction in teachers' professional initiative (Bush, 2020). In contrast, contemporary approaches emphasize the need for leadership that views the school as a learning community, where teachers, students, and other members of the school community play key roles in shaping the organization's policies and practices (Adams, 2023).

In this context, the importance of models of democratic (Woods, 2005) and distributed leadership (Harris et al., 2022; Spillane & Sun, 2022) has increased significantly. Democratic leadership, rooted in progressivism and participatory decision-making theory, is primarily concerned with the values of equality, inclusion, reciprocity, and collective responsibility (Hope, 2012). According to Spillane (2012), distributed leadership shifts the emphasis from the individual leader to the interactions among people, tools, and structures in the school, and as a result, opens up the school to be seen as a place where leadership is produced through the dynamics of everyday practices. Although the two approaches have been developed separately, their integration into a single framework – democratic-distributed leadership – provides a particularly insightful perspective.

Democratic-distributed leadership combines the democratic dimension of values with the functional dimension of distributed leadership action. It goes beyond the simple assignment of tasks, recognizing that authentic participation involves cultures of trust, organizational-level consultation processes, and coordination that promotes professional autonomy without diminishing collective responsibility (Harris, 2014). As a result, the school becomes a polycentric organization where leadership is not a privilege but a shared right and responsibility, enabling continuous professional learning and socially just educational practice.

Discussing its conceptual background, opportunities, and limitations, this article argues that the model of democratic distributed leadership is one of the most viable approaches to strengthening democratic school culture and promoting democratic education. With this article, we seek to highlight the theoretical and practical contributions of this model to building schools that facilitate democratic society and a human-centered educational model.

2. The concept of the democratic school

In political theory, the term “democracy” refers to a normative regime based on collective self-determination, equitable participation, and the common good, extending beyond formal procedures to substantive political action and shared governance (Ahlhaus, 2025). In this sense, democracy emphasises deliberative participation, pluralistic public dialogue, and institutional responsiveness to all groups of citizens, thereby resisting the reduction of social life to mere market interaction (Pinder, 2025). In education and broader society, democratic policy creates spaces where citizens and students are active decision-makers, rather than mere consumers of predetermined choices (Bogaards, 2026).

Contemporary academic research highlights how neoliberal reforms – characterized by commodification, individual choice frameworks, competition-driven accountability, and institutional autonomy – systematically reshape public goods into private commodities, restricting spaces for collective deliberation and democratic development (Riedl, 2025; Judge, 2024). This logic leads to the operation of market-centred schools. In this way, democratic capacities are undermined, as economic rationality is prioritised over common democratic goals and the political solidarity essential for substantive democracy is weakened (Kalmes, 2025).

In this base, the concept of democratic schooling extends beyond the mere implementation of participatory processes; it represents a comprehensive view of school life grounded in the principles of equal rights, collectivity, and social justice (Close, 2016). The basic assumption underlying this approach is the understanding that school is not a neutral space for the transmission of knowledge, but a socio-political environment where relationships of power, cooperation, and interaction are formed. Schools, as institutions, have the potential either to reproduce existing social inequalities or to become spaces for the empowerment and democratic liberation of the students and adults who comprise them (Culp et al., 2023).

The democratic organization of the school is based on cultivating a culture of participation, in which all community members have the opportunity to express their views, shape policies, and influence the functioning of the organization. This participation is not synonymous with formal representation procedures, but refers to the daily involvement of teachers, students, and parents in shaping educational choices and decision-making (Hand, 2023). According to Biesta (2023), democratic educational practice requires environments where students act as subjects with a voice rather than passive recipients, while the school's organization actively supports the development of critical literacy and political action.

A key feature of democratic schools is the existence of open communication structures. Processes of dialogue, reflection, and consultation are everyday practices rather than occasional activities linked only to formal bodies. Open communication helps build trust and ensures that leadership is exercised transparently and responsibly, allowing community members to recognize their contributions to collective goals (Alexander, 2023). The ability to express different opinions is considered central to strengthening democracy, as it helps the community develop alternative pedagogical options and form common practices based on evidence (McLeod, 2023).

The organization of the democratic school recognizes cultural, social, and learning diversity as a source of wealth rather than a problem to be addressed. Policies of equal access to learning, respect for diversity, and individualized support for students are integral parts of its democratic functioning (Johansson et al., 2007). Inclusion is not limited to learning but extends to the ways in which schools integrate the needs and expectations of all stakeholders in the community (Keddie et al., 2018).

The overall picture of the democratic school is that of an organization functioning as an ecosystem of participation. Within it, cooperation, reciprocity, and equality are not abstract principles, but everyday practices that shape the school's processes, relationships, and pedagogical choices. The democratic school seeks not only to promote democratic values to students, but also to embody them, offering a living example of democratic life on a small scale (Alexander, 2023).

A central issue in the functioning of a democratic school is the management of power. Democratic logic does not seek to abolish roles or responsibilities, but to redefine power as a diffuse resource that is distributed and redefined through relationships of cooperation and trust. According to Sun and Leithwood (2017), leadership and power are shaped through daily interactions, while the meaning that community members attribute to their actions determines the degree of democracy within the organization.

3. The relationship between democratic schools and educational leadership

The discussion on the democratic functioning of schools and the distribution of leadership within the organization is grounded in a broad theoretical background, linked to the principles of the progressive education movement (Boyles, 2018), theories of organizational change (Addison & Brundrett, 2008), and contemporary research on educational administration (Rubiyanoro & Bush, 2024). The concept and practice of the democratic school have their roots in Dewey's thinking, which argued that education should function as a democratic environment where students participate, collaborate, and develop critical inquiry skills (Hopkins, 2018).

Contemporary research on democratic schools further develops Dewey's approach, stating that democratic organization requires institutions and practices that promote participatory decision-making, equal access to knowledge, and the creation of a climate of dialogue based on mutual respect and trust. In this context, teachers are not seen as executors of a centralized system, but as professionals who have a voice and the ability to contribute meaningfully to shaping school policy (Ferguson-Patrick, 2022). Research on educational leadership has presented various models illustrating how leadership functions are exercised in schools. Traditionally, leadership was seen as a characteristic of the school principal, who played a leading role in setting goals and organizing school practice. However, this approach has limited use in the school environment, where complexity, diversity, and change require collective participation (Harris, 2014). Similarly, Yukl (2010) argues that leadership should be based on ethical and social bonds, and that trust and professional community are the main sources of leadership influence.

Distributed leadership was developed as an idea to address the need for more collaborative and participatory management styles. Spillane (2012) proposed a theoretical model of distributed leadership that views leadership as a process distributed among people, resources, and structures, focusing largely on the daily practices and routines of interaction (Sandvik et al., 2024). Similarly, Gronn (2003) coined the term "coordinated action", according to which leadership arises from collaborative flows of action that transcend the limitations of individual roles. Harris et al. (2022) linked this model to professional empowerment, arguing that when based on a culture of trust rather than formal structures of representation, the distribution of leadership can lead to school effectiveness. Democratic leadership differs from other approaches in that it bases its practices on the values of equal rights, participation, and social justice. This approach is not limited to management methods or consultation channels but argues that decision-making should reflect a collective sense of responsibility and practical citizenship (Woods, 2005).

Democratic distributed leadership is therefore a hub that connects democratic principles with the organizational logic of distributed action. This method recognizes that genuine participation cannot be achieved simply by assigning tasks, but requires an institutional framework that supports professional autonomy, provides structures for collaboration, and promotes a culture of open dialogue (Woods et al., 2021). Harris (2014) refers to the conditions for favorable leadership distribution, stating that these require relationships of trust and a commitment to continuous improvement from all members of the community. The democratic level highlights a normative aspect of the function: leadership is exercised not only for reasons of effectiveness, but also to strengthen the democratic functioning of the school and facilitate equal participation (Woods et al., 2021).

The theoretical framework discussed here helps interpret democratic-distributed leadership as a transformative approach to power and participation in the school unit. It not only provides a coherent background for understanding the dynamics of school life, but also lays the foundation for a more equitable, participatory, and pedagogically oriented educational organization.

4. The concept of democratic-distributed leadership

The adoption of democratic-distributed leadership in schools offers significant advantages but also presents complex challenges that affect the extent and quality of its implementation. Because this leadership approach requires a redistribution of power, increased participation, and a redefinition of roles, its success depends not only on the intentions of leaders and teachers but also on the organizational and cultural conditions of the school (Harris, 2014).

One of the most common and persistent sources of problems is teachers' resistance to changes that reduce or alter their autonomy or increase their responsibilities (de Oliveira et al., 2023). For many, participation in decision-making means a heavier workload and feelings of uncertainty and anxiety about their suitability for leadership roles (Spillane, 2012). Furthermore, distributed leadership can be misinterpreted as an instrumental delegation of tasks, especially when there is no shared vision or when school management collaborates with teachers for control rather than empowerment (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016).

Another critical obstacle concerns existing hierarchical structures in schools. Systems that rely heavily on centralized practices make it difficult to adopt a model that requires shared responsibility and institutional decentralization (Bush, 2020). In such environments, a top-down decision-making culture can undermine meaningful teacher participation, even when it is institutionally promoted. Additionally, the lack of adequate training in areas such as collaborative problem solving, co-leadership, and participatory decision-making is a significant obstacle. Those responsible for education often lack the preparation needed to design and support democratic processes, resulting in fragmented implementation. Finally, factors such as lack of time, bureaucratic pressure, and the absence of stable policy continuity hinder the institutionalization of democratic mechanisms (Day et al., 2016).

Despite these challenges, a key argument for adopting democratic-distributed leadership is its ability to enhance professional autonomy and a sense of active participation among teachers. Unlike centralized models, where decision-making is controlled by one or a few administrators, distributed leadership gives teachers the role of co-creators rather than mere executors of policy (Spillane, 2012). This participation increases professional commitment, as teachers realize they have a voice and influence on issues related to democratic educational practice. Research has shown that when teachers participate in decision-making, they demonstrate greater willingness to innovate, collaborate, and reflect, which are the pillars of democratic school development (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Democratic-distributed leadership plays a decisive role in developing a democratic culture, where relationships among the headteacher, teachers, and other members of the school community are based on mutual trust. Collaboration is not imposed as a mandatory practice but emerges as an integral part of the school's daily functioning (Yeigh et al., 2019). The literature indicates that schools adopting collaborative decision-making mechanisms achieve higher levels of cohesion, better communication, and more effective responses to educational challenges (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016). Furthermore, strengthening trust among school community members creates a safe environment in which teachers can experiment with new approaches without fear of failure, thereby embracing a democratic way of life (Macleod, 2023).

The adoption of democratic leadership approaches aligns with the broader need for schools to function as democratic microcosms, where values such as equality, dialogue, and critical thinking are cultivated through everyday practices. Teacher participation in decision-making models democratic behavior, enhancing their ability to convey these values to students (Bush, 2020). Democratic leadership, therefore, is not merely an administrative choice but a comprehensive pedagogical practice that contributes to forming citizens with a democratic ethos (Keddie et al., 2018). Strong arguments for adopting democratic distributed leadership stem from its documented impact on learning outcomes.

Many studies show that schools with distributed leadership practices and collective decision-making experience an improved school climate, higher student engagement, and better academic performance (Robinson, 2011). This is explained by the creation of effective professional learning communities, where teachers reflect together, plan joint interventions, and share evidence-based teaching practices. Such collective efforts lead to a critical pedagogical direction and consistent implementation of teaching strategies, reinforcing democratic learning (Hand, 2023). Democratic distributed leadership also strengthens the school's institutional resilience, as multiple leadership centers enable smooth operation even during crises or change. Schools where responsibility is concentrated solely on the headteacher are more vulnerable to emergencies, while those with distributed structures are more adaptable and self-regulating (Day et al., 2016).

Democratic-distributed leadership supports the sustainable development of schools by creating long-term structures of cooperation that do not depend on specific individuals, but rather on the adoption of collective democratic practices. As a result, change is not temporary or dependent on the personality of a headteacher, but is institutional and sustainable. The gradual cultivation of a democratic culture creates a school capable of evolving and responding to new educational challenges, strengthening critical pedagogy, and promoting a meaningful democratic ethos, thereby preparing students to become tomorrow's democratic citizens (Harris et al., 2017).

For democratic-distributed leadership to thrive, it is necessary to systematically build a collective vision that is recognized as authentic and shared by the school community. The existence of clear procedures for dialogue, evidence-based decision-making, and information sharing is crucial, as it ensures equal participation and prevents a return to centralized practices (Yeigh et al., 2019). In addition, the systematic professional development of all members of the school unit is essential. Training in leadership skills, collaboration methods, and reflection processes helps cultivate capacities that support participatory functioning (Soini et al., 2016). At the same time, institutional support from education systems – through stable policies, provision of resources, and reduction of bureaucratic burden – is a prerequisite for the sustainability of democratic practices (Day et al., 2016).

Overall, democratic-distributed leadership is a dynamic and demanding approach that can radically transform school culture and the learning process. However, its effective implementation requires clear structures, the cultivation of a democratic ethos, and consistent institutional support.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of democratic-distributed leadership in the school environment reveals a transformative approach that redefines how leadership, participation, and school functioning are understood. The synthesis of theoretical approaches and research findings shows that this model is not simply an alternative administrative practice, but a holistic philosophy that seeks to democratically empower all members of the school community and encourage their active contribution to educational decision-making (Harris, 2014).

Democratic-distributed leadership is structured as a complex framework in which leadership is distributed based on the needs, skills, and professional readiness of teachers. Unlike centralized models, this approach shifts the focus from the principal as the sole decision-maker to a collective group that takes responsibility, reflects, and

co-creates practices (Spillane, 2012). The literature confirms that when shared leadership emerges through institutionalized, transparent, and democratically established processes, it can strengthen school culture, professional identity, and pedagogical quality (Leithwood et al., 2020). However, our theoretical framework reminds us that distributed leadership is not automatically democratic. Democracy is embodied through relationships, rules, equality, and participation that allow each member to express their opinion and play an important role in school developments (Biesta, 2023). This distinction is crucial, as it prevents a superficial or instrumental adoption of the concept and supports the development of authentic democratic practices.

The challenges encountered in implementing the model confirm that the transition from centralized to participatory leadership requires profound cultural and organizational reforms. International research has shown that resistance to change is linked to established habits, fear of losing one's role, and uncertainty about increased responsibilities (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016). These obstacles can be overcome only when support structures, professional learning opportunities, and continuous encouragement for active participation are in place. In addition, inefficient allocation of time and resources is one of the most significant obstacles. Distributed leadership requires systematic mechanisms for collaboration, which need space, time, and coordination. In the absence of these, democratic processes are often limited to formal meetings without meaningful exchange of ideas. At the same time, the lack of training for education executives in democratic processes limits the ability of principals to act as coordinators and mediators of collective practices (Day et al., 2016).

Research data also show that democratic-distributed leadership serves as a pillar for improving school effectiveness when exercised systematically and consistently. Increased participation enhances trust, collaborative practices, and professional commitment, while empowering teachers to try innovative teaching approaches (Harris et al., 2022). In terms of learning outcomes, schools with a culture of democratic leadership have a more positive classroom climate, greater student participation, and improved performance on key cognitive indicators (Robinson, 2011). The mechanism that explains these improvements is not limited to more effective organization, but is linked to the strengthening of professional learning communities, which function as platforms for collective reflection and continuous improvement.

The overall picture that emerges from this analysis is that democratic-distributed leadership can be a powerful response to contemporary educational challenges, provided it is implemented consistently and with strategic planning. Its success depends on several factors, such as the leadership skills of the headteacher (Welch & Hodge, 2018), the commitment of teachers (Brundrett & de Cuevas, 2008), institutional support, and the cultivation of a culture of trust (Edwards-Groves & Grootenboer, 2021).

Democratic-distributed leadership is not just a modern management model but a human-centered approach that harnesses the potential of all members of the school community (Saputra et al., 2024) to promote the collective good. Consequently, this model emerges as an important direction for schools seeking to meet the demands of modern education and cultivate a culture of participation, empowerment, and democratic ethos.

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