

The New School Principal: Leadership, Management Skills and Organisational Climate. An Experimental Study in Three Schools in Campania

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Abstract

In recent years, the role of the school head has changed profoundly, evolving from an administrative figure to an educational leader with managerial and relational skills. This experimental study, conducted in six schools in Campania, analyses the impact of leadership on organisational climate and human resources management. Using a mixed approach, quantitative (KPIs and organisational climate scales) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews) instruments were employed. The results show how a transformational and participative leadership style fosters cohesive, inclusive and improvement-oriented working environments. Practices of transparent communication, empowerment and collaborative management are fundamental to organisational well-being and educational quality. The study emphasises the importance of stable and structured training courses for school leaders.

Keywords: School principal; Transformational leadership; Organizational climate; Human resources; Well-being at work

Introduction

The 21st-century school is immersed in a context of continuous change, fuelled by a variety of factors such as regulatory developments, technological acceleration, growing social and cultural complexity, and the emergence of new educational needs linked to globalisation, inclusion, and sustainability. In this dynamic and challenging scenario, the role of the school leader has undergone a radical transformation, evolving from a primarily technical and administrative role to a strategic and multifaceted position. Leaders now act as educational facilitators, human resource managers, agents of change and guarantors of organisational well-being. School leaders today are required to adopt a transformational leadership style capable of mobilising energy, engaging educational communities and directing school action towards shared goals of quality, equity and innovation (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). This type of leadership is characterised by vision, relational empathy, and the ability to guide complex processes in a participatory, flexible, and sustainable manner. In an increasingly interconnected and digital school landscape, leaders cannot limit themselves to regulatory and accounting management; they must also promote an organisational culture that combines pedagogical and managerial aspects. They must be able to activate internal and external resources, promote a

shared pedagogical vision, enhance the skills of teachers, and ensure the inclusion and well-being of students and school staff (Fullan, 2014).

This evolution requires a profound change in managerial skills. Today, school leaders must have an integrated set of managerial skills, including strategic vision, planning and problem-solving, personnel management, communication, listening and negotiation. They must also be able to manage conflict, foster trust and encourage collaboration between the different stakeholders in the school (OECD, 2020). Managing internal evaluations, consciously using data for continuous improvement and promoting evidence-based practices are also essential (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Now more than ever, school leaders must act as cultural and organisational mediators who can interpret the needs of a diverse and constantly evolving school community. They must recognise and value professional and cultural differences within the institution, promoting cohesion, belonging and shared responsibility among members of the school organisation. Their actions directly impact the internal climate and motivation of teachers and administrative staff, and indirectly but crucially impact student learning outcomes (Day et al., 2016).

Recent national and international education policies have placed an increasing emphasis on accountability and the evaluation of school performance. This further strengthens the strategic role of school leaders, who are tasked with building learning organisations that reflect and continuously improve through the use of data, process evaluation, the sharing of good practice and methodological and organisational innovation (INDIRE, 2023). School leaders thus become agents of change, equipped with technical skills, ethical sensitivity, decision-making ability and personal resilience (Spillane, 2005). This transformation concerns not only the function, but also implies a redefinition of the professional identity of the school leader. Effective school leadership today requires a continuous training and self-training process capable of integrating pedagogical, managerial, legal and emotional-relational knowledge. The school leader of the future is a reflective professional who can manage ambiguity, guide change, build collaborative networks, and create conditions that promote learning and well-being for all members of the school community (Murphy, 2016).

1. Research Aims

In light of the changes that have affected the Italian school system from regulatory, organisational, cultural and technological points of view, this study aims to analyse in depth the evolution of the role of school leaders in recent years. In an increasingly complex and challenging school environment characterised by a strong focus on quality, innovation, and inclusion, there is a need to rethink educational leadership as a complex set of managerial, relational, and strategic skills.

The primary objective of the survey is to identify the essential managerial skills required to effectively lead an educational institution today, paying particular attention to the headteacher's ability to promote a positive, collaborative and improvement-oriented work environment.

The study aims to explore the following specific aspects in particular:

- The type of leadership adopted by school managers, in relation to transformational, distributed or bureaucratic leadership models, and its impact on school organisation and staff well-being.
- The effectiveness of internal communication and human resource management tools will be assessed in terms of managers' ability to promote transparent dialogue, enhance internal professionalism, and implement motivation and engagement strategies.
- The perception of fairness and organisational justice by school staff, as determined by their level of satisfaction with their treatment, responsibilities, participation in decision-making processes and professional development opportunities.

- The perceived organisational climate, which is defined as the collective and subjective experience of the working environment by school staff, in relation to factors such as team cohesion, trust in leadership, the quality of interpersonal relationships, and sense of belonging.

The study aims to offer an integrated and up-to-date interpretation of the role of school leaders through a qualitative and quantitative experimental methodology conducted in three schools in Campania. This will provide useful insights for the continuous training of school leaders and for the definition of educational policies geared towards quality, equity and organisational well-being.

2. Methods: Sample selection; Qualitative and Quantitative Tools

- *Sample selection*

To ensure a diverse and meaningful representation of the regional school system, six schools belonging to different levels (primary, lower secondary and upper secondary) were selected for the study. The research was carried out over a period of three months, during which time information was collected from school administrators, teachers and administrative staff using quantitative and qualitative tools.

Participation in the study was voluntary and subject to informed consent. The inclusion criteria were established to ensure the relevance and reliability of the data collected. Participants had to:

- Have worked at the school in question for at least eight years, to ensure in-depth knowledge of the organisational context and changes experienced over time.
- Play an active role in managing school dynamics, paying particular attention to leadership (for managers) and participation in collegial bodies and strategic working groups (for teachers and administrative staff).
- Have participated in professional training or refresher courses in areas such as educational leadership, human resource management and school quality improvement in the last three years.
- They also had to possess basic digital skills to facilitate participation in data collection activities, some of which are carried out electronically (e.g. online questionnaires and video conference interviews).

The sample was divided into two distinct groups: an experimental group and a control group. Each group consisted of three schools and was selected to ensure a homogeneous distribution in terms of school grade and territorial context (urban, peri-urban and rural). Schools in the sample group were involved in a more structured cycle of observation and assessment, including guided reflection on leadership practices and organisational management. In contrast, schools in the control group only participated in the data collection phases and did not interfere with the normal running of school activities.

This division enabled systematic comparison of the two groups' perceptions, practices and outcomes, providing a solid basis for evaluating the impact of analysed variables and identifying significant differences in leadership, organisational well-being and quality of internal communication. The intentional sampling strategy, combined with distinguishing between the control and sample groups, strengthened the study's internal and external validity, providing a detailed, contextualised analysis of the managerial role's evolution in Campania schools.

- *Qualitative and Quantitative Tools*

To thoroughly investigate the evolution of the role of school leaders and the impact of leadership practices on organisational well-being and human resource management, the research adopted a mixed methodology using quantitative and qualitative tools. Integrating these approaches enabled robust and meaningful data to be collected, offering a multi-level analysis of the phenomenon.

Among the quantitative tools used was an organisational performance evaluation system based on key performance indicators (KPIs), developed in accordance with the criteria established by the National Evaluation System (INVALSI, 2021) and the Self-Evaluation Report (RAV). The KPIs focused particularly on efficiency in personnel management, participation in collegial bodies, implementation of innovative practices, frequency of internal training and conflict management skills. These were accompanied by a standardised scale for assessing organisational climate and job satisfaction, which was administered online to teachers and ATA staff. This scale measured dimensions such as team cohesion, trust in leadership, the quality of internal relationships, perceived fairness and degree of involvement in decision-making processes. This provided comparable numerical data for the sample and control groups.

Regarding the qualitative component, semi-structured interviews were conducted with school managers, teachers and administrative staff. These interviews aimed to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions of organisational changes, management practices and strategies implemented to promote participation, motivation and well-being among members of the school community. The interviews, which were conducted in person and via videoconference, were recorded, transcribed in full and anonymised to protect the participants' confidentiality. The transcribed texts were then subjected to a systematic thematic analysis process. This analysis was conducted using an inductive approach divided into several stages. First, we carried out an exploratory reading of the transcripts to familiarise ourselves with the content and identify the initial relevant ideas. Next, open coding was performed, whereby relevant units of meaning (i.e. sentences or paragraphs expressing key concepts or significant experiences) were assigned labels (codes). These codes were then grouped into coherent thematic categories through an iterative comparison process involving several researchers, ensuring the analysis's intersubjective reliability.

The categories that emerged were organised into macro-themes, making it possible to identify recurring patterns and differences between different school contexts, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of management practices. Some of the main themes identified were the perception of the manager's role as either a facilitator or a controller; internal communication methods; strategies adopted to promote staff cohesion; internal conflict management; and the construction of a shared sense of educational mission. The results of the thematic analysis were then triangulated with quantitative data to identify any discrepancies or similarities between the numerical data and the narratives of the school stakeholders. This strengthened the study's internal validity and provided an integrated, contextualised view of the organisational, relational and managerial dynamics that characterise the work of school leaders in the participating schools.

3. Intervention: Differentiated Approach between Control Group and Sample Group

In order to assess the effectiveness of leadership practices and organisational management in schools, the research intervention was structured differently for the sample group and the control group. This approach enabled the effects of the structured activities proposed to the sample group to be isolated, preventing them from influencing the daily school dynamics of the control group.

The intervention focused on promoting effective leadership practices in the sample group, paying particular attention to human resource management, internal communication and

creating a positive organisational climate. The activities were highly reflective and educational, aiming to stimulate critical awareness among school leaders and staff regarding leadership and management dynamics.

1. Workshops on school leadership

The reflection workshops explored the main leadership models applicable in a school context. School leaders participated in discussions about transformational, distributed and bureaucratic leadership models, analysing the pros and cons of each approach. Transformational leadership was considered in terms of inspiration, motivation and ongoing change (Bass, 1990), whereas distributed leadership was viewed as a collaborative approach that promotes the involvement of various stakeholders in decision-making (Spillane, 2006). Using practical tools such as the Leadership Competencies Model (Leithwood et al., 2004), the executives examined how these models can be flexibly applied to the challenges facing Italian schools.

2. Training on internal communication and human resources management

A specific module focused on internal communication, which is a crucial element for staff cohesion and motivation. Transparency and inclusion in decision-making processes were identified as key factors for a healthy and productive work environment (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). School leaders and staff were guided in exploring strategies to improve horizontal and vertical communication, focusing on conflict management and human resource development. Additionally, empowerment practices that stimulate the autonomy and active participation of team members in decision-making processes were examined (Conger & Kanungo, 1988).

3. Organizational climate analysis projects

The intervention also aimed to explore and improve the organisational climate within the schools selected for the study. Participants used peer feedback tools, such as the organisational climate scale (Litwin & Stringer, 1968), to analyse variables such as cohesion, trust in leadership and involvement in decision-making processes. The organisational climate was also examined in relation to sense of belonging, which is fundamental to staff well-being and productivity (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). The results of the surveys were used to design improvement plans aiming to address any issues and build on positive aspects through constructive feedback.

4. Professional empowerment workshops

The professional empowerment meetings aimed to promote the development of the skills of school staff, with a particular focus on teachers and administrative staff. The programme included workshops on recognising and developing individual potential and improving professional skills through continuous training. Empowerment was viewed as a process providing the necessary resources, motivation and autonomy to enable individuals to develop professionally and contribute actively to organisational improvement (Spreitzer, 1995). Additionally, the meetings emphasised the importance of providing equal opportunities for professional development and involving all team members in relevant decision-making processes.

The intervention in the control group was designed to monitor the initial situation in the schools, without introducing changes to leadership practices or daily management. This approach enabled a meaningful comparison to be made with the sample group, highlighting any differences in the effectiveness of leadership practices and human resource management.

1. Data collection via online questionnaires

The control group completed online questionnaires designed to gather information on organisational climate, job satisfaction and human resource management. These explored teachers' and administrative staff's perceptions of their work environment, school leadership, and internal communication. The tools used included Litwin and Stringer's (1968) Organizational Climate Model to analyse variables such as cohesion, support, and leadership, and Spector's (1997) Job Satisfaction Scale to measure satisfaction in relation to professional development opportunities and resource management.

2. Semi-structured interviews

Alongside the questionnaires, semi-structured interviews were conducted with school leaders and some staff members to gather qualitative information on the working climate, perceptions of school leadership, and views on resource management. These interviews enabled a more in-depth exploration of issues that might not have emerged from the questionnaires. The focus was on satisfaction with day-to-day management, support from managers and perceptions of fairness in resource distribution.

3. Observation of the organizational climate

Direct observations of daily interactions between school administrators, teachers, and administrative staff enriched the analysis of the organisational climate in the control group. These observations provided an informal and natural assessment of the degree of cohesion, the quality of internal communication and how team members interacted with each other. In particular, moments of interaction during weekly meetings and planning activities were observed in order to assess staff involvement in decision-making processes and the quality of internal communication.

4. Monitoring of well-being at work and motivation

Monitoring well-being and motivation at work was a key aspect of the control group. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) was used to measure workers' levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and personal fulfilment in order to detect signs of stress, dissatisfaction or reduced motivation. Additionally, Herzberg's Work Motivation Questionnaire (1966) examined the factors that influence intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, including perceived recognition, autonomy, and opportunities for professional development. This differentiated approach made it possible to observe the extent to which the reflection and training activities proposed to the sample group influenced improvements in leadership practices, human resource management and organisational well-being, and to highlight any significant improvements compared to the control group.

4. Results

- *Quantitative data analysis*

Analysing the quantitative data was crucial for assessing the effectiveness of the leadership practices and organisational strategies adopted by the sample group of schools compared to the control group. Data collected via online questionnaires and key performance indicators (KPIs) revealed significant disparities in the primary areas of investigation, offering an objective and comparable evaluation of organisational climate, job satisfaction and human resource management.

This approach aligns with studies emphasising the value of empirical measurement in guiding evidence-based school policies (Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2014).

In the sample group, which actively participated in training and reflection aimed at promoting participatory leadership practices, significantly higher scores emerged in several key areas.

In particular:

- Team cohesion: the average values obtained suggest a more positive perception of relationships between colleagues, as well as greater collaboration in work processes. Schools in the sample group scored 18% higher than the control group on this dimension. This finding is consistent with the argument of Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) that distributed leadership is associated with an improvement in collaborative culture and staff cohesion.
- Trust in leadership: trust in the school leader increased significantly, by an average of 21%, due to greater transparency in communication and shared participation in strategic decisions. As Tschannen-Moran (2004) points out, trust is a key element of high-performing school organisations, fostered by leadership practices oriented towards listening and reciprocity.
- Participation in decision-making processes: 74% of respondents in the sample group said they felt actively involved in organisational decisions, compared to 48% in the control group. This finding confirms the effectiveness of distributed leadership models in promoting democratic and inclusive school environments (Spillane, 2006).
- Job satisfaction: Spector's (1997) scale found greater overall satisfaction with daily work among teachers and ATA staff in the sample group, particularly with regard to professional recognition and development opportunities. The literature confirms that job well-being is closely related to the perceived quality of leadership (Day et al., 2016).

In terms of key performance indicators (KPIs), the sample group performed better in areas such as:

- Personnel management: significant improvements in the distribution of responsibilities, enhancement of skills and management of internal conflicts. This is in line with Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe (2008), who highlight the direct effect of instructional and transformational leadership on the effective management of human resources.
- In terms of teaching and organisational innovation, there was a higher frequency of project experimentation and participation in innovation networks, with KPIs related to the adoption of innovative practices increasing by 25% compared to the control group. This reflects schools' ability to evolve towards more dynamic and adaptive contexts (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).
- In terms of internal training, the schools in the sample group showed greater participation in professional development courses, which had a positive impact on participants. Training activities were found to be more integrated into school improvement plans, in line with the principle of professional capital outlined by Fullan and Hargreaves (2013), whereby professional growth is a key driver of systemic change.

Conversely, in the control group, where no structured leadership improvement activities were introduced, several critical issues arose:

- Job satisfaction was lower, particularly with regard to factors such as the perception of fairness, participation in decision-making and recognition of merit. This is consistent with the known effects of bureaucratic and vertical leadership (Sergiovanni, 1996).
- There were higher levels of stress and burnout, as measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory: a 27% higher rate of emotional exhaustion and a 19% decline in personal fulfilment were observed compared to the sample group. These data confirm the empirical evidence that organisational support and leadership quality are protective factors against burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

- There was also lower trust in leadership and perceived communication consistency, with lower scores in decision-making transparency and management support. According to Louis et al. (2010), the perception of distant or inconsistent leadership can profoundly undermine staff motivation.
- There is a lower propensity for innovation, as evidenced by KPIs indicating limited implementation of new practices and low participation in school improvement projects. These factors compromise the responsiveness of educational institutions to changes in context (Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2008).

Overall, the quantitative data highlight a positive correlation between adopting transformational and distributed leadership approaches, and improving organisational well-being indicators. Thanks to targeted interventions, the schools in the sample group demonstrated a greater capacity to foster a cohesive, participatory and quality-focused work environment. This supports the idea that a considered, reflective and collaborative leadership approach can positively impact internal relationships and a school's overall performance (Hallinger, 2011; Bush & Glover, 2014).

- *Qualitative data analysis*

The qualitative analysis of the interviews highlighted significant differences between the sample group and the control group, both in terms of their perception of the role of the school leader and their assessment of the organizational climate. In the contexts belonging to the sample group, leaders were predominantly described as empathetic role models, capable of active listening and endowed with inspirational leadership. One teacher stated: "For the first time, I felt part of an educational community where my opinion really mattered." A school staff member added: "The headteacher involved us in decision-making processes, asking us how to improve internal communication. It made us feel valued and listened to."

These testimonials reflect a profound cultural change within the institutions of the sample group, where leadership is perceived not as an exercise of control but as a relational practice based on mutual trust. Several interviewees highlighted how joint training sessions, reflection workshops, and empowerment meetings created the conditions for authentic and constructive dialogue.

One teacher emphasised: 'We got to know each other better as colleagues. We finally had the opportunity to talk openly about not only teaching, but also how we are doing and what we need to work well.' Sharing common goals, being able to express one's point of view without fear of judgement and recognising individual skills contributed to an increased sense of belonging and personal motivation. It was highlighted on several occasions that organisational well-being also had a positive effect on students and families, creating a virtuous circle of collaboration and trust.

By contrast, the narratives from the control group schools painted a picture of a more traditional headteacher who was often perceived as distant and mainly focused on bureaucratic aspects. Many teachers expressed frustration at the lack of listening and dialogue: "Decisions come from above, without discussion. We often don't even know the reasons behind them," said one secondary school teacher. An administrative employee commented: 'There is little room to express ideas or suggest improvements. It seems as though everything has already been decided elsewhere.'

Staff often spoke of a professional daily routine characterised by a lack of recognition, isolation and resignation. In some cases, internal dynamics were described as competitive and uncooperative, with a tendency to close ranks and defend one's role. The absence of structured opportunities for discussion and joint training has led to fragmented and ineffective communication which is sometimes perceived as opaque. In this context, involvement in

decision-making processes is limited, which has a negative impact on motivation, interpersonal relations and the quality of work performed. One teacher stated: 'Our contribution is not sought, and even when we try to make a suggestion, it is often ignored or postponed indefinitely. This dampens enthusiasm and increases the sense of professional isolation'.

In summary, the qualitative results suggest that the activities proposed to the sample group had a transformative impact on perceptions of leadership and overall organisational well-being. There is a widespread opinion that managers who can create spaces for authentic listening, promote active participation and value human capital can generate an organisational culture based on cooperation, transparency and shared growth. In such contexts, the school is viewed as a dynamic professional community that can face educational challenges cohesively and resiliently.

By contrast, the control group continues to exhibit more conservative dynamics characterised by unengaging, vertical leadership. This contributes to maintaining a static organisational culture that is less oriented towards innovation and individual well-being. This approach affects not only the quality of the school staff's work, but also the school's ability to respond flexibly and inclusively to the needs of the educational community.

5. Discussion

The results of the study clearly demonstrate that school leadership is a crucial factor in determining the quality of working life within schools, and consequently the overall effectiveness of educational institutions. In particular, the adoption of a transformational leadership style, based on shared vision, active listening, staff motivation and skills development, was found to be significantly more effective than traditional and bureaucratic models (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Day et al., 2016). This approach fosters collaborative and innovative environments where all members of the school community feel involved and valued. Schools in the sample group that underwent structured training and reflection showed significant improvements in team cohesion, trust in leadership and active participation in decision-making processes. This confirms the effectiveness of distributed and transformational leadership practices (Spillane, 2005; Fullan, 2014).

By contrast, schools in the control group, which were characterised by a more hierarchical management style focused on bureaucratic management, exhibited higher levels of stress and general staff dissatisfaction. This is consistent with previous research on contexts lacking participatory leadership (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Spector, 1997). In such environments, organisational dynamics tend to be more static and less innovation-oriented, with internal communication often perceived as fragmented and lacking transparency (Louis et al., 2010).

Therefore, the evidence gathered confirms the urgent need to promote continuous and targeted training for school leaders that integrates managerial, communication and interpersonal skills, in line with the concept of 'professional capital' (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Interventions aimed at managing the organisational climate, encouraging participation and equitably distributing responsibilities are key to increasing staff well-being and improving educational quality. In this sense, school leaders must take on the role of facilitators of change and promoters of a collaborative, professional culture oriented towards continuous improvement (Murphy, 2016).

However, it is important to emphasise that the study also highlighted structural issues, including inconsistencies in management practices and a lack of systematic support for the professional development of school leaders. In this sense, national education policies must be rethought to ensure structured, permanent training programmes capable of responding to contemporary schools' complex needs and supporting ethical, reflective and competent leadership (INDIRE, 2023; OECD, 2020). Providing formal training requirements is not

enough; we must build a culture of school leadership based on empirical evidence, peer comparison and enhancing human capital (Hallinger, 2011; Bush & Glover, 2014).

Conclusion

The study confirms that effective school leadership is crucial for improving school quality and developing an educational organisation that can adapt to social, cultural and technological changes. Schools that have implemented transformational and distributed leadership models have, in particular, demonstrated a greater ability to generate cohesive, motivating and innovative professional environments, in line with the findings of Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) and Spillane (2005). In such environments, staff well-being, trust in leadership and the quality of internal communication are notably higher, creating a positive cycle involving not only teachers and administrative staff, but also students and families (Day et al., 2016).

The school leader is thus a change facilitator and community builder who can promote shared decision-making processes, value the human capital within the school and create favourable conditions for learning and innovation (Fullan, 2014; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). The collected data highlight that leadership based on trust, active listening, and shared responsibility directly contributes to creating a positive organisational climate — a factor recognised as pivotal in preventing burnout and promoting job satisfaction (Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Spector, 1997).

However, despite this evidence, significant disparities between schools still exist, partly due to the absence of a systematic policy for the continuing education of school administrators. In some cases, a bureaucratic management approach prevails, with little focus on innovation, transparency, or participation. This situation reflects a structural problem that has already been highlighted by recent studies (OECD, 2020; INDIRE, 2023) and would require decisive, continuous investment in school leadership training.

In light of these findings, we hope to see the introduction of a national plan for the ongoing training of school leaders. This plan should promote the integrated development of strategic, organisational, communication and pedagogical skills, and not be limited to regulatory updates (Bush & Glover, 2014; Hallinger, 2011). Effective, reflective and evidence-based leadership is now essential for creating an inclusive and equitable school capable of learning and innovating over time. Ultimately, investing in educational leadership means investing in the quality of the entire school system, fostering a culture of collaboration, professional growth, and equity (Murphy, 2016; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

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