

Educational Communities: the role of school leaders in cooperative management

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the role of the school principal within the Italian educational community, highlighting the importance of management practices in promoting an effective and stimulating organizational environment. In a context characterized by rapid economic, social, and technological changes, schools face complex challenges that require a reorganization of roles and responsibilities. Through an integrated and collaborative approach, the school principal can facilitate cooperation among all stakeholders involved, thereby contributing to the well-being of everyone in the community. Reflection on these aspects, supported by organizational theories, provides insights to guide the strategic choices of educational institutions.

Keywords: School principal, educational community, management practices, cooperation, inclusion.

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Introduction

The current educational context is marked by a series of challenges and opportunities that require careful reflection on organizational and management practices. The coherence between the organizational model and management practices is fundamental to ensuring an effective and stimulating organizational environment. In this scenario, it is beneficial to recall the theories of authors such as Chester Barnard (1938), who emphasized the importance of cooperation and communication within organizations, and Henry Mintzberg (2009), who analyzed various organizational models and their implications for management. Barnard (1938), in particular, highlighted how the success of an organization depends on its ability to create a system of cooperation among its members, emphasizing the role of leadership and intrinsic motivation. This is especially relevant in the school context, where valuing the professionalism of all actors involved in the educational process is crucial for promoting a culture of collaboration and continuous learning.

Moreover, the current educational landscape is in constant evolution, with the emergence of new roles and competencies required. Digitalization, inclusion, and personalized learning are just a few of the challenges that schools must confront. Therefore, it is essential that management practices are flexible and adaptable to respond to the needs of a changing educational environment. Authors like Michael Fullan (2016) have underscored the importance of systemic change and transformative leadership in promoting effective innovations within schools. Furthermore, it is vital for educational institutions to develop strategies for monitoring and evaluating management practices to ensure

alignment with educational objectives and community expectations. Only through an integrated and coherent approach can contemporary educational challenges be addressed, promoting a high-quality school system. Reflection on these aspects, supported by the theories of recognized authors in the field of organization, can provide a useful framework for guiding the strategic choices of educational institutions. In the current context, characterized by rapid economic, social, and technological changes, organizations—particularly schools—are facing increasingly complex challenges. The reorganization of roles and responsibilities within these structures has become a necessity to ensure not only operational efficiency but also the well-being of students and staff (Formisano, 2020). The existing Italian legislation plays a crucial role in this process, as it establishes guidelines and fundamental rights that must be respected, promoting a fair and inclusive learning environment (Noden, 2015). It is essential to remember that schools are also educational organizations (communities), representing a social, educational, and relational system that transcends traditional school and academic settings. Here, student learning and academic success are viewed as processes involving the entire community, not just students and teachers within schools. This community-building requires more time and space, as well as speed and simultaneity, capable of providing immediate responses (Colombo, 2011) to all stakeholders. In this context, both teachers and parents share the recipients of their efforts and the objectives of their actions (Formisano, 2019), creating a complex system where information and interactions among members are fundamental for building consensus and achieving common goals (Francescato, 2018).

The Role of the School Principal as Observer and Observed

The role of the principal is complex and multidimensional, facing the challenge of being both an observer and the observed. When a new principal enters a school, a climate of anticipation and uncertainty is created, which can generate tension. However, if managed carefully, this transition period can become an opportunity to build a collaborative environment. Cooperation among the principal, school staff, and families is essential for the success of the educational institution.

Being a good observer is one of the key competencies for a principal. This involves not only monitoring the internal dynamics of the school but also understanding the needs and expectations of all stakeholders: teachers, students, families, and non-teaching staff. The ability to observe is crucial for building trust and promoting a positive work environment. Educational leadership, as emphasized by Sergiovanni (2001), requires continuous reflection and an active commitment to understanding the relational dynamics within the school.

On the other hand, the school principal is constantly "observed." Their actions and decisions are evaluated by colleagues, parents, and students, which necessitates a high degree of self-awareness. A principal who appears anxious or impulsive can exacerbate uncertainties and tensions within the school community. Conversely, a reflective and calm approach fosters a climate of stability and openness to dialogue. Emotional awareness, as highlighted by Goleman (1995), is critical in the school context, as it enables the principal to manage their own emotions and recognize those of others, thereby contributing to a positive work environment.

The ability to manage one's own emotions and those of others not only supports a favorable work climate but also facilitates communication and collaboration among members of the educational community. Through self-awareness and self-observation, the principal can identify their own needs and values, cultivating mental, organizational, managerial, and cultural energies.

To effectively fulfill their role, the principal can follow a structured observation process. This begins with an informative and cognitive observation, followed by participatory observation, planning the phases and methods with the members of the educational community, and integrating these observations into the project. Finally, a feedback phase is planned, where observations are shared and discussed in plenary. In this context, observation does not provide objective data but constructs meaningful interpretations of the observed reality. It allows for reading and transforming the school organization through the sharing of interpretations. Each school reality is a microculture with a unique identity, and the observer plays an active role in creating the observer-context system in a process of mutual adaptation.

Moreover, it is essential to identify what is taken for granted, pinpointing the "commonplaces" that form the collective networks of meaning. These elements, having become normal, take on the character of undisputed norms.

Another important aspect is the comparison between the formal and the informal. It is useful to compare personal observations with statements of intent and the informal interactions that occur in the

daily life of the school. This comparison can reveal significant discrepancies and areas for improvement.

Finally, it is crucial not to limit oneself to what appears normal but to embrace elements of surprise and novelty, which can enrich the understanding of the school reality. In summary, the role of the school principal as both observer and observed is complex and requires continuous reflection and adaptation. The ability to observe, listen, and understand relational dynamics is fundamental to promoting a positive and collaborative educational environment.

In conclusion, the contemporary educational landscape presents a myriad of challenges and opportunities that necessitate a profound understanding of organizational dynamics and management practices within schools. The theories of prominent scholars such as Chester Barnard and Henry Mintzberg provide valuable insights into the importance of cooperation, communication, and adaptability in fostering effective educational environments. As schools navigate the complexities of digitalization, inclusion, and personalized learning, it becomes increasingly vital for educational leaders to embrace flexible management practices that align with the evolving needs of students and the broader community.

The role of the school principal emerges as particularly significant in this context, as they must adeptly balance the dual responsibilities of being an observer and the observed. This duality requires a high level of emotional intelligence and self-awareness, enabling principals to cultivate trust and collaboration among all stakeholders. By actively engaging in a structured observation process, principals can gain deeper insights into the relational dynamics within their schools, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and shared understanding.

Moreover, the recognition of schools as educational organizations that extend beyond traditional academic boundaries underscores the importance of community involvement in the learning process. The collaborative efforts of teachers, parents, and students are essential in creating a supportive environment that promotes academic success and holistic development. As educational institutions strive to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world, the integration of formal and informal observations, along with a willingness to embrace novelty and surprise, can lead to transformative practices that enhance the overall educational experience.

Ultimately, the coherence between organizational models and management practices, coupled with a commitment to reflective leadership, will be crucial in addressing the complexities of the modern educational landscape. By fostering a culture of collaboration, continuous learning, and adaptability, schools can not only navigate current challenges but also position themselves as dynamic and inclusive learning communities that empower all members to thrive. In this way, the educational sector can fulfill its essential role in shaping future generations, equipping them with the skills and competencies necessary to succeed in an increasingly interconnected and complex world.

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