

26 SES 13 C, Leadership and Justice: How Successful School Principals Advance Quality amidst Accelerating Social Changes and Inequalities in Society An International Study

Symposium

Time: 2025-09-11 - 17:15-18:45

Room: 11 | Faculty of Philology | Gr. FI

Chair: Rose Ylimaki

Discussant: David Godfrey

Contribution

Educational leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the development not only of schools but also of their broader communities. The 2024/5 GEM Report by UNESCO underscores the potential of school leaders to drive societal change. This paper explores the relationship between educational leadership and disadvantaged communities in three Italian comprehensive institutes situated in different regions. Despite the diversities, their leaders faced similar challenges due to the management of a school community characterised by heterogeneous socio-economic backgrounds, a significant proportion of families of foreign origin and students with SEND. Building on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1995) this paper aims to explore the characteristics of the Italian educational system, with a particular focus on its limited school autonomy (Mincu & Romiti, 2022) and the challenges posed by national governance (Authors, 2024). By examining the multi-layered framework of micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono systems, the paper explores how school leaders have navigated these challenges to promote social justice. Complexity theory (Morrison, 2002) further enriched the analysis to better understand the dynamic interactions within and between these layers, conceptualizing school organizations as "complex, adaptive systems" (McKelvey, 2004), whose continuous evolution is shaped by dynamic exchanges among their stakeholders and feedback loops in response to new challenges. The data presented in this paper are drawn from three case studies conducted using the ISSPP protocol. Each of them employed a mixed-methods approach with a strong qualitative focus and a multi-perspective framework. Data included: five semi-structured interviews with the principal; an individual interview with eight teaching staff; one or two focus groups with parents; two focus groups with students; two individual interviews with the president and another member of the School Board; and an online staff survey. Despite the different approaches adopted, all principals shared a commitment to inclusion and social justice, pursuing equal opportunities for all students. Their leadership successfully fostered environments in which even vulnerable students—often those most at risk in traditional schooling—could envision and pursue more promising futures. Key actions to achieve this goal encompassed integrating activities that nurture multiple forms of intelligence, keeping schools open in the afternoons for study support and recreational activities, and establishing student representative bodies. These initiatives not only strengthened pupils' agency and engagement but also contributed to a significant

improvement in the schools' reputations. Significance of the study lies in understanding social justice in relation to multiple layers of contextual influence.

References

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