

Principals and the fragile balance between organizational, educational, and vocational training: Insights for an impactful post-pandemic school

I dirigenti scolastici e il delicato equilibrio tra esigenze organizzative, didattiche e formative: Suggerimenti per una scuola efficace post-pandemica

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ABSTRACT

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions have implemented measures to balance traditional teaching, educational, and organizational needs with the extraordinary demands posed by the emergency. The focus of the research is to understand whether, several years later, the Italian school system has managed to transform itself, drawing reflections and best practices from the pandemic experience. The role of the school principal is crucial in maintaining a balance by addressing the concerns of both the school staff and students and their families. The article focuses on a qualitative analysis of 14 interviews with school principals in the regions of Veneto, Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli Venezia Giulia, and Emilia-Romagna. This analysis has underlined a necessary reflection to review and redesign a new model for understanding and evaluating the role of school principals and, consequently, the organizational and educational system.

A partire dalla pandemia da COVID-19, le istituzioni scolastiche hanno adottato provvedimenti utili a bilanciare le tradizionali esigenze didattiche, educative e organizzative con le straordinarie richieste dettate dall'emergenza. Oggetto della ricerca è il tentativo di comprendere se, a qualche anno di distanza, la scuola italiana ha saputo trasformarsi, ricavando da quanto accaduto spunti di riflessione e buone pratiche. Cruciale è la figura del dirigente scolastico che ha il compito di garantire equilibrio nel raccogliere le istanze provenienti sia dal personale scolastico, che dagli alunni e le loro famiglie. L'articolo si sviluppa intorno all'analisi qualitativa di 14 interviste a dirigenti operanti nelle regioni Veneto, Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli Venezia Giulia, ed Emilia-Romagna. Questa analisi ha dato il via a una riflessione necessaria per rivedere e ridisegnare un nuovo modello di lettura e valutazione del ruolo del dirigente scolastico e di conseguenza sul sistema organizzativo e didattico.

KEYWORDS

Principals, Decision making, Leadership Style, Schools, Teamwork
Dirigenti scolastici, Decision making, Stile di leadership, Scuole, Lavoro di squadra

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1. Introduction

In a few days, the COVID - 19 epidemic forced the Italian school to face a challenge capable of putting to the test, and sometimes calling into question, not only the structure and formal teaching methods of the Italian school but more generally the entire organization and sometimes the very meaning of the school institution.

Since March 2020, educational institutions have had to balance traditional teaching, educational, and organizational needs with extraordinary demands dictated by the pandemic. Suddenly schools saw the change of roles and priorities, but also of teaching tools and methodologies as well as of organizational and above all relational structures. A one-of-a-kind test. In this context, the educational leadership of the principal, already central since the advent of “school autonomy” in Italy (DPR 275/1999)¹, has become a discriminating element of school resilience in a pandemic. Dello Preite (2021) underlines that during the pandemic, the exercise of widespread and democratic leadership has allowed principals to promote interpersonal relationships based on coherence, comparison, and collegiality. Those principles facilitated the circulation of ideas and the construction of a strategic-operational plan in which everyone was able to give their contribution in a spirit of cohesion and collaboration.

The organizational, strategic, but also, and primarily, educational and relational choices implemented by principals have therefore marked the boundary between a school capable of overcoming the pandemic challenge without losing sight of its educational mission and a school that has been overwhelmed by protocols, bureaucracy, and regulations (Lien et al., 2022).

The pandemic crisis, with the inherent and consequent challenges to the education system, however, is inserted into a process of evolution of the Italian school that began many years ago and was never completely structured definitively. One of the key elements of this evolutionary process is the push towards a technological evolution that allows the school, and those who live there, to access opportunities, resources, tools, and spaces for comparison that new technologies and the network provide. However, the instrumental aspect must be rooted in a new way of thinking, planning, verifying learning in all its forms, and, consequently, of conceiving the purpose of the educational institution. Molina et al. (2021) in their insightful work, analysed six large dimensions essential for a systemic transformation of the school. These six dimensions, identified by Fondazione Mondo Digitale, help to define macro areas and spheres of interest relevant to this evolution. Specifically, these six dimensions are: the “content of education”, that is to say, what you learn in terms of subject knowledge, curricular and transversal skills; “the learning approaches and environments”, or by what and how you learn—in terms of tools and teaching methods and dedicated spaces; the “management of teaching

and school processes” or tools and processes to support the management of the teaching activities themselves; “the training of teachers and managers”; “governance and system education policies”, that is legislation, policies, resources, and incentives intended for the world of education; lastly the “variety of sub-systemic innovations” that accompany and shape the evolution of the school system.

These dimensions changed their characteristics during the pandemic. For example, in relation to the “contents of education,” the pandemic event forced professors and teachers to identify, while respecting the contents defined by the ministerial programs, which contents to prioritise, and which ones could be moved to a virtual classroom. Teachers had to decide if a specific topic could be assigned for example in a flipped classroom, to students’ self-study. Soon every teacher became aware of the fact that it is not sufficient to replicate a frontal lesson in front of a “Zoom” camera expecting to be “doing school”. Inevitably teaching had to change with the mediation of a screen (Di Nuovo et al., 2021) as authors such as Rivoltella (2019) or Calvani (2013) had already recommended in “unsuspected times,” who had stressed that the focus should be “the teacher, not the device”. Also, the concept of “learning environment” faced an important semantic broadening: during everyday teaching, it embedded those characteristics already identified as pillars of digital didactics, strictly linked to immateriality and spatio-temporal autonomy (cfr. Andreatta et al., 2022; L. Rossi, 2021). In fact, it is evident that today we are witnessing more and more the materialization of a “liquid learning environment” as De Martino (2021) said. Through exposition of Bauman’s thought (2020), he emphasizes how, in the post-pandemic school, when it comes to the learning environment, it is necessary to overcome the dichotomy “distance” and “presence”, but also “synchronous” and “asynchronous”. The field should be a “liquid” customised learning environment, without clear boundaries between physical and digital, in a continuous and functional, cross-reference between these different dimensions, in an increasingly learner-centered perspective.

Such a perspective allows us to overcome the mistrust of digital learning environments as a kind of disturbing, if modern, drift in the world of schooling, which has led to it being called, despicably, a kind of “mcdonaldization of education” (Caroll 2013). Therefore largely acknowledged today is the insightful reflection of P. G. Rossi (2010) who defined the learning environment as any space, virtual or not, in which there are “support materials prepared by teachers and tutors (basic and in-depth ones), products/projects made in itinere by learners, communication tools, evaluation forms [...] Having overcome the concept of the environment as the one and only source of information, it becomes the working space where various actors, meet, listen to each other, dialogue, pick up and produce materials”. A workspace that requires no boundaries whatsoever, neither structural nor ideological, if it is able to stay true to its *telos*: to structure and foster learning.

Returning to the six dimensions of school transformation according to the “Fondazione Mondo digitale” we can see that “management of teaching and school

1 When their original language was not English, direct quotes have been translated by the Authors.

processes” and “teacher and managerial training” took on different meanings and nuances in recent years. As for the first dimension, the need and sometimes the value of the mediation of digital tools and online platforms and, in the second dimension, the teachers’ need of specific training in digital teaching were a necessary but clearly not sufficient condition for quality teaching. Interesting is the acknowledgement that the need for a digital literacy for teachers is not a specific characteristic of those countries with low “digital literacy” but has turned out to be a cross-country need (UNESCO, 2020; United Nations, 2020), also respecting the specificities of individual countries (Hodges et al., 2020; Purba et al., 2022; Herman, 2021; Perifanou et al., 2021;).

This outline of the school principal’s competencies draws a complex picture, certainly not fulfilled by the dedicated training course, which we expect to have been, not so much disrupted, but rather differently enhanced by the pandemic challenge.

Thus, we expect that organizational and evaluative skills have been effectively applied to health security protocols, in an effort to “hold together” the guidance received “from above” for the protection of everyone’s health and the didactic, educational, and human needs of teachers and students. We could imagine that decision-making competence has been continually prompted by the need to choose how to act and what directions to give to families, teachers, and students. Finally, we hope that the competence of leadership and inclusive vision has not faded but instead has been, in recent years, the key competence for linking the needs of the “school institution” with those of individual “school institutions” and the people who inhabit them on a daily basis.

This article was guided by these reflections, and it aims at understanding the pandemic experience caught “through the eyes” of school principals. So, what does a principal learn from this experience? Beyond personal attitudes, a good manager is one who knows how to learn from experiences and one who can make learning a collective and not an individual concept. “One of the best things to do after a crisis is to draw lessons from it in order to learn how to survive during similar situations in the future” (Akbaba et al., 2021, p. 4). So, the main point here is not so much to identify different models of “being a principal during the pandemic event” but mostly to understand what principals did learn during the pandemic.

2. Principals during the Pandemic: a research project

This work is also part of a larger research project, in which teachers will also be involved, to understand how relationships were structured among them (principals and teachers but also teachers and their colleagues) during the pandemic and what dimensions were involved. In other terms, it aims to understand how the structure of the relationships is shaped, in the era of the pandemic, among the actors of the professional bureaucracy (Ballarino, et al., 2021; Mintzberg, 1996) present in the school system. In

particular, the focus is on principals and teachers belonging to the same comprehensive institution (Lucisano et al., 2020). Moreover, this research is designed following a mixed-approach (Cardano et al., 2021), thus combining quali-quantitative stages in all the phases. Indeed, this paper focuses mainly on principals who are the key informants to prepare the following survey phase. Focusing on school principals allows a reflection above all on leadership style, decision-making, crisis management (Grant et al., 2004), and personal resilience. As Ramos-Pla et al. (2021) state, during the pandemic, principals had to rely on their personal leadership resources in a completely new way and this required a huge effort. Principals were expected to be able to balance “the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of their students with their duty to personnel, parents, the community, and other education stakeholders” (Varela & Fedynich, 2020, p. 2). Moreover, the COVID - 19 pandemic event has no recent similar event that could have been a best practice or model to follow. In this landscape, “school principals had to improvise and find their way with little or no guidance” (Lien et al., 2022, p. 775).

The article is developed around the qualitative analysis of 14 interviews with principals operating in the regions of Veneto, Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli Venezia Giulia, and Emilia-Romagna and here we present the results and the lines of in-depth study already started with the teachers of the same schools involved.

The school principals were chosen to ensure a geographical representation of the four main regions in the North-East of Italy. The principal sample consisted in ten (10) females and four (4) males: six (6) females have been in charge for less than four years², four (4) females for more than four years, males instead were in charge for more than ten years.

3. Principals’ voices: suggestions and advice from the future

The question research was explored by in-depth interviews with principals mainly to describe their experience in governing schools before and after the pandemic but also to discover how they tried to be responsive to families’ needs during the crisis. The interviews highlighted some fundamental dimensions of the principals’ role that became relevant in this specific situation. These dimensions were relevant and necessary to make a difference in the daily management of school life. The answers develop around six main categories:

2 It is important to underline that in the last five years a large number of principals were hired. According the Italian Education Ministry (MIUR, 2017), around 2.425 principals were missing throughout Italy and all these vacancies were assigned right before the 2019 pandemic. The implication of it was that a great number of “brand new principals” were facing a never-before-happened event. Italian Government website reports that in 2017 there was 6.792 principals in service, 1.189 vacancies, 1.748 regencies.

3.1 Crisis Management: setting priorities

Although the role of the school principal has always been central in the school of autonomy, the health emergency has demonstrated how crucial it can be to maintain the educational and formative purpose in an institution increasingly overwhelmed by procedural and bureaucratic aspects.

Principals, in order to lead such a complex and multifaceted system, have been called, for some years now, to embody certain skills that transcend, though not neglect, the mere organizational aspect. Principals are called upon to develop primarily managerial competencies that Malik (2007) summarises in five sub-competencies: planning competence, which is embodied in knowing how to focus on objectives; organisational competence, that is, knowing how to define paths and procedures; decision-making competence, necessary to choose and structure actions capable of conveying lines of meaning; evaluative competence, aimed at the entire process and individual interventions; and last educational competence, which allows one to enhance resources and have confidence in change.

Despite these acknowledged competencies, during interviews, all principals underlined an important issue concerning the problem of setting priorities. During the pandemic—especially in the very first months, many issues faded in the background because principals' priorities changed a lot (Marone et al., 2020). The core problem became "crisis management", which of course is an ability required of principals but in the specific situation, the crisis did not concern a single issue, but rather a large number of issues involving many social actors. Every principal involved in the research mentioned the fact that they spent too much energy trying to control the situation in all aspects: relational, logistical, sanitary, etc. The main suggestion they would give themselves if they could rewind back to February 2019 would be

To expend less energy on this aspect because what I then noticed is that some things then went on anyway, didn't they? I actually wanted to have absolute control of the situation, that is, from the masks that were provided to children [...]. I had to see them, I had to try them, I had to know even where they kept them... (P.Vi1).³

This fact underlines an important insight for principals, especially during stressful and urgent times, the need to focus on the necessary school priorities and not to lose sight of the real educational purpose of the school. This allows them to use all their energies for the global well-being of students and teachers.

3.2 Decision making and leadership style

Strictly linked to the former issue, the research revealed how principals manage their leadership style during the pandemic.

Many principals mentioned that the need of control was not lack of trust towards their staff (collaborators, teachers, administrative staff, families) but it was more a problem of how to set priorities and how to learn to delegate. This issue in literature is strictly related to personal leadership resources (PLR) and involves principals' cognitive, social, and psychological resources (Ramos-Pla et al., 2021). In Italian literature this issue, referring to principals, is not as much discussed but it is interesting to compare it with works referring to professors' teaching models (Franceschini, 2019). This leads to reflect on which models can be associated with principals' actions while coping with a crucial event.

Xodo (2010) highlights four foundational dimensions of leadership: "vision," referring to the competence of creating conditions for change; "credibility" referring to the competence of instilling trust and creating positive expectations; "motivation" referring to the competence of creating empowerment and fostering autonomy among peers; "exemplarity" referring to the competence of being a guide and example for subordinates and younger people.

Other relevant competencies, however, emerge from the literature that must be presented specifically given their relevance in recent months. A recent study (Parker et al., 2018) reports the key role of the principal in maintaining the mental health of teaching and non-teaching staff. This role, linked with emotional and social competencies, was central during the pandemic period.

This could be read in contrast with our results that evidence how principals felt a sense of being overwhelmed by duties and responsibilities and—being the main decision maker—a sense of loneliness. Especially during the first period of the pandemic, principals stated that the presence of collaborator staff faded in the background because they needed full control of the situation.

At the end you are the one who decides. This means that you are alone... however without these collaborators it is impossible to work (P.Pd1).

It can be said that although all principals claim to adopt an inclusive and shared leadership style, during the emergency phase they deeply modified their behaviour. In particular, they felt the need to try to control the needs of multiple stakeholders: thus, they shifted to a directive leadership. This impacts organisational culture and the way relationships are managed. It is only after learning how to handle the first emergencies that principals recognized that they need to change their leadership style (Ramos-Pla et al., 2021).

A principal cannot be alone, nor can he be under the illusion that he is in charge, of course you can direct, which is another thing [...] listening to what the people close to you are suggesting (P.Tv1).

In this case, the insight we could derive is the importance for each principal to reflect on their own style of leadership, trying to understand how collaborative it is, and improve the way to include the educa-

3 Codes used throughout the article refer to different participants.

tional works in the process of evaluating and decision making.

3.3 Technologies and (but not only) digital competence

The “technological” tools were introduced in Italian schools about twenty years ago, although with very variable methods and intensities depending on the area, sometimes facilitating teaching, other times creating reactions of rejection in those with “apocalyptic” fears (Eco, 1964) ready to see in each device a threat to the school, but more often leaving everything untouched and remaining dusty and semi unused in a corner. For many years people have acted as if “digital education” were synonymous with “using a computer during lessons”, guided by the mistaken belief that this choice would have changed the school and the students’ educational experience. This, in most cases, did not happen. Many teachers, and many principals, have read this failure as a sign of the uselessness, or worse, harmfulness, of the use of technology in schools, obviously unaware of the reflection of P. G. Rossi (2016) who recalls that technology, be it a device or a new online platform, does not modify the didactic strategies and architectures (Bonaiuti, 2014), but rather the specific didactic mediators. In short, teaching could remain frontal, passive, and unidirectional even if mediated by the most innovative instrumentation. The pandemic situation amplified this aspect when the Decree No. 22 of April 9, 2020—later transformed Law (cfr. DL 22/2020; Legge 41/2020), specified the mandatory nature of distance learning, giving even the most refractory institutions the input to start a targeted and aware DAD. The emergency, combined with the law prescription, has brought out a rather complex situation: many teachers, as well as several students, did not have adequate IT devices (ISTAT, 2020), nor the basic skills to use them, often not even in the most basic way.

The teacher’s unfamiliarity with the device reduces the attention that they can reserve to the lesson and even to the student, channelling most of the mental energies on the use of the tools.

However, the managers reacted quickly, already in the first weeks of lockdown, providing specific training and devices to students and teachers, demonstrating that digital competence can be achieved in a short time. It was more complex for teachers in real “digital teaching”, which was not limited to moving classroom teaching behind a screen, but which forced to rethink the educational experiences by fully exploiting the incredible potential that technological support and digital tools offer.

But still, it is not enough as the reflection of a principal testifies:

I mean... the thing I would do is to be more prepared for the... just the technical use of the G-Suite. Right away. But now we already have it. Right now, we will be able to deal with distance learning. Instead I would have started a reflection on the consequences of that. A reflection on the decisions we took and that maybe, we should do differently. We focused on fragile families. But how did we do it? (P.Ve1).

The real challenge therefore becomes that of understanding how to continue to “be school”, to stay focused on the person, and not just transmit notions (Yurinova et al., 2022, p. 1842), despite all the instrumental, strategic, and organisational changes that the school has been forced to activate in the past two years.

Reflection on consequences of distance learning should be promoted and pedagogical models for learning with technologies should be built (Laurillard, 2014) and, more importantly, teachers must be trained to use them effectively.

The insight that emerges is therefore to encourage teachers to learn how to use new technologies and to promote a conscious and intentional use of the different available tools.

3.4 Maintaining the sense of going to school

School is a complex system, characterised by different and deeply intertwined roles, processes, actors, actions. Interesting is Ajello’s (2005) perspective that explains this complexity through the construct of “Activity” borrowed from Leontiev in the context of the Russian cultural historical tradition of the late 1970s. According to this analysis, school is a system of *activities*, where the activity represents the collective response to a fundamental need and is characterised by a *raison d’être* which constitutes its object, in our case the school born to respond in an institutional way to the need for education and training of the new generations.

And according to this theory, the *activities* are then divided into a series of *actions* that pursue specific objectives through consciously oriented processes. Finally, these actions are carried out through *operations* that concretize the actions within specific contexts and constraints. In school, actions can be represented by verbs such as “teach”, “explain”, “evaluate”, “correct” ... but also “accompany”, “protect health”, “promote autonomy”, “organise”, which take the form of specific operations such as “writing a mark on the assignment page”, “carefully cleaning the corridors”, “setting up a memo”, or “tracing escape and access routes”. The school, therefore, like any effective complex organisation, is a collective set of people who act together oriented towards a common activity but carrying out peculiar and highly different actions and operations. This perspective helps to highlight not only the importance and dignity of each role and activity that moves within the system, contributing in a peculiar but indispensable way to the common activity, but also and above all the need not to subordinate the activity, as the *raison d’être* of the system, to the specific action or operation. The progressive bureaucratization and depersonalization of the school system, accompanied by a progressive transformation of the manager from an educational figure to an administrative figure, has in many cases weakened this awareness. The pandemic situation, characterised by extremely rigid and constantly evolving procedures and protocols, oriented towards the protection of human life itself, has created the surreal situation in many schools of seeing the “procedure” prevail over the “telos” for which it was created.

A careful reflection of a principal from Padua in fact highlights the following:

The point is to get kids to go to school, give them a safe place to grow, to learn, to become adults... Does that seem like a small thing? If I think about this even all the bureaucratic hassles make sense... And that's the part I liked best about this job. Yes, it's not maybe what I do most of the time... But it's the most important part. And at the end I realize that even every time I sign a resolution, write a memo, consult a norm... I do the boring part but this part is still needed to allow them to grow up to go to school (P.Pd1).

The principal thus becomes the element of mediation between the formal norm and the educational experience of each pupil, ensuring that every action and operation is effectively aimed at promoting the ultimate goal of the school, reaffirming the centrality of the educational and socialising role of the school. During pandemic principals were well aware of this and considered it as a "personal mission" and made their organisational and regulatory expertise available to the "school system" so that this happens in the best possible way.

An insight that appears to be crucial here is the principals' awareness that school is not only a place to rule but it is also and probably above all a place in which students can be in a social environment. School fulfils the task of providing new opportunities for students and this should be at the top of the principals' agenda.

3.5 Communication tools: social media is not the epitome of evil

The school, with the necessary and understandable cultural, geographical and historical variables, has always been an institution characterised by some very defined formal dimensions, by a well-recognizable hierarchical structure and, finally, by well-coded languages and communicative mediators: the manager communicates his directives through "memos", teachers communicate with parents through the personal booklet or, recently, the personal page of the electronic register, and so on. This formal dimension, found in any complex organisation, reduces entropy, optimises the effectiveness of the system by regulating everyone's work (Taylor, 1911), defines roles and responsibilities, and protects the organisation itself and those who live there.

In recent years, social media, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, has slowly entered schools, accompanied by a careful effort, however, to "keep their distance", reserving, for example, Facebook for the visibility of school activities without however allowing direct interaction. and relegating the much feared "class WhatsApp groups" to contact between teachers and parents, or even better representatives of class-parents, safeguarding all the other professionals who work in the school. Finally, the use of social networks for students during school hours was banned with every strategy, including the most coercive, to minimise information leaks, especially during tests. This is

to the disappointment of students but also of some scholars who see these tools as useful for motivating learning (Persico et al., 2016), effective in sharing resources (Lagree, 2014) but also important for the development of new skills, social and dialogic (Jenkins, 2009).

The role of social networks in the school has been drastically changed by the pandemic event, bringing out the precious potential of the instrument but also breaking down, probably definitively, a sort of "fourth school wall", borrowing a happy Pirandellian theatrical terminology.

I am in another group of principals here in Treviso. With WhatsApp we always keep each other updated, here I must say that during the pandemic we had the possibility of a continuous exchange (P.Tv1)

Social media has always been a reason to fight with my daughters... actually then also having joined some social channels of Facebook especially [...] I found resources from other principals who were posting interpretations, documents... for me now (social media) has become a reason not exactly for training but certainly to update! (P.Vi1).

Principals now use social media to improve networking among their colleagues and share strategies and information.

WhatsApp messages and phone calls are not only tolerated (24/7) but also considered as fundamental during the pandemic to cope with the constant changes.

Not only. The messaging of online platforms, the possibility of video call all during the day, the activation of discussion forums has also changed the dynamics and opportunities for exchange between teachers and students, thus opening a new learning paradigm, happily defined in unsuspecting times, "Ubiquitous. At any time and in any space" (Ogata et al., 2004) but also new ways of relating and closeness. Great potential, therefore, but also a great threat of anarchy and confusion of roles.

These data shed light on a useful insight: the principal should play a pivotal role, acting as a leader and a guide. This should enable the institution to become more and more tailored, close to the specific situation of each family and each student.

3.6 Digital teaching and children in need

Lastly, a core issue presented by principals was the need to reduce marginalisation of students perceived as "different" (Galegher et al., 2022) and to ensure an inclusive environment and a context for enhancing differences (Canevaro et al., 2014). All interviewed principals reported that today's challenge is both to keep what good things digital education has brought and to not forget the need for relationships and presence.

We've lost the weak ones, the last ones, the broken ones—the ones that even in the classroom you have a hard time keeping them

on track. But at least they're there—they're there. They listen to something. Especially the foreigners in our case but also all the problem families. As long as you have them in the classroom you know that for five or six hours, they are safe. Maybe they understand half of what is explained to them - but the half at least... And then something remains if they listen to it... When they are at home (during digital education), what happens? (P.Pd1).

This dimension has been the one that, in the realness of individual situations, marked the difference between school isolation and high-quality teaching, albeit at a distance. Principals, thanks to the knowledge of everyone's needs and the activation of creative solutions, were capable of enhancing specificities and resources of individual institutions.

An insight that appears substantial in this case is trying not to prioritise the efficiency—more effective and high-performance instrumental or organizational aspects—to the detriment of the students and their peculiar characteristics and fragilities.

4. Conclusions

To conclude, this analysis led to collecting from the voices of the principals, a summary suggestion of the dimensions analyzed: the importance of promoting “organizational learning” (Akbaba et al., 2021, pp. 1 – 2) that is to say the process of improving the ability to learn from experiences. Individuals learn from their own and others' experiences and do it together and this is different from individual learning. During the pandemic organizations experienced an uncommon situation: we focused on what changes could have improved the experience. “Learning is important not only for its results but also as a process” (p. 2).

The COVID - 19 pandemic was a stress test, a crisis that maybe provoked awareness among principals and highlighted an in-depth reflection on

- Organizational and logistical issues and personal skills
- Relations with colleagues, teachers, parents, pupils
- Importance of technology
- The social, educational, and cultural role of school

The central challenge is to capitalize on the lessons learnt from the pandemic so that these insights do not remain just pedagogical ideals but can, in everyday practice, become tangible in the annual planning and scheduling of each school year. This “best practice” of course should be shared by all teaching staff.

Still, there is a lot to explore in order to understand how relationships are shaped during pandemics, and above all it can be crucial, to involve other stakeholders to investigate other points of view and to learn from the past to shape a better future.

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