# Distributed Leadership in Greek Public Schools: Limits and Conditions

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*Author's contribution*

*The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim:** To know whether the legal and institutional framework of the educational structure and operation, therefore of the school leadership as follows, is properly formed in Greek educational system and what the model of distributed leadership plays in the Greek educational context.
**Results:** The organization of Greek formal education is based on the bureaucratic system. This centralized system of school organization leaves little room for action and initiative for principals and, consequently, for teachers. It is important that the personal vision of the principals is transmitted to the other members of the school, in possible sources of leadership, as a factor of change and inspiration for all, overcoming the abovementioned bureaucratic system but also for the system itself to change and become more diverse and flexible.
**Conclusion:** In our opinion the detachment from the traditional, hierarchical forms of leadership and the transition to the division of responsibilities and the decentralization of power is imperative. Despite the typical structure of any education system, we believe that schools maintain some degree of autonomy that they can use to create a power distribution network, even informally.

*Keywords: Educational leadership; distributed leadership; Greek public school; centralized system.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership, as a pictorial symbolism, is considered as a geometrically equilateral triangle, whose frame, followers and the leader are its three sides. Therefore, in addition to the school leadership and the model that follows, the current educational context should also be taken into account. Our main purpose was to investigate whether the legal and institutional framework of the educational structure and operation, therefore of the school leadership as follows, is properly formed in Greek educational system and what the model of distributed leadership plays in the Greek educational context. The organization of Greek formal education is based on the bureaucratic system. This centralized system of school organization leaves little room for action and initiative for principals and, consequently, for teachers. In our opinion the detachment from the traditional, hierarchical forms of leadership and the transition to the division of responsibilities and the decentralization of power is imperative. Despite the typical structure of any education system, we believe that schools maintain some degree of autonomy that they can use to create a power distribution network, even informally.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 The Concept of Leadership- Educational Leadership

The term "Leadership" is considered a controversial term that has given rise to literally hundreds of definitions as there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it [1,2].

Thus, various definitions of leadership have been proposed, but without clarifying the characteristic that makes leaders different from the rest [3]. Also, another problem that arises from the study of the concept is its connection and, often, its identification with the concept of management. Starting from the etymological meaning of the concept, Babiniotis [4] states that "the leader is the one who is at the top of power or in general influences and controls a whole (at political, social, ideological level)". Pasiardis [5] also states that "leadership is the web of those behaviors that you use with others when you try to influence their own behavior". According to Koontz & O'Donnel [6] leadership is seen as "the influence or art or process of influencing individuals so that they work willingly to achieve team goals". Kouzes & Posner [7] defined leadership as "the art of mobilizing others to strive for common aspirations". Therefore, based on these definitions, the main mission of the leader is related to the orientation of the group behavior through the influence towards the achievement of a common goal.

The concept of leadership could not have failed to infiltrate the education sector as well, playing a catalytic role. Bush and Glover [8] write that: "Leadership is a process of influence leading to the achievement of desired purposes. Successful leaders develop a vision for their schools based on their personal and professional values. They articulate this vision at every opportunity and influence their staff and other stakeholders to share the vision. The philosophy, structures and activities of the school are geared towards the achievement of this shared vision". Finally, as several researchers have reported, including Cuban [3,8], leadership is related to the notion of influencing others and, in particular, to the ability to activate others to achieve certain goals, a process which proposes two elements: taking initiatives and the concept of risk.

According to Argyropoulou [9], the educational leader must have: a) managerial skills, which require knowledge of regulations, specific methodology and strategies for specific procedures, and b) leader skills for human relations management, which are developed in administrative processes, and it is possible that some of these skills belong to both categories when it comes to a combination of strategies and leadership. At the same time, the fact that the educational leader knows only the legislation and the administrative valves, that is, to adhere to a centralized-bureaucratic model, is not enough to be able to meet the educational challenges of the 21$^{st}$ century [10].

### 2.2 Models of Educational Leadership

The following is a summary of the main models of educational leadership and their characteristics:

#### 2.2.1 Administrative and managerial

This type of leadership focuses on the actions, goals or behaviors of the leader, identifying leadership with management and focusing on the following practices: a) Supervision b) Input control c) Behavior control d) Output control e) Selection - socialization f) Environmental control [11]; Myers & Murphy [12].

### 2.2.2 Participative

At the core of this type of leadership is the promotion of the collective decision-making process at team level, thus helping to "tie" staff and reduce pressure from hierarchical superiors [8].

### 2.2.3 Transformational

Transformational leadership focuses on high levels of commitment to organizational goals and its main pillar is to create a common vision and set specific goals by the leader in order to motivate employees in an intellectual fashion. In addition, transformational leadership is characterized by the provision of standards, the possibility of personalized support, the cultivation of high expectations and the formation of a culture that plays an important role in developing participatory structures in the organization, ie developing mutual support between stakeholders [13].

### 2.2.4 Contingency

This type of leadership focuses on a leader's ability to adapt to organizational conditions and problems and argues that no type of leadership fully responds to all situations [8].

### 2.2.5 Moral

Moral leadership focuses on the leader's code of ethics. In this model, the values adopted and promoted by Greek Law 1566/85, as well as equal opportunities in education, equality, solidarity, autonomy, etc., are considered core values [14,11].

### 2.2.6 Instructional

This model is to facilitate the main task of educational organizations, namely teaching and learning, with emphasis on the following: a) defining the mission of the school b) managing the curriculum c) improving the school climate [15].

### 2.2.7 Distributed

Last but not least, distributed leadership is exercised through actions and tasks by various individuals in order to achieve the goals of the organization [16].

## 2.3 Distributed Leadership

### 2.3.1 Basic principles

Distributed Leadership has attracted the interest of many researchers and educators [17-19]. Many criticize it, saying that Distributed Leadership is nothing more than a "new orthodoxy" that strengthens administrative principles [20]. On the other hand, many believe that it offers a new way of thinking about leadership in schools and offers a powerful tool for transforming leadership practice [21]. Modern notions of Distributed Leadership are still coming to light but there is now growing evidence of its relationship to organizational change [19]. There is a wide range of studies that have investigated how different distributions already affect organizational outcomes and organizational change [17-19]. The results show that leadership formation is important and that some distribution models have a more positive impact on organizational development [19].

The birth of the idea of Distributed Leadership can be traced back to the mid-1960s. The term "Distributed Leadership" is believed to have been first used by Gibb [22], who states that leadership should not be taken advantage of as an individual privilege ,rather as a base of interaction towards common decision making among individuals. Several years later, Benett et al (2003), [16] argued that "the best way to understand Distributed Leadership is to treat it as a different way of thinking about leadership rather than as another technique or practice". Many different definitions and expressions of the concept of Distributed Leadership have been formulated, creating according to MacBeath [2] an "alphabetical soup" of descriptions, in which the following terms are predominant: "shared leadership", "cooperative leadership", "democratic leadership". Finally, empirically produced a classification of Leadership Distribution: "formal distribution"; "realistic distribution"; "strategic distribution"; "gradual distribution"; "opportunistic distribution"; "cultural distribution".

In the field of education, Distributed Leadership proposes two conditions at the same time: more leaders in schools, but also the special circumstances in which these people exercise power. A typical example is the interpersonal relationships that help this situation and which must ultimately be in line with the purpose and strategy of the school. This is why this leadership

proposes practices that are not based on hierarchical structures but on "side networks" and "fluid forms of governance" [13,16,23]. In addition, Fitzisimons, Turnbull James & Denyer [24] report that in Distributed Leadership, particular emphasis is placed on the transition from the absence of leadership to the emergence of multiple leaders who complement each other to achieve a common goal and also function at the same level in the organization.

In an attempt to clarify the concept, Copland [25] states that Distributed Leadership can be thought of as a set of functions shared with members of the school community. By members of the school community, we mean not only teachers but also non-community members, who hold either formal or informal authority. According to Spillane [17,24], people who do not hold official leadership positions, such as teachers, can contribute to leadership.

In other words, Distributed Leadership is not based on individual leadership skills and practices, quite on the contrary it stems from multiple interactions between members of the organization and the final dynamics of the school [18]. That is, the need to contribute to leadership is recognized by all members of the school community (internally and externally) in order to achieve the desired goals or to improve the educational process. Researchers asserted that promoting distributed leadership [26-29] in schools made a difference alter the way instructors associated, communicated, and collaborated, which was a prerequisite for enhancement. It is additionally critical to note that principals' distributed leadership [30]; Liu, Bellibas & Gumus [29] could offer assistance construct a strong supportive school culture. Even the contribution of parents with leadership qualities is considered important for success [12,13]. In short, Distributed Leadership is responsible for shifting the interest of school principals and other formal and informal leaders to a network of stakeholders and their identity, that is a parent , a teacher e.t.c.

The main view of leaders / principals about the factors that affect the operation of the school is the one that can determine how or to what extent leadership can be shared among the members of the organization. This is why the aspects of Distributed Leadership differ not only in schools and districts, but also in the terms and objectives of improving the same school [31]. Katzenmeyer & Moller (2001), as cited [32] emphasize the distinction of educational leaders with the rest of the teaching staff community through the application of various methods, such as the dissemination of improved teaching practices.

Principals monitor and encourage the distributed practice of leadership that occurs in the school in a spirit of mutuality. As a result, research points to the importance of distributed leadership as an interactive tool, with potential for collective decision-making, information and expertise sharing, and synergistic actions forming throughout the enterprise [33].

However, the leadership roles of teachers are not limited to the curriculum, but also extend to the administration, such as the selection of textbooks and teaching materials, the decision on the school budget, the timetable and a lot more. Thus, Distributed Leadership can take the form of research or encouragement of observation by fellow classroom teachers during teaching.

### 2.3.2 Dimensions of implementation of distributed leadership

According to Arrowsmith [34] there are five dimensions to implementing Distributed Leadership:

As the *first dimension* states [34], Distributed Leadership is given by the leader, not by existing staff". It is therefore likely that managers with increased social influence will be able to draw deeper motivation from their staff to develop their leadership skills. In addition, according to Leithwood [13], successful school leaders shape the conditions in their schools to support the efforts of teachers and students.

The *second dimension* concerns the "purity of the structure" and the "responsibility of individuals". Clarity helps reduce conflict and create opportunities for leadership, because when roles are clear there is no misunderstanding, and responsibility has to do with the responsibility of employees justifying their practices.

The *third dimension* invests in the administrative skills of the staff with the aim of effective leadership. This is not so much the knowledge that each principal can pass on to teachers, but the attitudes, and values inspired to his employees, which lead them to take initiatives and respond to their role in school accordingly. This process is also related to the general culture and not to the acquisition of skills.

The *fourth dimension* concerns the concept of trust between the members of an organization such as the school. Trust among teachers can lead to the creation of a "professional community", a term used by Louis et al. [31] and which can motivate teachers to exercise leadership. In fact, in schools with a high level of trust, decisions are made in a more collective way, which directly links Distributed Leadership to participatory decision-making. It should be noted that the above correlation is also related to students' academic performance, with Louis et al. [31] characteristically stressing:"When principals and teachers share power, teachers' working relationships are stronger and school performance higher".

Finally, the *fifth dimension* of the implementation of Distributed Leadership concerns the "turning point", specific actions and events in the historical course of the school that led to the emergence of Distributed Leadership.

## 3. THE GREEK PUBLIC SCHOOL AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

Prior to discussing the scope of application of Distributed Leadership in the Greek school, it would be good to refer first to the Greek educational system in general and to the centralized character it displays.

Leadership, as a pictorial symbolism, is considered as a geometrically equilateral triangle, whose frame, followers and the leader are its three sides. Therefore, in addition to the school leadership and the model that follows, the current educational context should also be taken into account. But has the legal and institutional framework of the educational structure and operation and therefore of the school leadership been properly formed in Greek educational system?

Educational systems, following the structure and the form of the system that determines the Public Administration of each state, represent and reflect the structural characteristics that shape them. Thus, the organization of Greek formal education is based on the bureaucratic system. By bureaucracy we mean the type of organization that is designed to perform a large administrative task by systematically coordinating the work of many people. A key feature of this typical bureaucratic organization is its hierarchical structure, which ensures the horizontal distribution of work in such a way that each institution is composed at a specific level of the hierarchy and exercises its authority under the control of its supervisor. Other characteristics of bureaucratic organization are centralism in decision-making, standardization, clear division of labor and formal and impersonal relationships between people (Pasiardis, 2004). This system of hierarchical relations and formalism it is structured by a complex web of laws and regulations that communicate with one another, limiting the opportunities for creativity and efficient administration [35,36]. It is known throughout the Greek educational community that the central feature of the Greek model of organization and administration of education is its super-centralized character, as almost all responsibilities (decisive, regulatory, supervisory, coordinating, executive) are exercised by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education, enacting laws, regulations, regulations and circulars, decides on the operation of the education system so that the intermediate authorities exercise their duties and power simply, without initiative, in most cases. The administration on behalf of the intermediate authorities takes on a simple managerial and procedural character.

In particular, at the central level, the Greek Ministry of Education has the general responsibility of shaping and formulating educational policy at all levels of education. In this context, educational policies are defined and their scope is regulated. In addition to school education, the content of curricula, teaching hours, initial education and training of teachers are also identified, while organizing the distribution of textbooks, the appointment and payroll of teaching staff and the control of total funding for the education [37].

The governance at regional level is carried out through decentralized services of the Ministry of Education, the Regional Directorates of Education and at local level, the Directorates of Primary and Secondary Education coordinate the operation of the school units of their jurisdiction and belong to the respective Regional Directorate. At the level of school units, the hierarchy of the executives is foreseen, which is the director, the deputy director and each schools' teacher staff association [38].

Bearing in mind the case of a typical Greek school, in combination with the centralized character of the Greek educational system described previously, one can easily see the lack

of flexibility. The principal of this school is rather consumed in bureaucratic procedures instead of inspiring, guiding and creating conditions for leadership.

## 4. UTILIZATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN THE GREEK SCHOOL: LIMITS AND CONDITIONS

In order to truly develop the momentum that promotes leadership development in the Greek school, structural changes are needed: A) Assignment of decision-making responsibilities to the school unit. B) Political and technical support of the school unit in its new role (trade unions, local educational authorities). C) Promoting flexible procedures for effective organizational forms at school level. D) Changing the hierarchical bureaucratic structure of the current administration to accept decentralized decisions, with an emphasis on leadership that encourages, coordinates and mobilizes [39].

The above mentioned conditions do not seem to apply in the case of the Greek educational system. Another condition for the implementation of Distributed Leadership is the change of culture and mentality. In fact, Harris [18] points out the same, characterizing this change as very important. Therefore, the detachment from the traditional, hierarchical forms of leadership and the transition to the division of responsibilities and the decentralization of power is imperative. Despite the typical structure of any education system, we believe that schools maintain some degree of autonomy that they can use to create a power distribution network, even informally. Within these limits, the Greek school units could maneuver themselves, and start the implementation of the Distributed Leadership. An important goal for school staff should be to understand the power of peer-to-peer connections, leading to more effective decision-making and ultimately to school development and improvement.

As mentioned above, the centralized system of school organization leaves little room for activation and initiative for principals and, consequently, for teachers. The formalism fueled by centralization sets a negative pressure on a series of procedures, and any change is likely to be seen as a danger to the established balance and power, leaving the head teacher with no room to implement sustainable leadership principles [36].

Some even add that these organizational barriers are exacerbated by the attitude of head teachers, who believe that their higher hierarchical position cannot be challenged and equated with that of other teachers. More specifically, Barth (1999), as cited in [32], sees the willingness of principals to accept persons who may disagree with their own views as a condition. Therefore, any contrary attitude of principals can be an obstacle to the implementation of Distributed Leadership in schools.

Limits are also set by teachers themselves for the implementation of Distributed Leadership in the school. In particular, some researchers focus on them and their work culture as a deterrent to the application of Distributed Leadership. Lieberman et al. (2000), as cited in [32] cite loneliness and the feeling of isolation from teachers as one of the most important professional barriers for teachers to take on leadership roles.

## 5. DISCUSSION

In recent years, of course, in the Greek educational system, the margins of relative autonomy have expanded. In other words, there is an attempt at decentralization which, according to McGinn & Welsh [40], concerns the shifting of the position of those who pursue educational policy and the transfer of power from those at the higher level of education, to those at a lower level, local authorities or schools, which can then make their own decisions on many aspects of education and its practical application, such as funding methods, human resources, curricula, administrative and management tasks and planning [41,42]. Thus, the principal of the Greek school does not need to remain anchored in bureaucratic structures and management practices [15,43]. There is now room for questioning the hierarchical, transactional model of school leadership [1]. The attempt at decentralization is also evident from the laws of the state, which, however, does not shy away from re-emphasizing its centralized nature and the attempt to control the procedures. It typically states: "The school principal becomes the leader, the animator and the facilitator of the changes in his school unit. He is responsible for achieving a high level of performance and good behavior of students at school at the educational level and for the smooth operation of the school at the administrative level {...} and is responsible for the smooth, harmonious and effective operation of the school, its coordination of school life, the

supervision of the operation of the school, the observance of the laws, the circulars and the official orders, as well as the schedule of the program" [44]. Hence, despite these attempts to decentralize education (Laws 1566/1985, 2043/1992, 2817/2000, and 2986/2002), the reduction in schools' vertical reliance on central administration was not followed by a school's incorporation into the local community [36].

This decentralization effort should be the beginning of a school that is open to all. A school that promotes democracy, participation, cooperation and interculturalism. A school that supports students with special learning needs, that involves parents and the local community in an educational organization in which the educational leader seeks to empower individuals with his or her personal vision in order to achieve higher goals for personal and professional development. In order for Distributed Leadership to have scope, both in the Greek school and in general, it is important that the personal vision of the principals is transmitted to the other members of the school, in possible sources of leadership, as a factor of change and inspiration for all. When the vision of the leader becomes collective, shaped by the whole schools' teacher staff, then the school is strengthened as an organization and acquires the characteristics of a learning organization.

Finally, it is important for a leader to encourage the remaining, potential leaders, to promote innovative actions, offering everyone both learning and career opportunities and ensuring that himself utilizes the potential and skills of each member of the school staff, in order to promote broad learning and create learning enviroment for all.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Distributed leadership improves organizational ability in schools by including a diverse and skilled group of people in leadership, which can boost social capital by resulting in more engaged and satisfied leaders and teachers, improved staff mutual esteem, and academic optimism [45,46,27,28,47]. The detachment from the traditional, hierarchical forms of leadership and the transition to the division of responsibilities and the decentralization of power is imperative. Despite the typical structure of any education system, we believe that schools maintain some degree of autonomy that they can use to create a power distribution network, even informally.

Fixed positions are changing in the constantly changing global environment. As the educational process evolves in its quest of social, cultural, and technological advancement, the status quo of the educational process vanishes. As a result, it is critical for the Greek education system to break free from the economic and organizational prejudices that have hampered its development and jeopardized its long-term viability in previous decades.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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