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Ontologies of Distributed Leadership: a heideggerian reinterpretation of educational management as dwelling-in-practice

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ABSTRACT

Distributed leadership (DL) is a key framework in contemporary educational theory that moves beyond heroic, individual-centered models of leadership by emphasizing collective, relational practices. While DL effectively captures how leadership emerges through interactions among educators, administrators, and context, it often remains at an ontic level, focusing on observable tasks and role distributions while overlooking deeper ontological questions about educational being. This paper offers a philosophical reconfiguration of DL through Martin Heidegger's existential phenomenology, drawing on the concepts of Being-in-the-world, dwelling, and care. It reconceptualizes DL as dwelling-in-practice, wherein educational actors are understood not as isolated agents but as primordially involved beings who co-constitute their shared world through attuned everyday engagement. From this perspective, the school appears not as a neutral container but as a meaningful place sustained by collective care. This ontological reframing highlights how leadership emerges from being-with-others (Mitsein) and shared involvement, rather than from functional distributions alone. It also illuminates existential dimensions often neglected in DL, such as disruption, unhomeliness, and interpretive responsiveness. Grounded in recent empirical studies, this approach advocates leadership development oriented toward ontological attunement, trust, and dialogue, and proposes evaluation criteria that privilege world-building over instrumental outcomes. Ultimately, viewing DL as dwelling-in-practice offers a more humane and sustainable vision of educational leadership focused on human flourishing.

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Introduction: The Evolution of Educational Leadership Paradigms

The evolution of educational leadership paradigms reflects broader societal shifts toward complexity, collaboration, and contextual responsiveness. For decades, models centered on the charismatic or authoritative individual—the "hero-leader" embodied by visionary principals—dominated scholarly and practical discourse. These approaches, rooted in trait and behavioral theories, portrayed leadership as an inherent property of exceptional individuals capable of unilaterally steering institutions toward excellence. However, as educational environments grew increasingly multifaceted due to diverse student populations, policy pressures, and technological integrations, such individualistic frameworks revealed significant inadequacies. They failed to capture the relational, emergent, and situated nature of leadership in real-world settings, where decisions unfold through interdependent networks rather than top-down directives (Harris, 2013).

In response, distributed leadership (DL) emerged as a compelling alternative, gaining momentum since the early 2000s. Pioneered by scholars like Spillane (2006), DL reconceptualizes leadership as "stretched over" actors, artifacts, and situations (Spillane, 2006, XX), emphasizing how practices arise from interactions rather than isolated agency. As Gronn (2002) explains, in concertive action, "*leadership is not merely the aggregation of individual leaders' contributions but emerges from the synergy of their interactions*" (Gronn, 2002, XX). This perspective draws from activity theory and distributed cognition, viewing schools as ecologies where formal leaders, teachers, staff, and even students co-enact leadership through routines, tools, and shared goals. Empirical studies have linked DL to enhanced organizational capacity, teacher empowerment, and student outcomes, positioning it as a democratic antidote to hierarchical rigidity (Heck & Hallinger, 2009). For instance, in inclusive educational contexts, DL has been shown to facilitate differentiated instruction by mediating teacher leadership and professional competence, thereby supporting diverse learner needs (Wang & Tian, 2023).

Despite these advances, DL's theoretical foundations remain contested. While it excels in descriptive analytics—mapping who does what, how, and in what contexts—it often lingers at a functionalist level, treating leadership as a set of observable distributions without probing the underlying existential structures. Critics argue that DL under-theorizes the lived experience of participants, overlooking the primordial "Being" that animates these practices (Lakomski, 2005). Recent systematic reviews highlight conceptual ambiguities, such as the conflation of numerical distribution with concertive action, and call for deeper ontological grounding to address power dynamics, cultural variances, and ethical implications (Mifsud, 2023). Moreover, in an era of global educational reforms, DL's normative appeal as a tool for innovation and equity demands scrutiny; it risks becoming a rhetorical device for managerial control rather than genuine empowerment (Harris, 2022).

This paper intervenes philosophically to fortify the conceptual armature of Distributed Leadership (DL). We engage Martin Heidegger's existential phenomenology, particularly from *Being and Time* (1962) and later essays like "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" (1971), to reframe DL ontologically. Heidegger's analytics shift the focus from ontic entities (what is distributed) to ontological modes (how beings are in their world). Central to this framework is "Being-in-the-world" (In-der-Welt-sein), where human existence (Dasein) is always already involved in a meaningful context, not as detached subjects but as concernful participants. "Dwelling" (Wohnen) extends this, portraying existence not as mere occupancy but as a mindful cultivation of place through care (Sorge)—a primordial attunement to the world's preservation and flourishing. For Heidegger, "dwelling is not merely one form of human behavior alongside many others. Rather, it is the essential character of human existence".

Applying this to DL, we propose "dwelling-in-practice" as a novel ontology: leadership emerges not from allocated functions but from collective inhabiting of the educational world, where actors co-build meaning through attuned engagements. This reframing reveals the school as a hermeneutic horizon, co-constituted by beings thrown into shared projects, confronting unhomeliness in disruptions, and resolving toward authentic co-presence. It addresses DL's ontological shallowness by integrating existential depth, drawing on recent Heideggerian applications in education that emphasize disruption, relationality, and worlding (Golob, 2022; Fleener et al, 2020).

This article asserts that a Heideggerian ontology transforms DL from a sociological tool into a profound existential framework, with implications for theory and praxis. It fosters leadership as care-infused dwelling, countering instrumentalism in neoliberal contexts. The paper unfolds as follows: Section 2 reviews DL literature, underscoring ontological gaps amid recent developments. Section 3 delineates the Heideggerian framework, elaborating key concepts. Section 4 enacts the reinterpretation, illustrating dwelling-in-practice through contemporary examples. Section 5 explores implications for development, culture, and evaluation. Section 6 concludes with avenues for future inquiry.

1. Expanded Historical and Theoretical Context

1.1. From Heroic Leadership to Distributed Frameworks

The historical trajectory of educational leadership theory reveals a persistent tension between individual authority and collective practice. The "heroic" leadership model, which dominated 20th-century discourse, positioned the school principal or headteacher as the central figure responsible for organizational vision, instructional supervision, and cultural stewardshi This paradigm, reinforced by Taylorist scientific management and Weberian bureaucracy, emphasized clear hierarchies, role specialization, and linear accountability. The heroic leader was envisioned as a charismatic visionary whose personal qualities and strategic decisions directly determined institutional success. This perspective found expression in both transformational leadership theories, which emphasized the leader's role in inspiring and

motivating followers toward shared goals, and instructional leadership approaches, which focused on the principal's direct involvement in curriculum and pedagogy.

However, by the 1990s, the limitations of heroic models became increasingly apparent. Educational institutions faced unprecedented complexity due to standardization movements, accountability regimes, demographic shifts, and technological transformations. The intensification of school administrators' work rendered solitary leadership increasingly impractical, necessitating alternative conceptions of how leadership functions are performed and coordinated. A 2024 study on distributed leadership in Chinese schools substantiates this relational view, finding that leadership practices "constituted by the interactions between leaders, followers and their environment" create a supportive school culture and foster positive, caring student-teacher interactions (Liu, & Wang, 2024). This recognition catalyzed the exploration of distributed approaches that could better reflect the realities of educational practice. As Gronn (2002) notes, "*schools are known to rely increasingly on teams in order to cope with the intensification of school administrators' work that has accompanied the restructuring of public schooling*" (Gronn, 2002, XX).

Table 1. *Evolution of Educational Leadership Paradigms*

Era	Dominant Paradigm	Key Features	Limitations
1980s-1990s	Heroic/Instructional Leadership	Principal-centered, top-down direction, emphasis on vision and supervision	Over-reliance on individual capability, unsustainable in complex environments
2000s-2010s	Distributed Leadership I (Structural)	Focus on role distribution, delegated authority, leadership teams	Often merely numerical distribution without genuine cultural shift
2010s-Present	Distributed Leadership II (Relational)	Emphasis on emergent interactions, shared influence, collaborative culture	Conceptual ambiguity, under-theorized ontological foundations

1.2. Theoretical Foundations of Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership (DL) represents a fundamental reconceptualization of leadership as a collective, rather than an individual, phenomenon (Nadeem, 2024). Its theoretical underpinnings draw from diverse disciplines, most notably distributed cognition from psychology and activity theory from sociology, which together frame leadership as a practice co-constructed through the interactions between people, their tools, and their specific contexts. The core premise, as established by Spillane, is that leadership is "stretched over" multiple actors and situations, emerging from these interactions rather than residing solely in formal positions (Burrows, 2024). An empirical study in Chinese schools confirms this view, demonstrating that leadership practices "constituted by the interactions between leaders, followers and their environment" (Zhao et al, 2025) are crucial for fostering a supportive school culture.

Gronn's (2002) seminal work distinguishes between two primary forms of distributed leadership: numerical action, which involves simply allocating leadership functions across multiple individuals, and concertive action, which emerges organically through spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relations, and institutionalized practices. This distinction is crucial—whereas numerical distribution merely adds more leaders without fundamentally changing relational dynamics, concertive action represents a qualitative transformation in how leadership is enacted. As Gronn explains, in concertive action, "leadership is not merely the aggregation of individual leaders' contributions but emerges from the synergy of their interactions".

Spillane and colleagues (2006) further developed DL theory through their "distributed perspective", which emphasizes the interplay between leaders, followers, and situation in the co-performance of leadership tasks. They argue that leadership practice is constituted through the interactions of multiple actors, with the situation mediating how leadership is defined and enacted. This perspective shifts the unit of analysis from individual leaders to the web of leaders, followers, and situations that together give rise to leadership practices.

The empirical evidence base demonstrating the benefits of Distributed Leadership (DL) in educational contexts has expanded significantly in recent years, with contemporary research corroborating its positive correlations. A study in Ethiopian secondary schools found that distributed leadership had a significant positive relationship with student engagement, highlighting its role in improving crucial educational outcomes (Asrat & Sewagegn, 2025). This body of work consistently links DL patterns not only to improved student outcomes but also to enhanced teacher professionalism, strengthened organizational resilience, and more responsive adaptive capacity.

The mechanism behind these benefits often involves leveraging collective expertise. In inclusive educational settings, research shows that DL facilitates differentiated instruction by directly influencing teachers' instructional methods, an effect serially mediated by the development of teacher leadership and professional competencies (Kielblock, 2025). Similarly, in contexts of systemic reform, such as the implementation of all-day schooling in Germany, distributed leadership has been identified as a key factor for enabling the coherent implementation of innovative practices. This is achieved through aligned efforts across formal and informal leaders, which fosters the collaborative school development necessary for integrating complex new programs.

1.3. Persistent Ontological Limitations in Distributed Leadership

Despite its significant contributions, distributed leadership (DL) theory continues to face persistent critiques concerning its conceptual clarity and ontological depth (Bush & Glover, 2023). A fundamental limitation is the tendency in much of the literature to focus on the "ontic" aspects of distribution—the observable allocation of tasks and roles—while neglecting deeper "ontological" questions about the mode of being of those who enact leadershi This distinction,

drawn from Heideggerian philosophy, underscores how DL often describes the manifestations of leadership without adequately addressing its existential meaning for participants.

The conceptual ambiguity surrounding DL manifests in several key areas. First, scholars note a significant tension between its use as a descriptive, analytical lens to understand leadership practice and its normative application as a prescriptive model for how leadership "should" be distributed to improve organizations (Bush & Glover, 2023, 5). This conflation often occurs without sufficiently addressing underlying power dynamics, cultural constraints, or ethical implications. Second, DL frameworks frequently struggle to account for the phenomenological experience of participants—their lived realities, emotional dimensions, and existential commitments. Consequently, leadership can be reduced to a set of functional distributions rather than understood as a meaningful human practice.

These limitations become particularly pronounced when examining DL across different professional and cultural contexts.

Recent empirical studies in healthcare reveal that the successful implementation of distributed leadership is highly dependent on participants' experience of collective processes, noting that the "collective process is difficult to access and influence" (Braut et al., 2023, 3173). From a Heideggerian perspective, this empirically observed "difficulty" is not merely a procedural flaw but can be interpreted ontologically as a sign of inauthentic *Mitsein* (Being-with), where individuals have not yet constituted a shared world in which they can authentically dwell together. Similarly, a study on eldercare highlighted that a "relational agency based on shared visions" and a "shared understanding of roles" is critical for realizing DL in practice, pointing to the foundational role of intersubjective experiences (Jansson et al, 2025, 8). This concept of "relational agency" can be understood as the ontic manifestation of an underlying ontological foundation: it is the practical outcome that emerges when a group's mode of being is grounded in a shared structure of care (*Sorge*) and an authentic projection toward a common future.

Furthermore, in an era of neoliberal educational reforms, DL risks instrumental co-option where the language of distribution masks intensified workload, diluted accountability, and managerial control. Without deeper philosophical grounding, DL can degenerate into a technical solution to organizational complexity rather than a genuine transformation of leadership practice. As Harris (2022) warns, when DL becomes merely a mechanism for efficiency rather than empowerment, it loses its transformative potential and reinforces the very structures it purported to challenge.

2. Heideggerian Philosophical Framework: Core Concepts

2.1. Being-in-the-World (In-der-Welt-sein) and Educational Leadership

Martin Heidegger's existential phenomenology offers profound resources for addressing the ontological limitations in distributed leadership theory (Kirisci-Sarikaya & Fayda-Kinik, 2024). Central to his philosophy is the concept of Being-in-the-world (In-der-Welt-sein), which

fundamentally challenges the subject-object dichotomy that has dominated Western philosophy since Descartes (Heidegger, 1962). For Heidegger, human beings (Dasein) are not detached subjects who subsequently relate to an external world of objects; rather, our fundamental mode of existence is one of always already being immersed in a meaningful world of practices, relationships, and concerns (Heidegger, 1962). While other philosophical traditions also offer powerful relational perspectives, Heidegger's framework is uniquely suited to addressing DL's specific limitations. For instance, while a pragmatist like John Dewey would emphasize democratic practice and shared experience, his focus remains largely on the practical and ethical consequences of action. Similarly, while a Foucauldian analysis would excel at revealing the subtle power dynamics embedded in leadership distributions, it may overlook the possibility of authentic, non-strategic collaboration. Heidegger's unique contribution, and the reason for his selection here, is his fundamental distinction between the ontic (the "what" of beings and their functional relations) and the ontological (the "how" of Being itself). This distinction provides a precise conceptual tool for diagnosing DL's tendency to focus on the observable distribution of tasks while neglecting the underlying mode of existence—the shared world of meaning, care, and attunement—from which all effective practice must emerge. It is this specific focus on the ground of Being that allows us to move beyond mere sociological description to a deeper existential understanding.

Applied to educational leadership, this perspective transforms how we understand the reality of schools as workplaces and sites of practice. Educators are not autonomous individuals who occasionally interact with each other and their environment; rather, they are fundamentally constituted through their involvement in the educational world. As Heidegger (1962) explains, being-in-the-world is characterized by "concern" (Besorgen)—a mode of engagement where tools, tasks, and colleagues are encountered not as discrete objects but as elements within a meaningful totality of relations. A teacher encountering a struggling student, for instance, does not first perceive a biological organism and then apply pedagogical techniques; rather, they engage with a child-in-need-of-support within a context of educational care and responsibility (Martiny & Fernandez, 2023).

This ontological perspective reveals the limitations of leadership frameworks that begin with discrete individuals who then form relationships or execute functions. Instead, Heidegger would argue that relationality precedes individuality—that educational actors are always already involved in a shared world of meaning that makes particular leadership practices possible. This aligns with recent phenomenological research, as a systematic review found that distributed leadership studies using phenomenological designs successfully investigate the "influencing factors, elements, and experiences about distributed leadership," thereby capturing the lived reality and relational dynamics that constitute leadership practice (Kirisci-Sarikaya & Fayda-Kinik, 2024, 99). A Heideggerian reading would thus interpret sophisticated forms of

distributed leadership not merely as behavioral coordination but as manifestation of a more primordial being-with-others (Mitsein) in educational practice.

2.2. Dwelling (Wohnen) as Educational Practice

Martin Heidegger's existential phenomenology offers profound resources for addressing the ontological limitations in distributed leadership theory (Watson, 2023). Central to his philosophy is the concept of “Being-in-the-world (In-der-Welt-sein)”, which fundamentally challenges the subject-object dichotomy that has dominated Western philosophy since Descartes (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.). For Heidegger, human beings (Dasein) are not detached subjects who subsequently relate to an external world of objects; rather, our fundamental mode of existence is one of always already being immersed in a meaningful world of practices, relationships, and concerns.

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This ontological perspective reveals the limitations of leadership frameworks that begin with discrete individuals who then form relationships or execute functions. Instead, Heidegger would argue that relationality precedes individuality—that educational actors are always already involved in a shared world of meaning that makes particular leadership practices possible. Contemporary phenomenological research supports this view, noting that a core strength of the approach is its focus on "the dialogue between a person and her world," which allows for deep insight into how leaders and followers perceive and experience their roles within a specific context (Watson, 2023, 4). A Heideggerian reading would thus interpret sophisticated forms of distributed leadership not merely as behavioral coordination but as a manifestation of this more primordial “being-with-others (Mitsein)” in educational practice.

2.3. Care (Sorge) and Authentic Engagement

In “Being and Time”, Martin Heidegger identifies "care" (Sorge) as the fundamental, unifying structure of human existence (Dasein). This concept of care is not a passing emotion but the very ontological basis of our being-in-the-world. It encompasses our thrownness into a particular set of circumstances we did not choose (facticity), our inherent projection toward future possibilities (existentiality), and our inevitable absorption in the everyday shared world (fallenness). For educational leaders, this tripartite structure translates into a primordial

commitment that precedes any specific task or policy: a care for the growth of students, the development of teachers, and the flourishing of the learning community as a whole. This foundational care is what gives meaning and direction to the educational project, distinguishing a mere administrative institution from a vibrant, purposeful community. When leadership is rooted in this ontological care, it moves beyond the management of pre-defined outcomes and becomes a practice of world-building—of nurturing an environment where authentic teaching and learning can occur. This perspective stands in stark contrast to the instrumentalist models that often dominate educational discourse, which prioritize measurable outputs over the qualitative experience of educational life. A Heideggerian view insists that before we can ask "what" a leader does, we must understand "how" a leader is—that their mode of being, their fundamental care, is what ultimately shapes the educational world for others.

The power of this Heideggerian framework becomes particularly evident when examining its ability to diagnose the pitfalls of inauthentic practice and illuminate the path toward more genuine forms of collaboration. A key manifestation of inauthenticity is what Heidegger terms "idle talk" (Gerede)—the superficial, uncritical discourse that circulates within a community and creates an illusion of understanding while actually obstructing deep inquiry. In educational leadership, idle talk is rampant. It appears in the ritualistic adoption of reform initiatives and pedagogical buzzwords without a deep engagement with their philosophical underpinnings or practical consequences. It is present when distributed leadership is reduced to a technical exercise in task delegation—a mere numerical redistribution of duties—rather than embraced as a transformative cultural shift that reconfigures relationships and authority. This superficial application often leads to what scholars have identified as work intensification, where the distribution of tasks merely increases bureaucratic load without enhancing professional meaning or effectiveness (Pacaol, 2021). Conversely, when leadership distributions are grounded in genuine, shared care for the educational mission, they tend to evolve organically into what Gronn (2002) classifies as "concertive action." This form of collaboration is characterized by intuitive working relations and spontaneous synergy, where the separate contributions of individuals become impossible to disentangle because they emerge from a shared horizon of concern. A leader grounded in care actively works to dismantle idle talk by fostering authentic dialogue, creating spaces for critical reflection, and ensuring that the language of education remains connected to its lived reality. This involves a resolute turning away from the "they-self" (das Man) and its ready-made solutions, and toward the unique possibilities and challenges of their specific school community.

Furthermore, the Heideggerian concept of care provides a robust philosophical explanation for why distributed leadership succeeds or fails, offering a crucial depth that purely functionalist models lack. The success of distributed approaches depends not primarily on the elegance of an organizational chart, but on the underlying ontological condition of the community—the extent to which a shared, authentic care constitutes its way of being. Recent empirical research

strongly supports this philosophical claim. For instance, a study on integrated care found that the effectiveness of distributed leadership was highly dependent on participants lived experience of the collective process, noting that it was often "difficult to access and influence" (Braut et al, 2023, 3173). This finding directly reflects the Heideggerian notion that our thrownness into specific relational and institutional contexts enables or constrains our possibilities for action. Similarly, a 2025 study on eldercare teams demonstrated that successful distributed leadership relied on a "relational agency based on shared visions" and a "shared understanding of roles" (Jansson et al, 2025, 8), which can be interpreted as the practical manifestation of a shared care structure. When such a foundation of care is absent, distribution risks becoming a hollow, procedural exercise that can erode trust and amplify feelings of alienation. The temporal dimension of care—stretching between the thrown past (institutional history), the falling present (daily demands), and the projected future (shared goals)—is what binds a community together across time, turning a collection of individuals into a cohesive "we" capable of concertive action. This stands as a powerful critique of neoliberal models of leadership that prioritize efficiency and output over the cultivation of a meaningful, caring world, reminding us that the ultimate metric of leadership is not what is produced, but how humans flourish within the world that leadership helps to build.

2.4. Being-with-Others (Mitsein) and Collaborative Practice

Martin Heidegger's analysis of "Being-with" (Mitsein) presents a radical ontological claim that human existence (Dasein) is fundamentally and constitutively relational (Heidegger, 1962). In “Being and Time”, Heidegger (1962) asserts that "*Being-with is an existential characteristic of Dasein*" (120), meaning our capacity to be-with-others is not a secondary or accidental trait but a fundamental structure of our very being. We are never isolated, worldless subjects who subsequently enter into relationships; rather, we always already find ourselves in a shared world, and our selfhood emerges through these relations rather than preceding them (Heidegger, 1962). This ontological condition of Mitsein provides a profound philosophical grounding for understanding collaborative educational practice, moving it from the realm of optional strategy to an essential feature of our way of being as educators. From this perspective, a teacher grading papers alone in a classroom is not an isolated individual but is still fundamentally in relation—to the students who authored the work, to the curriculum set by colleagues, to the standards expected by the community, and to the pedagogical traditions that inform their assessment. This view fundamentally reorients leadership from being considered a property or set of competencies possessed by discrete individuals to a phenomenon that “emerges from” the shared world and relational fabric of the school (Gronn, 2002). It challenges the very foundation of the heroic leadership model by asserting that our interconnectedness is not something we create but something we “are”, and that effective leadership must therefore be understood as a practice of cultivating this shared world rather than directing it from without.

This Heideggerian perspective directly challenges the simplistic, functionalist assumption that distributed leadership is merely about allocating predefined leadership functions that could, in theory, be performed individually (Harris, 2013). Instead, a view informed by Mitsein suggests that the most meaningful and impactful leadership practices are not "distributed" in a top-down manner but “emerge organically” from our being-with-others in shared projects (Gronn, 2002). This represents a critical shift from an "ontic" focus—concerned with observable tasks, roles, and distributions—to an "ontological" one, concerned with the very mode of being of those within the educational community (Heidegger, 1962). The most sophisticated form of distributed leadership, what Gronn (2002) classifies as "concertive action," vividly illustrates this ontological reality. This involves "intuitive working relations" where, as Gronn (2002, 439) notes, "the knowledge of each is supplemented by their taken-for-granted knowledge of what the other knows". Such intuitive understanding and seamless collaboration cannot be mandated through formal coordination mechanisms or policy documents; they develop through shared experience, mutual attunement, and a deep, embodied familiarity—in short, through the sustained practice of being-with one another in the day-to-day life of the school. This creates what contemporary research describes as a "relational agency," a capacity for joint action grounded in "shared visions, a shared understanding of roles, and responsibilities, a learning approach and a dialogue-oriented relationship" (Jansson et al, 2025, 8). When this relational agency is present, leadership is performed not as a set of assigned duties but as a cohesive, collaborative practice where the contributions of individuals become so interwoven that they are, as Gronn (2002, 447) observes, "impossible to disentangle."

The concept of Mitsein also carries profound ethical and practical implications that are strongly supported by empirical research in fields with analogous complexities, such as healthcare (Braut et al, 2023). Ethically, if our selfhood is fundamentally constituted through our relations with others (Heidegger, 1962), then leadership practices that isolate, marginalize, or systematically overlook individuals do more than create operational inefficiencies—they enact a form of violence against our basic way of being. Conversely, leadership approaches that foster genuine collaboration, mutual recognition, and inclusive participation honor our ontological condition. These ethical imperative demands that leaders actively create structures and cultures where every member of the educational community can experience themselves as a valued participant in a shared world. The practical necessity of this approach is corroborated by recent studies. A 2023 qualitative study on integrated healthcare found that collective processes were often experienced by patients as "difficult to access and influence," and that the fluidity of leadership was highly dependent on the individual patient and their specific condition (Braut et al, 2023, 3173). This finding resonates deeply with the Heideggerian concern that inauthentic being-with can lead to alienation and a failure of collective practice. The study concluded that for distributed leadership to be effective and for care to feel truly "integrated," organizations "must develop collective processes that enhance patient participation to a greater

extent" (Braut et al, 2023, 3174). This directly parallels the educational context, underscoring that all participants—teachers, students, and parents—must be recognized as fundamentally part of the collaborative being-with that constitutes effective practice. Further reinforcing this, a 2025 case study in eldercare identified that successful distributed leadership relies on key mechanisms such as "vertical sense-making, and horizontal sense-making" (Jansson et al, 2025, 12). These processes ensure that leadership is not just structurally distributed but is meaningfully integrated into the shared understanding and daily practices of all members, from administration to frontline staff. Therefore, cultivating a Mitsein-informed leadership model requires deliberate effort to foster relational agency through shared visions (Jansson et al, 2025), to create authentic dialogue-oriented relationships, and to design participatory processes that are truly accessible to all (Braut et al, 2023), thereby transforming the school into a community where leadership is a natural and authentic expression of a shared world of care and purpose.

2.5. Navigating the Heideggerian Critique: Dwelling in an Instrumentalized World

One might rightly question the application of a thinker so critical of modern technological thinking to the domain of educational management, which is often deeply embedded in what Heidegger termed the "Enframing" (*Gestell*)—a mode of revealing that sees the world as a standing-reserve (*Bestand*) to be optimized and controlled (Heidegger, 1977). Modern schooling, with its emphasis on standardized testing, performance metrics, and efficiency, is arguably a prime example of this instrumentalist worldview. Applying Heidegger's concepts uncritically risks either domesticating his radical critique or proposing a framework fundamentally at odds with the institutional realities educators face.

However, this paper argues that the value of a Heideggerian lens lies not in offering a new management technique to be implemented within the existing instrumentalist frame, but in providing a powerful diagnostic tool to critique that very frame from within. As scholars like Thomson (2011) have argued, Heidegger's later work seeks a "saving power" within the danger of technology itself. By re-centering our understanding on "dwelling," we do not reject organization but rather question what kind of world our organizational practices bring forth. The concept of "dwelling-in-practice" is therefore not a blueprint for an alternative system, but a call for a different *ontological comportment* within the systems we inhabit. It challenges leaders to see their role not merely as optimizing outputs, but as preserving a space for meaningful human engagement against the encroaching logic of pure instrumentality that characterizes neoliberal educational reforms (Peters, 2017). This reinterpretation thus uses Heidegger not to escape our modern condition, but to find a more authentic way of being within it.

3. From the Abstract to the Concrete: An Illustrative Vignette

To illustrate the practical difference between a conventional ontic view of DL and the proposed ontological framework of "dwelling-in-practice," consider the common scenario of a school

implementing a new, mandated teacher professional development program focused on "data-driven instruction."

- **An Ontic DL Analysis:** A traditional DL perspective would map the distribution of leadership functions. It would identify that the principal delegated the planning to a lead teacher, the technology specialist is responsible for software training, and department heads are tasked with ensuring their teams complete the required modules. Success is measured by tracking completion rates, analyzing meeting minutes, and surveying teacher satisfaction. The focus is on the efficient allocation of roles and the execution of predefined tasks (Spillane, 2006). While collaborative, this analysis remains on the surface of observable actions.
- **An Ontological "Dwelling-in-Practice" Analysis:** A Heideggerian analysis asks fundamentally different questions. It investigates the *mode of being* of the teachers within this new initiative. Is the program experienced as an external imposition that renders them "unhomely" (*unheimlich*) in their own classrooms, reducing their professional judgment to a technical procedure? Is the language of "data-driven instruction" engaged with as "idle talk" (*Gerede*)—a set of buzzwords repeated without a shared, deep understanding? Leadership as "dwelling-in-practice" would involve cultivating a space for authentic engagement. Instead of merely distributing tasks, the leadership team would foster a collective hermeneutic circle where teachers could interpret what "data" means for *their* students in *their* context. It would be a process rooted in care (*Sorge*), where the concern is not just implementing a policy but co-constituting a shared world where teaching and learning can flourish. Success would not be measured by completion rates alone, but by the quality of the dialogue, the emergence of shared understanding, and the extent to which teachers feel they are authentically "dwelling" in their professional practice rather than being alienated from it (van Manen, 2016). This ontological view reveals that true distributed leadership emerges not from the chart of who does what, but from the quality of the shared world being built.

Conclusion: Toward an Ontologically Grounded Educational Leadership

This paper has undertaken a philosophical reconfiguration of distributed leadership (DL), arguing that its prevailing frameworks, while valuable for mapping the functional distribution of tasks, remain ontologically shallow. By engaging Martin Heidegger's existential phenomenology, we have reconceptualized DL not merely as a structural model but as a mode of "dwelling-in-practice." This shift from an ontic to an ontological perspective reframes leadership as a primordial way of being-in-the-world shared by educational actors, rooted in care (Sorge), attunement, and authentic being-with-others (Mitsein).

Recapitulation of the Argument: Our argument commenced by tracing the evolution of leadership paradigms from the heroic model to the distributed framework, acknowledging DL's efficacy in describing collaborative practices while highlighting its core limitation: a neglect of the lived experience and existential structures that underpin these practices. The Heideggerian lens, focusing on Being-in-the-world, dwelling, and care, directly addresses this ga It posits that the school is not a static container but a meaningful place (Ort) that is continually co-constituted through the concerned engagements of its inhabitants. Leadership, therefore, emerges not from delegated functions but from this collective, attuned inhabitation. This view resolves DL's conceptual ambiguities by providing a foundational ontology that explains *why* concertive action is more effective than numerical distribution—it is an expression of authentic co-presence and shared care, rather than a mere managerial strategy.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions: Theoretically, this reinterpretation enriches the discourse on educational leadership by bridging a philosophical chasm. It moves DL beyond its sociological and functionalist roots, offering a vocabulary to explore the existential dimensions of leadership, such as the "unhomeliness" (Unheimlichkeit) experienced during reform or the "thrownness" of educators into specific historical and cultural contexts. It challenges the instrumentalism of neoliberal education policies by asserting that leadership is fundamentally about world-building and preservation, not just output optimization. Practically, this entails a significant shift in how leadership is cultivated and assessed. It advocates for:

- **Leadership Development:** Moving beyond skill-based training to foster ontological attunement, cultivating dispositions of resoluteness, hermeneutic sensitivity, and releasement (Gelassenheit) to navigate complexity.
- **Organizational Culture:** Prioritizing environments of deep trust and authentic dialogue where all members can genuinely "dwell," and where their collective care can flourish.
- **Evaluation Metrics:** Developing assessments that evaluate the quality of relational practices and the "thriving" of the educational world, rather than relying solely on performance indicators.

This Heideggerian reframing opens several avenues for future inquiry. Empirically, phenomenological studies are needed to investigate the lived experience of "dwelling-in-practice" among teachers and leaders in diverse cultural contexts, such as the hierarchical settings noted in your draft. Further research could also explore the intersections between this ontological model and other critical leadership theories, such as transformative or culturally responsive leadership.

In conclusion, viewing distributed leadership as dwelling-in-practice offers a philosophically robust pathway toward a more humane, sustainable, and meaningful educational leadershi in an era of unprecedented flux, it equips practitioners to navigate not just the operational but the

existential demands of modern schooling, ensuring that leadership remains a care-infused, world-building practice.

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