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of the Journal Scuola Democratica**

**REINVENTING EDUCATION**

2-5 June 2021

**VOLUME III**

**Pandemic and Post-Pandemic  
Space and Time**

**ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"**

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**Proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup>  
International Conference of  
the Journal Scuola  
Democratica  
REINVENTING EDUCATION**

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**VOLUME III**

**Pandemic and Post-  
Pandemic Space and Time**

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## **Pandemic and School Management: Challenges for Future Education**

**Francesca Dello Preite**

University of Florence, francesca.dellopreite@unifi.it

**ABSTRACT:** *2020-2021 will be remembered as the years of the Pandemic caused by COVID-19, a virus that suddenly spread worldwide affecting the health and the life of millions of people of all ages and putting a strain on welfare, economic, scientific and politic structures of all the Nations that have tried to respond to the multiple needs of their populations facing many obstacles and difficulties. In these two years all the public and private institutions have tried to overcome the limits imposed by the repeated lockdowns with new organizational, logistical and communication models and to continue to help citizens with their facilities. Among these ones, the school, like the other social agencies, faced the emergency by adopting, as a first measure, the suspension of teaching in presence and continuing with all the remote activities, from the educational training to the administrative services. With reference to this, the article intends to present the planning framework and the results of an exploratory qualitative research aimed at the sphere of school management, which intended to investigate the skills, methods, times, tools and resources to which the principals have applied to direct, coordinate and enhance the human resources of their institutes in order to guarantee to all their pupils the right to a continuous and quality learning, which is an indispensable prerogative for a fair and sustainable human growth.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Pandemic, School, Principals, Leadership, Management*

### **Introduction**

The last two years of school (2019-2020 and 2020-2021) were deeply affected by the health emergency that caused not only educational difficulties, but also significant changes in the organisation of the educational system in Italy. The adoption of Decree Law n. 6 on the 23rd February 2020 and the Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers on the 4th March 2020, amongst other things, established the suspension of the school activities in presence in favour of their continuation through distance learning. Consequently, many questions and considerations arose concerning the institutional and academic fields with which it is necessary to deal urgently, using competence and commitment (Agasisti, 2020; Bertagna, 2020; Laneve, 2020).

Among the several issues: how to guarantee to the students the right to study while taking into account their personal needs? How to reshape the school activities and lessons in order to adapt them to virtual platforms while keeping a high quality in the relationships and in the process of teaching-learning? (Limone, Toto, 2020; Moretti, 2021)? How to train teachers and principals for the purpose of activating processes of empowerment and agency (Boffo, 2018; Dato, De Serio, Lopez, 2007) that are fundamental to understand and manage the new educational emergencies (Annacontini, Vaccarelli, 2021; Ulivieri, 2018)? How to remould the relationship between school and families in order to create an effective and concrete educational co-responsibility (Amadini *et al.*, 2019)?

## 1. Research Objectives and Theoretical Framework

Based on these presuppositions, the inter-university research group D.I.S.C.O.V.E.R.<sup>1</sup> launched the project 'School management in the time of the pandemic' with the aim of understanding through what processes, strategies, decisions, and responsibilities the principals succeeded in leading schools during the first lockdown while guaranteeing the right to study which is established by the Italian Constitution (Marone *et al.*, 2020). The research focused on the following objectives:

- identifying what methods and instruments were used in order to reorganise the school routine during the lockdown;
- identifying those resources and strategies that enabled the transition to distance learning;
- understanding how the students' needs were fulfilled, with a particular focus on school non-completion, drop-outs, and/or students with disabilities;
- collecting information about what school principals 'learnt' from this situation and what competences helped them be active and resilient;
- highlighting what aspects of school management are fundamental in order to face present and future school difficulties.

The research was divided into six phases in order to better organise the activities to be carried out:

- first phase (April 2020): identification of the methodological system and of the research planning;
- second phase (June 2020): elaboration of the interview schedule;
- third phase (July 2020): creation of the convenience sampling;

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<sup>1</sup> Research group D.I.S.C.O.V.E.R. (*Studies and research on school leadership from an inclusive and gendered perspective*) is composed of professors from the University of Naples 'Federico II' and Florence and school principals from Naples. This group aims at developing and implementing those studies concerning school management from the point of view of inclusivity and gender which are used to interpret the organisational and managerial processes in schools.

- fourth phase (August-September 2020): interviews and their transcription;
- fifth phase (October-November 2020): textual analysis of the interviews;
- sixth phase (February 2021): restitution of the results to the participants and to the scientific community.

During the first phase, the team selected the reference theoretical framework for the research. They chose naturalistic observation (Lincoln, Guba, 1985) that Luigina Mortari (2007, 61) defines as

what occurs in a natural setting, that is in those places and in those ways in which the phenomenon normally happens [...] and finds its *raison d'être* in the fact that each phenomenon under consideration acquires its sense by reference to the context in which it occurs.

The main points of naturalistic observation are investigation of the phenomena and methodological flexibility that allow us to take into account unexpected events and diversities which are likely to be observed in human existence. Furthermore, this method permits us to obtain an in-depth knowledge of the meanings that the subjects attribute to the problems under consideration. For these reasons, naturalistic observation does not opt for a specific theory *a priori* and does not want to make generalisations from the results. Rather, it tries to give a deep and accurate interpretation of them paying attention even to those aspects that could be considered as being secondary (ivi, 64).

In order to collect the experiences of the principals during the first lockdown, the research team opted for the narrative method (Clandinin, Connelly, 2000; Demetrio, 2020) applying the autobiographical interview as an instrument tool. According to Atkinson (2002, 21):

it is the most effective research approach in order to obtain a subjective perspective and a better understanding of the topic or issue under consideration. Autobiographical narrations tend to organise life events and circumstances coherently. For the purpose of giving a meaning, identifying the factors that influenced those life events, and interpreting those experiences, the autobiographical narration is the perfect method. It helps the researcher understand life events from the point of view of the person who experienced them.

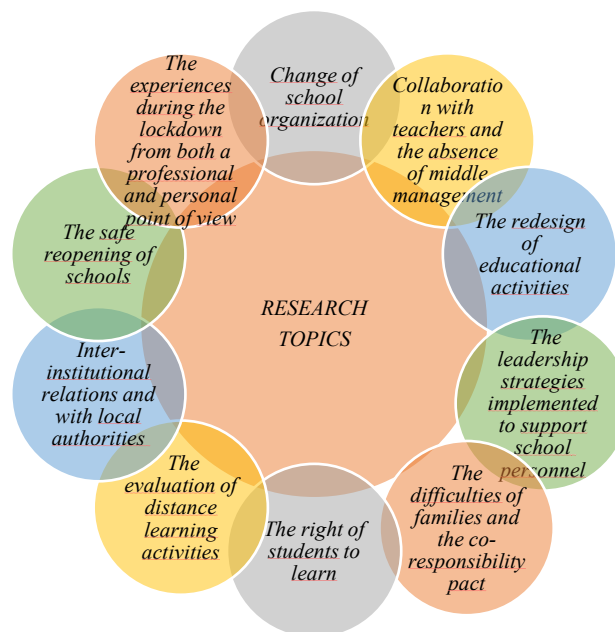
Thus, the autobiographical interview is provided with a double pedagogical function. On the one hand, it allows the interviewers to deeply understand the interviewees' experiences; on the other, it permits the interviewees to tell their stories, focusing especially on those aspects and dynamics that they consider as being crucial for the reconstruction of their cognitive, relational, and emotional experiences.

## 2. Thematic Areas and Procedure Used for Conducting Interviews

In line with the above-mentioned objectives, it was established on what thematic areas the biographical interview was to be focused: Area n. 1 – Chance of school organization; Area n. 2 – Collaboration with teachers and the absence of middle management; Area n. 3 – The redesign of educational activities; Area n. 4 – The leadership strategies implemented to support school personnel; Area n. 5 – The difficulties of families and the co-responsibility pact; Area n. 6 – The difficulties of families and the co-responsibility pact; Area n. 7 – The right of students to learn; Area n. 8 – The evaluation of distance learning activities; Area n. 9 – Inter-institutional relations and with local authorities; Area n. 10 – The safe reopening of schools; Area n. 11 – The experiences during the lockdown from both a professional and personal point of view (Fig. 1).

In the interview schedule all these areas were translated into open questions so that school principals, while telling their experiences, could give meaning to the relational, educational, didactic, organisational, and managerial activities they carried out during the lockdown. In so doing, they could also critically judge their work in terms of educational quality and equity.

**FIG. 1.** *Thematic areas that were addressed during the interviews*



The interviews were conducted online in August and September 2020<sup>2</sup>. The respondents were 26 principals – 19 women and 7 men – managing

<sup>2</sup> Interviews were held on platform Google Meet. Date and hour were agreed with principals and each meeting lasted around one hour. Participants were asked their consent to record the meetings so that narrations could be accurately transcribed and later analysed.

educational institutes of different levels (from kindergartens to upper secondary schools) in various regions of Italy: Basilicata, Campania, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio, Liguria, Lombardy, Apulia, and Tuscany (Fig. 2).

An interesting point to be taken into account is the fact that the majority of the interviewed principals stated they manage two educational institutions (one of which was temporarily entrusted to them) of the same or different level. This aspect is not to be overlooked since it allowed the interviewees to analyse their leadership from more than one perspective and showed that each context required specific decisions and solutions.

**FIG. 2.** *Composition of the convenience sampling*

<i>Number of principals</i>	<i>Levels of the schools</i>	<i>Geographical location of the schools</i>
Total number of principals 26: - 19 female principals - 7 male principals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Comprehensive schools (pupils aged 3-11)</li> <li>- Lower secondary schools</li> <li>- <i>Licei</i>: Linguistico (Foreign Languages High School), Scienze Umane (Human Sciences High School), Economico-Sociale (Socio-Economic High School), International Scientific Cambridge STEM, Artistico (Art High School)</li> <li>- I.P.S.E.O.A. (Institute for Enogastronomic and Hospitality Services)</li> <li>- Provincial Institute for Adults' Education</li> </ul>	Basilicata Campania Emilia-Romagna Lazio Liguria Lombardy Tuscany Apulia

The technological tools that were used to conduct the interviews were extremely useful for the collection of data. Not only did they enable the interviews to be carried out despite the restriction on circulation, through online meetings, but also gave the opportunity to record them. Thanks to this high-quality digital material, it was then possible to transcribe the interviews with great accuracy and precision (Bichi, 2002). Consequently, the resulting texts were largely coherent with the corresponding oral interviews.

### **3. Educational Leadership at the Time of COVID-19: The Voice of the Principals**

In October 2020 textual analysis (that is the fifth phase) started. On the basis of the selected methodological approach, it was organised as follows:

- entering in the text: this step aimed at identifying those elements considered as significant with reference to the research questions. No preset scheme was adopted.

- sense-making: the most significant parts of the narrations were analysed in order to understand their meanings and to find correlations among them.
- persistent immersion: it enabled the researchers to highlight those schemes and structures making up the narrations.
- confirming: the elements emerging from the narrations were tested;
- presenting the account: in this last step the final report of the analysis was put into writing.

For the purpose of identifying the core elements of the narrations and in order to guarantee an as accurate as possible interpretation of them (fidelity criterion), more than one expert of the research team was involved in each step.

For the sake of brevity, in this paper we will present an in-depth analysis on the narrative contents with reference to the core category *Leadership and flexibility implementation*<sup>3</sup> (Marone *et al.*, 2020). During the suspension of the school activities in presence, this dimension of the educational leadership played a central role in managing the relationships with teachers, students, families, and stakeholders. The principles on which it relied were dialogue, collegiality, and coherence and through them it was easier for ideas and for the strategic plan to take shape. Moreover, every participant made their contribution with a spirit of cooperation.

Since the principals were trained according to the principles of this educational, widespread, and democratic leadership, they were able to improve the cohesion within the school community so that everyone cooperated for the achievement of a common objective as it happens in close-knit teams.

Without a doubt, this experience contributed to both my personal and professional growth; having to reorganise school relations, to keep alive the relationships with the students, to find mutually agreed solutions to the problems we had to deal with, helped me learn new values and meanings related to school management. I understood the importance of my role not only as guarantor for unanimous decision-making and intervention, but especially for students' outcomes and formative success. (DS-F-SSSG<sup>4</sup>)

educational relationships need an organised environment, fixed rules, which can even be questioned, but, anyway, it is indispensable for them to have order and harmony. [...] working with this idea in my mind

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<sup>3</sup> Five core categories could be identified through textual analysis of the interviews: 1) Self-awareness, context analysis and coping strategies; 2) Recognition and analysis of personal and system resources; 3) Re-planning and orientation to new objectives for an uncertain future; 4) Leadership and flexibility implementation; 5) Keeping relationships alive.

<sup>4</sup> Labels legend: DS-School principal; F-Female; M-Male; IC-Comprehensive Institute; SSSG-Upper Secondary School; CPIA-Provincial Institute for Adults' Education.

helped me manage distance learning as well. Everyone's contribution to organisation, dialogue, keeping the communication channels open, guaranteeing several reference points. I understood that it is a fundamental aspect in school management. In some respects, it is a privileged job since in the school community everything must work according to the principles of a micro utopia, it is a world where relationships must be honest, open, and clear. (DS-F-IC)

I wanted to create an 'educating school community' with a democratic and shared leadership starting from a cooperation with departments, teachers' meetings and all the teaching staff [...] we gathered all together. That made us feel like a team that was not afraid of exploring new organisational methods [...]. (DS-F-SSSG)

shared leadership does work, if we involve the others in our own objectives and we share with them the reasons that caused specific decisions, it is positive. [This experience] strengthened my conviction that shared leadership is effective, I am convinced [of that]!' (DS-F-SSSG)

From the beginning, principals understood that this rapid change could be managed only through flexibility, transformation, and innovation (Antonucci, 2020) which would enable the pre-existing (but not replicable) scheme to be reshaped from a critical-reflective perspective. By doing so, they aimed at outlining a work plan that could satisfy the new educational needs of pupils and students, investing in the training of all the teaching staff which took up the challenge and gave continuity, coherence, and validity to their professional roles.

The key word, the core concept was flexibility, not dispersion, but flexibility, that is the possibility to add new elements and verify them. Verifying them on-the-spot and discussing them was fundamental. (DS-F-IC)

the school staff, both teachers and ATA employees, responded amazingly [...] because all of them took up the challenge. What was and always will be essential is our ability to face the change and use it as a means to improve. The actual challenge consists in the transformation of this deep change into an opportunity to improve. (DS-F-IC)

we gathered online with teachers and created an operational group in order to find solutions. Actually, what I said to the teachers was [...]: 'Let's try and find another way, obviously we must not lose contact with students, but let's try and find another way'. The first objective was trying not to do the same things we did in presence since they could not be applied to distance learning neither from an operative point of view, nor from the point of view of the objectives and goals we wanted to achieve. (DS-M-IC)

Some principals regarded leadership as a pedagogical tool useful for taking care of teachers, students and families through empathy, active listening, understanding of their feelings, and constructive dialogue. Interpreting the school difficulties arisen during the pandemic through the principle of care (Boffo, 2016; Cambi, 2010; Mortari, 2019) required an insight into the deepest thoughts, feelings and fears resulting from the worry of the unknown in order to encourage the others to regain confidence in their capacities relying on empowerment and agency.

I told myself [...] I must take care of the teachers as [...] in such a problematic and worrying situation they could get lost in the COVID-19 maze. First of all, I decided to gather with [...] the various groups, coordinators, teachers [...] I took care of their expertise [...] they had to know I was there, and I would support them at any time [...] but they had to be independent [...] be free to work and teach. (DS-F-SSSG)

I focused not only on the professional responsibilities connected to my position, but especially on taking care of people, students, and staff so that they all could achieve the 'goal' safely. In short, I felt as if I were a team coach that besides training the technical and athletic skills of their team, must take care of the positive atmosphere within it. (DS-F-SSSG)

The new organisational and managerial conditions caused by the lockdown underlined those issues that the principals have been submitting to the policy makers for a long time, that is the many responsibilities with which they are loaded and the need for a middle management (Paletta, 2020) that would cooperate with principals in order to improve quality and equity within the school community.

The lack of the so-called middle management [...] produces a gap between the principal and the rest of the school staff [...] in school life. In managing responsibilities, we cannot neither discuss, nor receive support from other professional figures, that is the big problem! We are alone when making decisions and this system will not resist much longer since working alone will not get us anywhere. (DS-8-F-SSSG)

According to me, one of the biggest problems to be dealt with [...] is the one concerning middle management, I mean we ask for the definition of stable carrier paths for teachers that will become the main supporters of school principals. [...] I am not worried about having more students, more classes than I have now as long as in each school there are stable professional figures dealing with problems and freeing us from day-to-day burdens. (DS-16-M-SSSG)

Looking not only at the present situation, but also at the future, a school principal concludes his interview by saying:

The role of the school principal, today more than ever, is a complex role. We are asked to intervene on many fronts: planning, security, privacy,

accounting, [...], relations with local authorities, trade unions, associations, families [...].

The experience of recent months raises, even more, the need of:

- adequate training to consolidate and/or acquire new skills useful for managing complex situations and changes effectively;
- new professional figures to be ensured, if not to individual schools at least to school networks, I am thinking of the school doctor, the psychologist;
- new curricular planning and evaluation models;
- a real simplification of administrative requirements to make an otherwise 'plastered' system more flexible. (DS-M-CPIA)

## Conclusion

In the last two years of school, which were marked not only by considerable uncertainty (Bauman, 1999) and vulnerability (Ranci, 2008), but also by incredible resilience (Vaccarelli, 2016; Zizioli, 2021), school principals played a fundamental role in the management of educational and organisational school systems proving a strong sense of responsibility and professionalism. According to the principals' narrations, what was crucial was the recruitment of an educational leadership (Barzanò, 2008; Dello Preite, 2018; Domenici, Moretti, 2011; Mulè, 2015) having a proactive attitude and aiming at research, formulation and exchange of ideas, cooperation, and share decision-making. Decisions (that sometimes were even troublesome) had to be made taking into account all dimensional levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979): from micro- and meso-levels, concerning individuals and the socio-cultural context in which schools are included, to the eso- and macro-ones relating to the peripheral and central system of schools.

Several examples reveal a resilient attitude which, according to Franca Pinto Minerva (2004, 24), «is identified by cognitive dynamism that permits, especially to people in difficult situations, to start a strategic plan aiming at self-regulating deconstruction and reconstruction of their own (cognitive, emotional, relational, and social) competences».

Reflecting on the dynamics and activities with which they had to deal in recent months, principals are sure that after this long 'critical period' their professional expertise will be strengthened, particularly if the educational community takes advantage of what they learnt and experienced with sense of responsibility and awareness.

Undoubtedly, this is a valuable opportunity to implement managerial roles in schools. Nowadays more than ever, managerial figures need an adequate training in order to reinforce and/or acquire competences that can help them dealing with complex situations and changes effectively.

As Edgar Morin states in the recent work he wrote during the COVID-19 pandemic, «The unexpected future is now taking shape. We hope it

will lead to political regeneration, planet protection, and society humanisation: it is time to change» (2020, 32).

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