

99 ERC SES 04 H, Educational Leadership

Paper Session: 2025-09-08

Time: 14:15-15:45

Room: Tempus | Faculty of Philosophy | Mezzanine [2.FI - 3.FL]

Chair: Joe O'Hara

Contribution

This paper explores the topic of school innovation in Italy, with the objective of identifying the key factors that contribute to the successful implementation of innovative practices in education. It is part of my doctoral project, which investigates how various aspects of educational leadership can effectively support the adoption of innovation processes within the Italian context, specifically during the first cycle of education (Eurydice, 2025). Considering the limited support from external governance systems (Bevilacqua, Acquaro, Girelli, 2024), the research also examines whether belonging to a pedagogical network can enhance principals' leadership. The data presented in this proposal is based on a case study conducted at a comprehensive institute in northern Italy, where, over a 10-year period, the headteacher has led a largely bottom-up transformation contributing to improving student well-being and engagement.

Education is widely regarded as a cornerstone of societal progress and must continuously evolve to meet the challenges posed by an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world. Technological advancements, shifting societal needs, and ecological concerns present significant obstacles to the education system, including low student engagement and unequal access to quality education (UNESCO, 2011). In this context, educational innovation has emerged as a crucial response, with the potential to enhance learning experiences, foster more inclusive environments, and bridge existing gaps.

Despite the evident need for innovation, uncertainty remains regarding the implementation of concrete change (Timperley et al., 2014). The 4th edition of the Oslo Manual (OECD/Eurostat, 2018) asserts that innovation is a multifaceted concept, encompassing both the process of developing an innovation and the resulting output. Educational organizations contribute to product innovation when they introduce meaningful changes, such as new curricula, textbooks, or resources. Conversely, they contribute to process innovation by implementing substantial changes to their organizational processes for delivering educational products or services.

However, realizing innovative approaches requires a transformation of school culture, not merely the introduction or adjustment of isolated practices. For genuine change, this transformation must be systemic, scalable, and supported by educators, administrators, researchers, and policymakers (Serdyukov, 2017). School innovation should, therefore, be seen as a multi-level phenomenon: at the pedagogical level, through new teaching practices; at the

school level, through sustainable changes in cultural and organizational practices; and at the education system level, by systematically consolidating these changes (European Commission, 2018). The most significant challenges are related to coordinating this multi-level social process, involving hundreds of individuals. Ultimately, the success of change depends entirely on the actions of individuals and their willingness to take part (Fullan, 2018).

Given this, numerous barriers can hinder educational innovation. The OECD (2023) identifies several key obstacles, including insufficient human and financial resources, bureaucratic constraints, lack of management support, and staff resistance. Leadership plays a crucial role in identifying strategies to overcome these challenges and involve all school stakeholders in the innovation process, but its influence is shaped by government policies and institutional frameworks in each country. In Italy, for example, challenges arise from limited school autonomy, which restricts the ability to select teaching staff and constrains the role of school principals (Mincu, 2024). Additionally, the lack of targeted professional development for both school leaders and teachers (Gurr, 2024), difficulties with teacher retention, and the practice of appointing principals to manage multiple institutions simultaneously further complicate the situation. At the policy level, short-term thinking and the absence of clear action plans, common in other European countries (European Commission, 2018), have led to a series of ineffective national reforms.

By examining a case study where leadership played a pivotal role in driving transformation, the research presented here offers valuable insights into how principals can lead innovation despite these challenges.

Method

The central research questions guiding this study seek to identify the factors that enable educational leadership to effectively implement innovative processes that enhance teaching and learning in Italian comprehensive schools. Additionally, the study explores how belonging to the Scuola Senza Zaino (Orsi, 2006) network helps principals facilitate these processes. To address these research questions, this study integrates Bronfenbrenner's ecological human systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1995) with complexity theory (Morrison, 2002), creating a conceptual framework that visualizes the impact of leadership across multiple layers—micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono. This framework enables a deeper understanding of how both internal and external factors, acting as facilitators or barriers, influence the innovation process, while also considering the unique features of the Italian school system. Additionally, the study explores the complex and adaptive nature of school organizations (McKelvey, 2004), with components at one level acting as the building blocks for components at another. Indeed, schools function as dynamic entities in uncertain environments, constantly evolving through interactions among their stakeholders. This research adopts the most recent ISSPP protocol (Day & Gurr, 2024), employing a mixed-methods, multi-perspective approach with a strong qualitative focus. The case study was conducted at the Daniele Spada comprehensive institute, located in a suburban town in the Lombardy region of northern Italy. The institute includes a kindergarten, three primary schools, and a lower secondary school, spread across

three municipalities, serving a total of 730 students and 102 teaching staff. The school was selected according to the ISSPP protocol's criteria, primarily due to the significant innovative improvements driven by the principal, which have notably enhanced the school experience for all students. A key strength of the ISSPP protocol is its emphasis on the direct involvement of the school's key stakeholders. Empirical data were collected over five days and included: five individual interviews with the principal, one interview with eight staff members, two focus groups with students, one focus group with parents, individual interviews with the president and another member of the school board, an online survey for the principal, and an online survey completed by 68 teaching staff. Additionally, 17 hours of research observation were conducted, encompassing school tours, leadership team meetings, and shadowing the principal's work. In compliance with the university's ethical guidelines, all participants received a privacy form outlining the project, and their participation was entirely voluntary. Interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded in accordance with the ISSPP methodological framework.

Expected Outcomes

A key aspect of the transformation at this institute is the redesign of the curriculum and learning spaces in the lower secondary school, alongside a significant increase in the use of technology. These outcomes are particularly noteworthy, given that this school level is often considered one of the weakest links in the Italian education system (Lentini, 2024). The principal has developed a unique leadership approach, which he refers to as the "pedagogy of the butterfly and the turtle." He believes that successful innovation requires the vision of a butterfly—capable of seeing the bigger picture—combined with the steady pace of a turtle, ensuring that the school's needs and its community are considered throughout the process. Through this approach, he has effectively guided the staff through profound pedagogical and organizational changes. While the Senza Zaino network officially includes only preprimary and primary schools, the support he received from this movement has been indispensable, strengthening his leadership across the entire institute, especially during critical times such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Before his appointment, the school faced significant challenges due to ineffective principalship. His prior five years as a teacher within the same school gave him deep insights into its issues, earning the trust of both colleagues and the municipality. This strong foundation enabled him to overcome major obstacles, including the lack of support from regional and territorial educational offices, as well as local social and health services. By promoting distributed leadership and reducing bureaucratic obstacles, he fostered a culture of collaboration within subject departments, leading to the creation of self-produced teaching materials. The dedicated teaching staff, deeply committed to each student's growth, played a crucial role in driving the school's transformation. This case study highlights how educational innovation can thrive, even in the face of challenges within the Italian educational system.

References

Bevilacqua, A., Acquaro, D., & Girelli, C. (2024). Leadership Amidst a Context of Disadvantage, Autonomy and National Reform in Italy. In *How Successful Schools Are More than Effective:*

Principals Who Build and Sustain Teacher and Student Wellbeing and Achievement (pp. 73-96). Springer International Publishing.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1995). Developmental ecology through space and time: A future perspective. In P. Moen, G. H. Elder Jr., & K. Lüscher (Eds.), *Examining lives in context: Perspectives on the ecology of human development* (pp. 619–647). American Psychological Association

Day, C., & Gurr, D. (Eds.). (2024). *Researching Successful School Leadership: Working with Complexity*. In *How Successful Schools Are More than Effective: Principals Who Build and Sustain Teacher and Student Wellbeing and Achievement* (pp.1-19). Springer International Publishing.

European Commission. Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture. & PPMI. (2018). *Study on supporting school innovation across Europe: Final report*. Publications Office. Eurydice. (2025). Overview: Key features of the education system in Italy. <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/it/national-education-systems/italy/panoramica>

Fullan, M. (2018). Research into educational innovation. In *The management of educational institutions* (pp. 245-261). Routledge.

Gurr, D. (2023). A think-piece on leadership and education. UNESCO. Paper commissioned for the 2024/5 Global Education Monitoring Report, Leadership and education. International Commission on the Futures of Education. (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*.

UNESCO. McKelvey, B. (2004). Toward a complexity science of entrepreneurship. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 19(3), 313-341.

Morrison, K. (2012). *School leadership and complexity theory*. Routledge, 5-30

Lentini, S. (2024) *Un'esperienza tra curricolo per nuclei fondanti e autoproduzione dei materiali alternativi di libri di testo nella secondaria*, Rivista Senza Zaino 2. Erickson, Trento, 2024

Mincu M.E. (2024). School and middle leadership tasks, skills and standards in low school autonomy systems: What is the impact of system governance and school community? (2024). GEM Report UNESCO. Paper commissioned for the 2024/5 Global Education Monitoring Report, Leadership in education.

Morrison, K. (2012). *School leadership and complexity theory*. Routledge, 5-30

OECD. (2023). *Measuring Innovation in Education 2023: Tools and Methods for Data-Driven Action and Improvement* (S. Vincent-Lancrin, Ed.). OECD.

Orsi, M., (2006). *A scuola Senza Zaino*. Trento: Erickson (first edition). Serdyukov, P. (2017). Innovation in education: what works, what doesn't, and what to do about it?. *Journal of research in innovative teaching & learning*, 10(1), 4-33.

Timperley, H., Kaser, L., & Halbert, J. (2014). A framework for transforming learning in schools: Innovation and the spiral of inquiry, Centre for Strategic Education, p.3