

GENESIS AND EVOLUTION OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN ITALY: CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS FOR A FOCUSED CRITICAL INTEGRATIVE REVIEW

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Abstract

School leadership has progressively emerged in international research as a crucial dimension for understanding school improvement, organisational development, educational quality, and the capacity of schools to respond to increasingly complex social and educational challenges [21], [22], [33]. Contemporary scholarship no longer interprets leadership merely as an administrative function, but as a multidimensional process connected to teaching and learning, professional collaboration, organisational change, inclusion, and educational equity [4], [13], [15], [24], [37].

This article establishes the conceptual foundations for a focused critical integrative literature review on the genesis and evolution of school leadership in Italy. The Italian case is analytically significant because school leadership emerged within a historically centralised education system that moved formally towards school-based autonomy only from the late 1990s onwards. This reform season reconfigured the institutional role of the school head and formally instituted the *dirigente scolastico* as the legal representative and unitary manager of the school institution [17], [19], [20], [31]. Yet key strategic resources, including teacher recruitment, staffing frameworks, and substantial aspects of financial governance, remained under central regulation, generating a structurally hybrid leadership model [27], [29], [34], [35].

The paper defines the research gap, formulates the guiding questions, justifies the methodological choice of a focused critical integrative review, and advances a preliminary three-phase framework: a pre-autonomy phase centred on administrative coordination; a managerial-autonomy phase shaped by accountability and organisational responsibilities; and a relational-distributed phase associated with collaboration, middle leadership, leadership for learning, and school improvement [27], [28], [30].

The contribution is both theoretical and methodological. It argues that Italian school leadership should not be understood as a linear transition from bureaucracy to decentralised leadership, nor as a delayed adoption of Anglo-Saxon models. Instead, it should be investigated as a historically situated process of institutional hybridisation shaped by autonomy reforms, persistent central regulation, collegial governance traditions, and the selective translation of international leadership paradigms.

Keywords: School leadership; educational governance; school autonomy; leadership for learning; Italy; focused critical integrative review.

1 INTRODUCTION

International research has consistently shown that school leadership can influence school improvement and student learning, mainly through indirect pathways such as teaching quality, teacher motivation, organisational culture, professional collaboration, and strategic goal-setting [21], [22], [33]. Over time, the field has diversified into multiple theoretical and organisational perspectives. Instructional leadership emphasises the role of school leaders in improving teaching and learning processes [14]. Transformational leadership focuses on organisational vision, professional motivation, and school change [23]. Distributed leadership conceptualises leadership as a socially shared and relational practice extending beyond formal positional authority [15], [36]. Leadership for learning links leadership practices to student learning, professional development, and organisational learning processes [13], [24]. Inclusive and social justice-oriented perspectives have further expanded the field by highlighting equity, democratic participation, resistance to marginalisation, and unequal access to educational opportunities [7], [9], [37].

Leadership models are, however, far from institutionally neutral. They are developed within specific governance arrangements and often presuppose a certain degree of school-level autonomy, professional discretion, and control over organisational resources. Their transfer into more centralised systems is therefore complex. The Italian case is particularly relevant in this respect because the

development of school leadership has been shaped by the coexistence of autonomy reforms and persistent central regulation.

Historically, the Italian education system was defined by strong ministerial control over curricula, teacher recruitment, school organisation, and resource allocation. The reform season of the late 1990s marked a major institutional turning point: a package of legislative acts introduced school autonomy and formally reconfigured the role of the school head, establishing the *dirigente scolastico* as the legal representative and unitary manager of the school institution [17], [19], [20], [31]. The analytical significance and structural limitations of this normative turning point are examined through the framework developed below; what matters here is the governance logic it produced and the institutional tensions it left unresolved [32].

Existing contributions have analysed important aspects of this transformation, including governance and leadership for learning [27], accountability [29], institutional hybridisation [12], [35], middle management [30], and the everyday work of school leaders [3]. Nevertheless, this literature remains dispersed across disciplinary traditions, publication contexts, and thematic focuses. A synthetic account capable of treating the historical emergence and conceptual evolution of Italian school leadership as a unified research object is still missing.

To address this gap, the article establishes a framework-building stage for a subsequent focused critical integrative review. Its aim is not to report definitive findings from a completed review, but to clarify the conceptual architecture, research questions, and methodological rationale for a more structured synthesis of the field. The paper addresses two research questions:

- 1 Which historical, institutional, and normative conditions enabled the emergence of school leadership in Italy?
- 2 How has the concept of school leadership evolved within the Italian educational and academic debate?

By developing a preliminary three-phase interpretative framework, the paper lays the foundation for a focused critical integrative review designed to reconstruct how school leadership in Italy has been constructed, translated, and institutionally mediated over time.

2 METHODOLOGICAL RATIONALE

This paper adopts a framework-building logic. It represents the initial stage of a broader research programme aimed at producing a focused critical integrative review of school leadership in Italy. The function of this stage is to define the research object, identify the relevant conceptual tensions, justify the choice of review methodology, and develop a preliminary interpretative framework capable of guiding the subsequent, more formalised synthesis.

A conventional systematic review would not be fully appropriate for the present research object. The questions addressed here do not concern the effectiveness of a single intervention or a narrowly defined empirical relationship. Rather, they concern the historical emergence, conceptual transformation, and institutional mediation of school leadership within a national education system. The relevant literature is heterogeneous and includes empirical studies, theoretical contributions, sociological analyses, policy studies, monographs, legislative texts, institutional documents, and selected grey literature.

For this reason, the next stage will adopt a focused critical integrative literature review design. This approach combines the critical orientation needed to examine assumptions, contradictions, and conceptual tensions with the integrative capacity to synthesise diverse forms of literature. Integrative reviews are particularly appropriate when the aim is to generate new conceptual understanding from heterogeneous empirical and theoretical sources [10], [41], [42]. They also allow broader and more interpretative research questions than systematic reviews, while still requiring explicit search strategies, inclusion criteria, appraisal procedures, and transparent synthesis logic [40].

The subsequent review will follow two interconnected analytical tracks. The first is a normative-governance track, concerned with school autonomy, headship, accountability, central regulation, collegial governance, and PNRR-related reforms. The second is a pedagogical-conceptual track, concerned with the reception, adaptation, and institutional mediation of international leadership models, including instructional leadership, leadership for learning, distributed leadership, middle leadership, and social justice leadership.

The present article performs the conceptual and methodological groundwork required for that review. It identifies three interpretative phases emerging from the literature and proposes them as a heuristic framework rather than as a definitive periodisation. The subsequent study will apply a more formalised search, selection, appraisal, and synthesis strategy in order to test, refine, and extend the framework proposed here.

3 PRELIMINARY FRAMEWORK FOR THE FOCUSED CRITICAL INTEGRATIVE REVIEW

3.1 The Pre-Autonomy Phase: Administrative Coordination within a Centralised System

Before the autonomy reforms of the late 1990s, the Italian education system was characterised by strong ministerial regulation over curricula, teacher recruitment, school organisation, administrative procedures, and resource allocation [2], [11], [39]. Within this framework, the *preside* primarily operated as an administrative and bureaucratic figure responsible for implementing ministerial directives, supervising daily school operations, and ensuring procedural compliance.

This does not mean that schools lacked forms of participation or professional coordination. The expansion of collegial governance mechanisms during the 1970s strengthened participatory dimensions of school administration. School councils, teachers' collegia, and class councils contributed to a governance culture based on shared deliberation. However, leadership had not yet consolidated as a distinct professional and academic field comparable to later international educational leadership studies.

The pre-autonomy phase is therefore best understood as a period in which coordination, collegial mediation, and administrative responsibility coexisted with limited institutional conditions for school leadership to consolidate as an autonomous professional practice. Leadership discourse existed at the margins of pedagogical and organisational debate [16], but it had not yet become a stable analytical category through which the role of the school head could be systematically theorised or professionally developed [34].

Establishing this historical baseline is analytically prior to any serious examination of the reforms that followed. The literature suggests that school leadership in Italy was not the natural prolongation of a pre-existing leadership tradition, but the outcome of a later, deliberate, and never fully completed institutional construction.

3.2 The Managerial-Autonomy Phase: Reform, Accountability, and Incomplete Decentralisation

The reforms introduced between the late 1990s and early 2000s represented a major turning point. Law 59/1997 and Presidential Decree 275/1999 granted schools legal status and organisational autonomy [17], [31], while Legislative Decree 59/1998 and Legislative Decree 165/2001 formally established and consolidated the *dirigente scolastico* as the legal representative and unitary manager of the school institution [19], [20].

In significant respects, this phase brought Italy closer to broader international trends associated with decentralisation, school-based management, and accountability. School leaders were assigned broader responsibilities related to organisational coordination, resource management, strategic planning, and school results [5], [27], [34]. Yet the Italian model of autonomy remained structurally incomplete. Teacher recruitment, personnel allocation, salary structures, and important aspects of financial governance continued to be regulated nationally, making the promise of school-based management only partially realisable [12], [27], [32], [35].

The result was a distinctive institutional tension. The *dirigente scolastico* became increasingly responsible for school-level improvement and organisational management, but without full discretion over the strategic resources usually associated with managerial leadership in more decentralised systems. Leadership discourse progressively incorporated terms such as planning, evaluation, efficiency, accountability, and improvement; empirical studies, however, continued to highlight bureaucratic routines, administrative overload, and the difficulty of developing pedagogical and relational leadership practices [3], [12], [29], [35].

This phase bequeaths a precise analytical question to the forthcoming review: to what extent did the autonomy reforms genuinely create the institutional conditions for leadership, and to what extent did they instead impose new accountability expectations without decentralising the strategic resources needed to meet them [32]? This tension between expanded responsibility and structurally constrained discretion constitutes one of the core elements of the framework advanced in this paper.

3.3 The Relational-Distributed Phase: Collaboration, Middle Leadership, and Organisational Learning

From the 2010s onward, Italian scholarship and policy discourse have given growing prominence to relational, collaborative, and distributed conceptions of school leadership. In this perspective, the *dirigente scolastico* is no longer interpreted only as a formal authority or administrative manager, but also as a coordinator of leadership processes involving teacher teams, professional communities, organisational support functions, and inter-school networks [15], [24], [30], [36].

This shift reflects both international developments and distinctive Italian institutional needs. Empirical research has shown how school context, principal leadership practices, and mediating organisational variables interact to shape teacher self-efficacy and school improvement processes in the Italian setting [28]. Distributed leadership and leadership for learning also resonate with Italian traditions of collegial governance [1], while responding to the practical limits of the principal's direct managerial discretion: since school leaders operate with limited control over key resources, collaboration becomes not only a pedagogical value but also an organisational necessity.

Law 107/2015 strengthened organisational flexibility and allowed principals to identify up to 10% of teachers to support organisational and educational activities [18]. This provision encouraged forms of teacher leadership and collaborative coordination, but it did not create a fully institutionalised middle-management career structure. Paletta's work on middle management is particularly relevant here because it shows that distributed leadership requires recognised intermediate roles, organisational stability, and professional development if it is to support school improvement effectively [30].

More recently, PNRR-related initiatives have encouraged schools to pursue digital innovation, inter-school collaboration [26], inclusion policies, reduction of territorial inequalities, and organisational redesign [25]. These processes require adaptive and collaborative leadership, especially in schools facing complex social and territorial challenges. However, the diffusion of distributed leadership remains uneven and dependent on school size, local cultures, available resources, territorial contexts, and the presence of recognised intermediate roles.

The interpretative challenge this phase poses to the forthcoming review is as much methodological as substantive: it requires careful analytical distinction between policy prescription, academic theorisation, and actual organisational enactment. The decisive question is not whether distributed leadership has entered the Italian debate, but how, where, and under what institutional conditions it has been translated into situated and sustainable practice.

4 SYNTHESIS: ANALYTICAL AXES FOR THE SUBSEQUENT REVIEW

The three phases outlined above are not rigid chronological containers. More accurately, they should be understood as overlapping institutional logics that continue to shape contemporary Italian school leadership. Administrative coordination, managerial accountability, pedagogical responsibility, collegial governance, and distributed leadership coexist within the role of the *dirigente scolastico*, often generating hybrid professional configurations.

Such layered coexistence constitutes the central theoretical insight of the framework proposed here. Italian school leadership appears to have developed through a process of institutional hybridisation. Autonomy reforms expanded school-level responsibilities, but central regulation continued to shape staffing, recruitment, salary structures, and financial governance, producing what the literature has aptly described as a system of incomplete or paradoxical autonomy [32]. International leadership models entered the Italian debate, but their translation was mediated by national governance structures, public-sector administrative traditions, and the governance culture of the autonomous school [6], [12], [35].

On this basis, the subsequent focused critical integrative review will be organised around two interconnected analytical tracks. The first is a normative-governance track, concerned with the institutional construction of school autonomy, the role of the *dirigente scolastico*, accountability

mechanisms, central regulation, collegial governance, and PNRR-related reforms. The second is a pedagogical-conceptual track, concerned with the reception and adaptation of international models such as instructional leadership, leadership for learning, distributed leadership, middle leadership, and social justice leadership.

These two tracks will allow the future review to move beyond a descriptive chronology of reforms and towards an integrated interpretation of Italian school leadership as a historically situated and institutionally mediated field. They also delimit the ambition of the next stage: the purpose is not to map every publication or every local practice, but to reconstruct the main normative-governance and pedagogical-conceptual trajectories through which school leadership has been framed in Italy from the autonomy reforms to the PNRR phase.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This paper has reframed the study of the genesis and evolution of school leadership in Italy as a framework-building stage for a subsequent focused critical integrative literature review. It advances three interrelated arguments.

First, the Italian case resists interpretation as a linear transition from bureaucratic administration to decentralised leadership, or as a delayed, incomplete adoption of Anglo-Saxon models. What the evidence points to instead is a process of institutional hybridisation shaped by the interaction between autonomy reforms, persistent central regulation, collegial governance traditions, and the selective translation of international leadership paradigms.

Second, the emergence of leadership as a recognisable professional and academic field in Italy appears as a historically situated institutional construction triggered by the normative turning point of the late 1990s. This construction has remained only partially stabilised: the *dirigente scolastico* continues to be positioned at the intersection of administrative responsibility, managerial accountability, pedagogical coordination, collegial governance, and distributed leadership expectations.

Third, despite the analytical richness of individual contributions, the existing literature remains dispersed across disciplinary traditions, thematic focuses, and publication venues. Governance reforms, accountability dynamics, institutional hybridisation, leadership for learning, middle management, and school improvement have each attracted dedicated scholarship, yet an integrated synthesis of the field as a unified research object remains absent.

The principal contribution of this paper is therefore to establish the conceptual foundations and methodological rationale for the next stage of inquiry. The three-phase model, including pre-autonomy, managerial-autonomy, and relational-distributed, is proposed as a heuristic device to organise the field and to support the design of a focused critical integrative review.

The subsequent review will focus on reconstructing the evolution of school leadership in Italy from the autonomy reforms to the PNRR phase. It will follow two interconnected analytical tracks: the normative-governance trajectory of school autonomy, headship, accountability, central regulation, collegiality, and PNRR-related reforms; and the pedagogical-conceptual trajectory through which international leadership models have been received, adapted, and reinterpreted in the Italian debate.

Priority areas for the forthcoming review include the relationship between school leadership and territorial inequalities across Italian regions; the development and institutionalisation of middle leadership roles and career pathways; leadership in socially disadvantaged and educationally challenging contexts; the organisational implications of PNRR-related reforms for school leadership capacity; and the comparative positioning of the Italian model within broader European frameworks of educational governance [8], [38]. These are not merely thematic lacunae but structural absences reflecting the field's fragmentation, absences that a critical integrative synthesis is designed to address.

In this sense, the present paper constitutes a coherent and autonomous contribution: it identifies the research gap, constructs the analytical framework, and justifies the methodological design of the forthcoming review. More broadly, it advances an argument with implications beyond the Italian case: educational leadership can only be adequately understood when studied as a historically situated and institutionally mediated process, not merely as a transferable set of models or practices.

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