



New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences



Volume 6, Issue 7 (2019) 012-018

Selected Paper of 10th World Conference on Learning, Teaching and Educational Leadership (WCLTA-2019) 01-03 November 2019, Novotel Conference Center Athens – Greece

The moral dilemmas of Italian principals

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Suggested Citation:

Mortari L. & Tomba B. (2019). The moral dilemmas of Italian principals. *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences*. [Online]. 6(7), pp 012–018. Available from: www.prosoc.eu

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Jesus Garcia Laborda, Alcala University

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the moral dilemmas faced by a principal. A well-functioning school depends on many factors. Among these factors, the competence of the principal plays an important role. Often this competence, defined as leadership, is understood in a technical way because it is often interpreted as the acquisition of legal and management skills. In contrast, a good school requires strong humanistic competence and, in particular, ethical knowledge. The narratives of the principals reveal the sense of the inadequacy of their role: the administrators declared that they do not have a suitable and complete preparation to manage the complexity of the system. Their primary concerns relate to the evaluation and disciplinary aspects of the students, as well as the sense of responsibility aimed at the training of the entire person, not only his personal education.

Keywords: Ethical leadership, Italian principals, moral dilemmas.

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1. Introduction

The profession of the principal is certainly one of the least understood because the problems he faces are systemic and are almost never perceived in their complexity. Managing a school requires effort, commitment and great responsibility for many aspects of school life: administrative, legal, financial, disciplinary, contractual, educational and pedagogical. The challenge is plural expertise related to the product (the outcome of the teaching), the process (strategies and learning processes) and the organisational design (Dutto, 2016). In recent decades, the profile of the Italian principal has been interwoven with the manager. Everyone recognises that the specificity of the school needs a different leadership that focuses on people: the student and his future remain the purpose (Cerini, 2010). The profound cultural and moral crisis that society is experiencing has sometimes very critical or even devastating repercussions on schools; there are emergencies to be faced and priorities to be managed in turbulent times (Shapiro & Jay Gross, 2008). The role of the principal becomes more and more delicate and difficult: who must contend with a very complex organisation, know how to manage the formal rules, but, above all, the multiplicity of behaviours of all those connected to the school.

A functioning school community needs a leader who can make good use of his influence and respond responsibly to problems that arise with effective and constructive decisions. The community needs teachers who are aware of their role and have a multifaceted capacity with students, who learn, mature and need trained administrative staff who can share the school's opportunities. The principal is called upon to maintain this influence, to involve the professional and social community, as well as to promote the desires of teachers, collaborators and families. He must be aware that his task is to make the work effectively, with the aim of forming the whole person, in addition to achieving the educational outcomes of the students. He must do this by taking care of the organisational aspects, valuing the subjects involved, creating conditions that enrich learning environments and teaching practices. But, a principal must do so, above all, by creating a school culture composed of shared values that guide every choice (Sergiovanni, 1992; 2005). The central theme is to build true leadership for the growth of the school community, which the leader can do by building trusting relationships with all stakeholders through authoritative and inspired leadership.

2. Statement of the problem

A school is a complex organisation, so everything works, it is necessary that the elements comprising the school are well coordinated with one another so that there is consistency between all the actions implemented, the goals clearly articulated and explicit, and the available resources used effectively: these are the starting points for designing a management system (Pace, 2019). The glue of this organisation is the value system that governs the decision making of the people involved. The task of the ethical leader, who is able to show the way with his example, is to stimulate, solicit development, provoke thinking and evoke feelings. A good leader knows how to build processes of sharing rather than imposing his own will. A leader is one who knows how to motivate people, and, especially, who knows how to dispense the culture of responsibility (Starratt, 2012).

There have been many regulations to define the professional profile of the school head, but never has the legislator managed to define in a clear, recognisable and shared role the functions and responsibilities of this category of staff that is placed at the top of educational facilities. Until the 1990s, the profile function was codified in Article 396 of Legislative Decree No. 298 of 1994. As a result of the school autonomy system, he acquired the managerial qualification by the decree of the President of the Republic No. 59 of 1998. The person who directs a professional educational community, such as an autonomous educational institution, works on projects and programmes. For these reasons, more attention should be paid to the regulation of all aspects and stages of his professional career. This regulation begins with recruitment, which should require a strong knowledge of the working environment. Professional knowledge and skills, as well as personal life skills, such as

initiative, balance, predisposition to communication and relationship, must be ascertained. The tasks and responsibilities of the principal, and the other governing bodies of the same institution, must be defined and shared (Mariani, 2017).

3. Moral dilemmas

The dilemma is the choice between two different possibilities; it is not simply a problem that requires an answer because, while the problem presents an open solution, the dilemma has only two options of choice, often antithetical. In order to be able to choose, it is necessary to be able to think critically. The choice is made on the basis of a principle of good, which is why the dilemma is always ethical. The purpose of ethics, as Ricour (2007) reminds us, is the search for good.

In every work sector, there are many choices to be made, but, in a school environment, decisions are more carefully because they concern the growth of the person; thus, the dilemma is experienced in a much deeper way. Uncertain situations constitute a crisis in the mind of the person, who finds himself alone in front of his conscience, sometimes in conflict with it. The protagonist is at a crossroads, in front of him he has two options that he can take, and he will be able to make a choice only if he is able to reflect critically, otherwise he will delay the decision without being able to solve the dilemma. The person must also be brave, i.e., able to take risks. The relationship with one's own conscience, which indicates the difference between what is right and what is wrong, leads to knowing how to evaluate individual cases and then to act according to what is called ethical exercise (Rossy, 2011).

In the USA, many studies confirm that tackling dilemmas is one of the characteristic experiences of school leadership: Cuban (1996) argues that this characteristic is considered 'genetic' to the role, while Cranston (2006) considers dilemmas the heart of the professional experience of school leaders. Both principals and teachers feel dilemmas are tensions, especially those in middle leadership. One of the main characteristics of the educational community, in fact, is, precisely, that of sharing the same values and the same intentions (Sergiovanni, 1994). An Australian study, conducted by Duignan and Collins (2001), revealed that the tensions of leaders concern the good of the community regarding individual rights, the spirit of service against economic rationalism, the status quo against development, the long term against the short term, the principle of individual care against the principle of role and values against practice.

In Scotland, Murphy (2002; 2012) repeatedly addresses the subject of school leaders' dilemmas and identified three essential perspectives:

1. Psychological: Dilemmas are conceptually interpreted as an emotional experience.
2. Political: Dilemmas often arise from the social and political complexity of school development in a rapidly changing society.
3. Ethics: Dilemmas inevitably involve values.

Through the presentation of cases called 'vignettes,' various situations typical of the work experience of a principal are addressed, and, in so doing, he learns to direct his own thinking in a critical way in order to arrive at a correct decision-making process in all its aspects. Murphy (2012) also offers a 'Dilemma Toolkit' that uses the COPE process to guide decision making and actions. This process requires four steps:

1. C—Clarify is the deep analysis of the problem in order to have a complete design.
2. O—Options are the various choices with their risks or advantages.
3. P—Plan and act are the decision and the action, what must be done, by whom, when, how, and where.
4. E—Evaluate is the study of the development of the situation or the evaluation of the process.

Imagining, analysing and facing possible moral dilemmas in a school environment help to exercise the mind to resort to critical thinking and reflection on one's own values in order to be ready to face the decisions that will be encountered in the daily problems.

Shapiro and Stepkovich (2001) analysed the ethical dilemmas through Multiple Paradigms, considering ethics through three points of view, already analysed and expanded by Starratt (1994; 2004; 2012), and the ethics of justice, criticism and care, as well as an added a fourth model called ethics of the profession. The authors believe that, in a complex age, or a turbulent age (Shapiro & Jay Gross, 2008), complexity and diversity can only be understood by applying the multiple paradigm approach, the only one able to bring full understanding to the changes in society and that allows a resolution of the dilemmas arising.

4. Methods

The purpose of this research is to investigate and determine the moral dilemmas of Italian leaders and their precise meaning. This survey aims to give voice to the practices, that is, those who work in the field and who exercise their role in a specific geographical and historical context; in this way, it is possible to have an image of the current work context of the leaders and to reflect on possible aspects of improvement for that context (Mortari, 2015). The qualitative method used is the narrative inquiry, and the technique used is the conversational interview. The researchers invited the principals to narrate their experience beginning with the stimulus question, 'What are the moral dilemmas that you face in the exercise of your profession?' From here, the narration begins in the form of a conversation, wherein the researcher places himself in an attitude of respect and listens, in search of the meaning of their experiences. An essential task for educational research is to find ways to reveal this knowledge that otherwise would remain unexpressed.

This epistemic project aims to materialise the educational culture of school leaders by giving voice to their thoughts and actions and to investigate practical knowledge yet research academically on a solid and fertile ground of real research questions.

Because reality is complex, there is no pre-formulated heuristic device to capture this complexity. Thus, the phenomenological method has epistemic value because it is based on the principle of fidelity to things, which means dedicating the work of thought to seeking as precise a knowledge as possible of the way in which those things are revealed; it is the principle of fidelity to the real. Every phenomenon has its own essence, and it is the essential task of the heuristic act to grasp it; the researcher must look upon things as they are, without mediation, to go and grasp the being of things themselves so as not to find data confirming his own theories. Phenomenology requires us to go beyond the tendency to be in the anticipated world. In order for the work of analysis to be able to grasp the essential, it is necessary for the researcher to adopt a position of listening, of profound understanding: this is the ethical relationship with the text (Mortari, 2010).

The stages of the research are as follows: preparing the map and planning the interviews, beginning with a stimulus question; carrying out the interviews and transcribing them in entirety; reading the interviews once; rereading the transcriptions repeatedly at designated times; identifying the significant text units and constructing the synthetic descriptions and the relative labels; analysing the transversal evidence and producing a coding system; and then writing the report. At the same time, a notebook on the life of the mind was kept, i.e., a notation of the research path of the researcher's diary (Mortari & Saiani, 2013; Sita, 2012).

A total of 32 school leaders from all levels of Italian state schools throughout the country were involved. The theme of the interview was focused: the moral dilemmas of the leaders. A preliminary study of the literature on the subject was carried out. The interviews were free stories in which the principals, starting from the stimulus question, began their narration. In conducting the interviews, the style looking for stimuli that could open the conversation and stimulate reflection. Next followed the reading phase of the interviews, wherein the researchers reread each interview repeatedly at

various times and, before moving on to the next interview, took time to reflect. Therefore, for each interview, significant units of description were identified, that is, all those segments of the text that contributed to the knowledge of the phenomenon. A brief description was then given to each segment. The researchers then assigned the first conceptualisation to each unit, that is, a label that states the essential quality, followed by general category identification. Finally, the researchers carried out a transversal analysis of the texts by comparing their meanings.

The creation of a coding system, the document that includes all the conceptualisations elaborating on the interview texts, required a continuous return to the textual analysis to verify the accuracy of the interpretation. This is an intensely heuristic effort because there can be distinct readings of the same phenomenon. Keeping a personal research diary, where all the personal reflections on the development of the same items are recorded, helps the researcher to become continually aware of his inner path and aides him/her in executing the process effectively. The summary of the results highlighted the complex profile of the principal.

5. Results

This research gives voice to the wisdom of practice, bringing out the moral dilemmas of school leaders and allowing them to give a name and a characterisation to that which reflects the current school context. This study made it possible for researchers to define where ethical dilemmas are found and a precise point of view from school leaders; they are defined in their nature as constant, continuous and numerous concerns that, in the face of problems, are not answered by a single solution, but by answers that diverge from one another. The terms most used to characterise the dilemmas are worries, doubts, efforts and tensions; terminology that recalls a state of crisis that is understood as a moment of reflection undertaken before a decision is made in light of thoroughly evaluated consequences.

The primary outcome of this research was the discovery of the deep sense of responsibility that all school leaders interviewed have of their role: the most recurrent dilemma is, in fact, the uncertainty of having responded or not to their institutional tasks. It is identified in the achievement of the good that, as previously mentioned, is precisely the essence of ethics. The researchers identified the means to achieve this aim in the action of caring for one's own school and prioritising care for people but, also, caring for all the organisational aspects and external relations of the institution. The role of the principal is seen as an extremely complex task that involves many areas, such as legal, administrative and financial. These tasks are so burdensome and specific that the leaders feel that they do not have a sufficient preparation. Above all, the leaders believe that the excessive burden of this type of responsibility takes them away from their main task as educational leaders: to accompany the educational community in the growth of students, especially from the human point of view.

In the description of their tasks, they also use to refer to the necessary possession of a sensitivity, a priori, in recognising some problematic situations, as well as a deep capacity to be able to listen to others with an attitude to relate. They believe that they have not had any type of training regarding these competencies, which are fundamental to the success of their work and, consequently, for the achievement of the educational aims of the entire institution. They underline how the experience has been fundamental to the development of these competences, but only after having made mistakes whose consequences reflected back upon the school and themselves. They hope that the training of future principals can also include specific emphasis on relational and empathic type skills, which consider and utilise case studies that present actual situations undergone by colleagues with whom they can compare. They also confess to the loneliness in the role of the principal. The focus upon sharing principles and the idea of school as a service to the community identified as preventive factors to the emergence of complex problems. The decision-making process is directly linked to the dilemmas that are considered to be continuous and manifold throughout the course of the work, which concerns a variety of situations.

Principals present, as a dilemma, some situations in which the school is the place where social problems arise: a serious concern is the duty to report abusive situations in the lives of students. This problem is difficult, in that, one must identify real situations of hardship and abuse, maintain awareness, determine when the process began, which may lead to the removal of the child from the home, a situation that is difficult to reverse even if the accusations are unsubstantiated. The leaders dislike the difficulties of being able to cooperate with other institutional figures, such as courts and social workers, who are not always willing to listen to the school and consider its experience. They believe that the educational alliance with the family in the first place and with other institutions is necessary to face and solve the most difficult problems.

The evaluation of the students is also expressed as a dilemma: the principal have great concern in the final evaluation phase that leads to the possible rejection of a student and subsequent repetition of a school year. They underline the negative value, from the educational point of view, of this choice, as the school should be able to undertake personalised training courses for each individual student; the negative evaluation, in this case, is a negative evaluation of the school's inability to respond in an individualised manner to the personal needs of each student. In this regard, the principal points out a lack of docimological culture on the part of some teachers.

A further dilemma concerns the disciplinary aspect of the students; in the same way in which the teachers respond to a pupil's failure in education by deciding to reject them. In light of behavioural problems of medium or serious consequence, they display an attitude of punishment, desiring removal from school or suspension, which does not have effective consequences for the student. Principals express bitterness at the fact that it is extremely difficult for them to convey certain principles, such as the educational consequences of certain teacher decisions, to the larger educational community of teachers.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The analysis of the narratives contributed by the principal offers some ideas for improving the present situation of Italian schools. First of all, the training of school leaders should concern technical aspects as well as the relational skills needed to build an educational community. The same competition procedure should also provide for an evaluation of these life skills, or an aptitude test, that investigates the skills of ethical discrimination of the principal in the face of some critical situations that may arise.

The experience of working with an executive in service with the future principal is extremely useful, as it anticipates their future experience. A compulsory period of middle management may prevent the future executive from making mistakes due to inexperience. Relationship skills are the basis for the creation of a school community that includes all the operators allied together with a common goal in view. The sharing of objectives, experiences and values can lead to choices in the form of school networks that are united by a common purpose. This unity could be synergistic, wherein the comparison between people raises the quality of the school because 'the quality of the school is never higher than that of those who work in it' (Profumo, 2018).

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