



# Educational Challenges and the Exercise of Leadership in the Italian School Context: Addressing Emergencies and Enhancing Middle Management. Findings from Empirical Research

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**Abstract.** This paper examines how distributed educational leadership is enacted within the Italian school context in response to two major contemporary challenges: managing emergency situations in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous learning environments, and enhancing middle management as a lever for collaborative and resilient school governance. The study is grounded in the framework of the Second-Level Master's programme in "Leadership and Management in Education" at Roma Tre University and adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive research design. Empirical data were collected between 2020 and 2024 through 152 case studies conducted in Italian schools of different levels and geographical areas, complemented by semi-structured interviews with school principals. From this wider corpus, 20 cases were selected for in-depth analysis: 10 focused on emergency situations, particularly those related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and 10 focused on the development of middle management roles. The findings show that Italian schools responded to emergencies not merely through compliance with formal directives, but by activating reflective, participatory, and adaptive decision-making processes involving school leaders, teachers, students, families, local authorities, and third-sector organizations. The study also highlights the strategic role of middle management in supporting organizational continuity, professional collaboration, shared responsibility, and workplace well-being. However, persistent challenges remain, including the limited formal recognition of middle management functions, work overload, and the need for clearer role definition and targeted training. Overall, the research suggests that distributed educational leadership, when supported by school autonomy, reflexive practices, and strong relational networks, can contribute to the development of integrated and resilient educational ecosystems capable of addressing uncertainty and sustaining organizational learning.

**Keywords:** Distributed Educational Leadership; School Leadership; Middle Management; School Autonomy; Emergency Management; VUCA Contexts; Resilient Educational Ecosystems; Italian Schools; Qualitative Research; Case Study Method.

## 1 Introduction

In Italy, as well as in the international context, a key issue facing all education systems concerns how complex organizations such as schools can effectively address the numerous and ongoing challenges, they are called upon to attend to.

It can be hypothesized that the Italian school system, similarly to other international education systems characterized by a well-established process of school autonomy, is capable of addressing present and future educational challenges with resilience and the achievement of positive outcomes. Conversely, it is well known that non-autonomous school systems, still marked by various forms of hierarchical leadership and bureaucratic administration, often demonstrate limited sensitivity to context, reduced ability to adapt to emerging needs, and insufficient capability to respond effectively to new challenges.

Processes of school autonomy stand out in particular for the adoption of participatory and context-sensitive planning practices in the design of educational provision, as well as by the ability to organize teaching in a flexible manner. More broadly, school contexts granted administrative, pedagogical, research, and financial autonomy can rely on solid regulatory frameworks and a variety of shared cultural and professional incentives to promote multi-actor decision-making processes. From this perspective, decisions are open to the direct contribution of multiple organizational actors (teachers, students, non-teaching staff, school principals, and specialist figures, where present) as well as social and territorial stakeholders (families, local institutions, and cultural, sports, religious, voluntary, and third-sector organizations). Moreover, these actors are consistently encouraged to express their viewpoints and to collaborate responsibly in the collective construction of collaborative ecosystems.

However, recent challenges suggest the need to take action and activate decision-making processes that enable educational ecosystems, whose main protagonists are schools and their local stakeholders, to function as transformative resources. In other words, in order to address contemporary challenges, it is no longer sufficient to build educational ecosystems that are merely collaborative; rather, it is necessary to foster conditions in which such ecosystems progressively support all involved actors in co-evolving systemically, with the aim of directing existing relational networks toward the development of increasingly integrated and resilient educational ecosystems (Moretti, 2022).

In particular, this contribution examines two challenges that schools in Italy and globally are called to address, demonstrating their ability to respond to adversity in both proactive and resilient ways. The first challenge concerns emergency situations and volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) contexts (Earley, 2020). The second challenge relates to the need to enhance middle management or to identify system roles and functions in order to develop a cooperative culture and a systemic, relational, and distributed form of leadership.

Within this framework, the strategic role played by school principals, middle management, and system-level figures is reaffirmed, particularly in relation to how they exercise and promote distributed educational leadership within the school system. This is essential both for effectively addressing the identified challenges and, more broadly,

for contributing to the development of a cooperative culture and the strengthening of enabling and resilient educational ecosystems (Earley, 2020; Moretti, 2022).

This study refers to models and approaches to educational leadership that do not limit themselves to the activities carried out directly by the school principal, but instead consider the full range of leadership practices involving, directly and indirectly, all educational actors engaged in decision-making processes and planned actions. In the literature, this perspective is associated with the concept of “distributed educational leadership” (Spillane, 2006; Bubb & Earley, 2010; Domenici & Moretti, 2011; Earley, Greany, Moretti & Barzanò, 2024). From this standpoint, leadership is not regarded as a trait or quality attributable to a single formally designated individual, but rather as a collaborative and cooperative practice, sometimes informal, anchored in a specific educational or organizational context, whose actions can shape or generate new processes of learning, both individual and collective.

Distributed educational leadership, as understood here, does not rely on abstract guidelines to be applied mechanically, nor does it depend on optimal, pre-packaged solutions considered universally valid regardless of context and the type of challenge. Instead, it is conceived as a democratic and empowering practice aimed at fostering staff involvement in decision-making processes, improving organizational climate, ensuring well-being, and enhancing the school’s potential for innovation. It is a situational form of leadership (Moretti, 2022), which takes into account the actual sustainability of actions to be undertaken and maintains awareness of the limitations that may affect individual agency, particularly in new and emergency situations. It is an aspect highlighted in the literature through the notion of “imperfect leadership” (Munby & Bretherton, 2022; Munby, 2024).

In responding to educational challenges, including the two examined in this study, schools may adopt two different approaches. The first involves an assertive and normative stance, establishing predefined standards and behaviors deemed effective and requiring all organizational and socio-territorial actors to comply with them, treating the challenge as an external threat to be overcome. The second approach consists of fostering a diverse and plural ecosystem that respects different perspectives and supports actors in negotiating, engaging in dialogue, and ultimately converging toward flexible and adaptive responses, with an awareness of the limits of action. In this way, the challenge is addressed as an opportunity for learning and for strengthening the resilience of the local educational ecosystem.

In this sense, “educational leadership” can be defined as a social and organizational process through which school principals, coordinators, teachers, and other organizational, social, and territorial actors intentionally and positively influence individuals and groups both within and beyond the school, in order to promote individual and collective learning, support students’ educational success, and identify and mobilize all available territorial resources.

Addressing a challenge (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) should not be limited to surviving a potential trauma; rather, it should serve as a stimulus for reflection and for rethinking key dimensions of educational practice, as well as for redesigning educational infrastructures so that they support the development of integrated and resilient

ecosystems, promoting diverse forms of cooperation as well as mentoring and tutoring (Petrache, Mara & Bocoş, 2023; Fiorucci & Moretti, 2024).

The Second-Level Master's programme in "Leadership and Management in Education" (LME), active since 2003 at the Department of Education Sciences of Roma Tre University, currently represents in Italy a public infrastructure available to graduates and professionals already working in educational contexts, aimed at consolidating and developing skills, knowledge, and competencies in the exercise of distributed educational leadership. Within the context of the LME Master's programme, drawing on the potential of the case study method and adopting a multi-actor and multi-level perspective (Stufflebeam, 1972; Scheerens, 2018; Moretti, 2022; Moretti, Morini & Giovane, 2024), this study seeks to understand whether and how schools in Italy address emergencies and enhance middle management and system-level roles.

## 2 Research Methodology

The aim of this study was to examine whether, and in what ways, distributed educational leadership is enacted within the Italian national school context, addressing in particular two key challenges: the first concerns the ability to respond to emergency situations within learning environments defined as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) (Earley, 2020); the second relates to the potential for leveraging middle management to foster the development of a collaborative culture, as well as systemic, relational, and distributed forms of leadership. To this end, an observational study was designed, adopting a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive approach. The research was conducted within the framework of the Second-level Master's programme in "Leadership and Management in Education" (LME) of the Department of Education of Roma Tre University (Italy).

The LME Master's program specifically aims to promote theoretical and operational competencies for access to school leadership positions, as well as to develop targeted skills and tools for the training of professionals working within educational institutions in collaborative roles with school principals or performing specific functions. The LME Master's program includes coursework, seminars, and internship activities carried out in Italian public schools, in collaboration with the Professional Association "Proteo Fare Sapere". The Master's program's long-standing continuity (over twenty editions) has made it possible to collect strategic data over time, contributing to the development of a research stream focused on exploring various aspects of educational leadership in school settings (Domenici, Moretti e Ciraci, 2012; Moretti, 2014; Barzanò e Moretti, 2015; Moretti, Morini e Giovane, 2024; Moretti et al., 2025; Moretti et al., 2026).

The study was conducted over the 2020-2024 period and involved a total of 152 schools of different levels across the national territory. Schools expressed their willingness to host internship activities associated with the LME Master's programme for one participant, typically a teacher employed in a school of a different level. Specifically, for the purposes of the research, schools were asked to ensure the availability of the school principal to present a case study addressing a specific problem to be resolved and to participate in a semi-structured interview.

2.1 Case studies

The choice to use the case study as a tool for observing and analyzing the enactment of educational leadership in school contexts is intended to underscore the importance of contextual features in understanding both the decision-making processes activated and the degree of participation among the actors involved (Stake, 1995, 2000; Yin, 2003; Silverman, 2008). Furthermore, the case study proves to be an effective instrument for examining how theory applies to concrete and complex situations, thereby confirming its robustness (Trinchero, 2004).

The methodological framework of the case study, adopted within the internship activities of the LME Master’s programme, is structured in five main phases: the definition of research objectives; the selection of the case and the negotiation of access procedures; fieldwork; the organization and analysis of data through the examination of materials and the triangulation of sources; and the drafting of the final report. As part of the preparatory training for conducting the case study, particular emphasis is placed on monitoring several critical aspects, including the researcher’s mode of access to the context, the selection of the most appropriate tools for collecting data, both qualitative and quantitative, and the explicit articulation of the criteria used for data analysis (Coggi e Ricchiardi, 2010; Montalbetti e Lisimberti, 2015).

2.2 Interviews

The interviews were administered to school principals directly by the participants in the LME Master’s programme, based on a shared protocol. Interviews were conducted by recording responses and subsequently transcribing them in full. To ensure that the interviews were conducted consistently with the topics under investigation, an interview guide comprised of six questions was provided, addressing key issues related to the exercise of leadership within the school context. Table 1 presents the questions included in the semi-structured interview.

**Sample Heading (Third Level).** Only two levels of headings should be numbered. Lower level headings remain unnumbered; they are formatted as run-in headings.

*Sample Heading (Forth Level).* The contribution should contain no more than four levels of headings. The following Table 1 gives a summary of all heading levels.

Table 1. Semi-structured interview guide.

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| D1 Distributed leadership characterizes an educational context primarily through three aspects: the reflexivity of the actors involved, a positive socio-relational climate, and shared decision-making. In your view, which strategies may be effective in enhancing each of these three aspects within the school context? |
| D2 In your opinion, is distributed leadership encouraged in your school? In particular, which strategies are used to actively engage and coordinate teachers?                                                                                                                                                                |

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D3 In your opinion, what factors limit teachers' opportunities to assume responsibility and develop distributed leadership in your school? Why?

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D4 In a school oriented toward distributed leadership, students are also encouraged to increase their autonomy and responsibility. Please, describe an experience in which, in your view, students in your school had the opportunity to develop and exercise distributed leadership.

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D5 Does the educational provision of your school explicitly refer to the importance of encouraging distributed leadership among teachers and students? What strengths and critical issues emerge in this regard?

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D6 The exercise of distributed educational leadership can contribute to enhancing the quality of both internal and external processes at school. In what ways, in your school, is the evaluation of educational and teaching processes oriented toward improving the overall quality of the education and training system?

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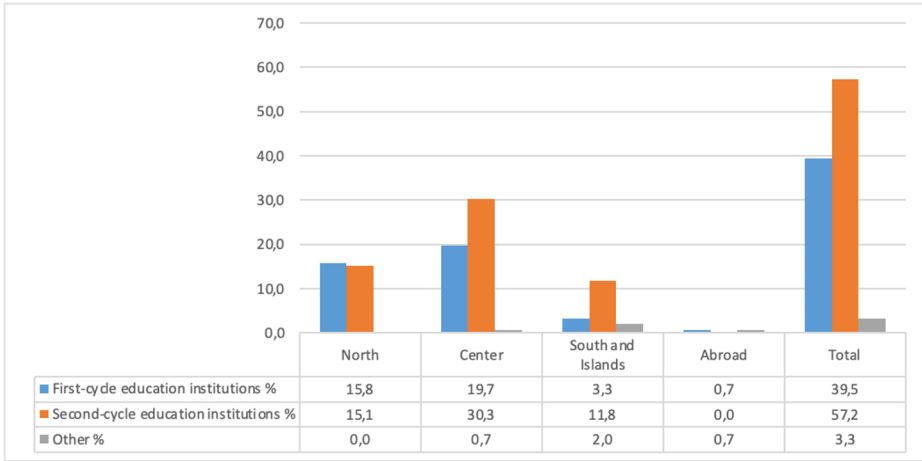
For data analysis, a database was initially created in which background information on the context of each interview and the responses, organized by question, were recorded. The construction of this database was essential for the subsequent data processing and textual analysis. In the first phase, the entire corpus of data was read to achieve familiarity with the responses. Subsequently, re-reading was guided by the research questions in order to identify information consistent with the study's focus. Relevant segments of the interviews were then highlighted. At the same time, notes and observations on the data were produced. To represent the most significant features, semantic units were identified. Interpretative criteria were derived from the scientific literature, and the conceptual framework informed the thematic analysis (Braun e Clark, 2006; Gale et al., 2013).

### 2.3 Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis consists of 152 schools of different levels, located across various regions of Italy. To illustrate their geographical distribution, the territory was conventionally divided into the following macro-areas: North, Center, South and Islands. Two Italian schools located abroad were also included in the sample.

The schools were classified into two main categories: first-cycle education institutions, comprising pre-primary education (ages 3-6), primary education (ages 6-11), and lower secondary education (ages 11-14); and second-cycle education institutions, corresponding to upper secondary education (ages 14-19), which in the Italian context includes *licei* (academic high schools), technical institutes, and vocational institutes.

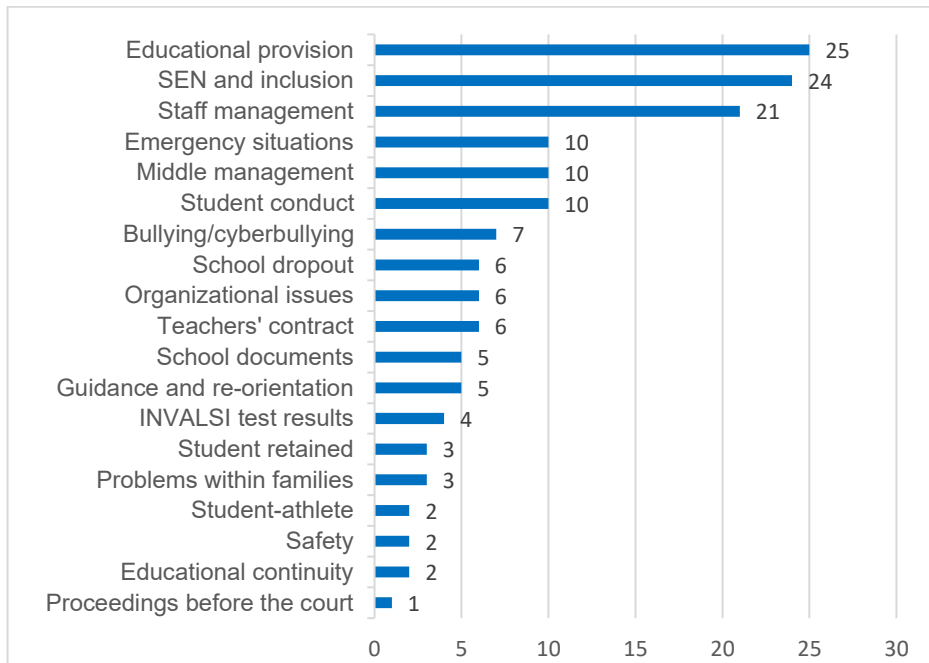
As shown in Figure 1, the majority of the schools involved in this study belong to the second cycle of education (58.4%) and are predominantly located in Central Italy (60%). The category "other" refers to all-through schools (encompassing both first and second cycles of education) or adult education and training centers.



**Fig. 1.** Representation of the unit of analysis: geographical distribution and distribution by cycle of education.

The unit of analysis was investigated through the examination of the case studies collected. The aim was to address the research objective, namely to examine whether and how distributed educational leadership is enacted within the Italian national school context in order to (1) manage uncertainty and emergency situations in VUCA learning environments and (2) leverage middle management to foster the development of a collaborative culture and systemic, relational, and distributed leadership.

A database was subsequently developed. The case studies were coded by indicating the reference year, the code and gender of the participant in the LME Master's programme who conducted the study, the geographical area and school level in which the case was observed, and the main problematic situation analyzed. Keywords were then identified to effectively represent the primary critical issues addressed in each case. These keywords facilitated the identification of some thematic macro-areas. The following figure (Fig. 2) illustrates the distribution of the case studies across these macro-areas.



**Fig. 2.** Thematic macro-areas of the issues analyzed in the case studies (2020–2024).

This categorization made it possible to identify 10 schools in which case studies related to emergency situations were presented (2 of which belong to the first cycle of education and 8 to the second cycle, all located in Central or Southern Italy), and 10 schools that addressed the issue of building and developing middle management (2 of which belong to the first cycle of education and 8 to the second cycle, with a mixed geographical distribution).

The main findings of the study are presented below, based on the analysis of the 20 selected case studies and the evidence emerging from the corresponding 20 interviews with school principals. In reporting significant excerpts from the interviews, references to cases related to emergency situations are indicated by “ES,” while those concerning middle management are indicated by “MM.”

### 3 Main Findings Of The Study

The selected cases were subjected to a qualitative analysis conducted from a diachronic, multi-actor, and multi-level perspective (Stufflebeam, 1972; Scheerens, 2018, Moretti, 2022). This analysis considered the knowledge and definition of the context, the characteristics of the issues addressed, the organizational structure of the school settings examined, the modes of negotiation and allocation of decision-making responsibilities, the processes of coordination and professional dialogue among the actors involved, as



well as relationships with relevant social and territorial stakeholders. The analysis examined the twenty distinct yet interrelated cases (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) with the aim of identifying significant similarities and differences, consequently achieving a broader and more in-depth understanding of the phenomena observed.

### **3.1 Addressing emergency situations in VUCA contexts: case studies**

The first challenge explored in this study concerns the ability to address emergency situations through the exercise of educational leadership (Moretti et al., 2025) within learning environments defined as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) (Earley, 2020). The ten cases identified as consistent with the research focus were directly related to the health emergency and the issues connected to the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim was to examine whether, and in what ways, school institutions adopted specific approaches and organizational solutions to mitigate risk factors and promote widespread well-being within their respective contexts.

The findings indicate that Italian schools addressed the health emergency by adopting a critical stance oriented toward learning and innovation. School principals and members of leadership teams worked to effectively adapt national directives and guidelines to the specificities of their local contexts, with the goal of ensuring safe conditions and containing the spread of the virus. At the same time, teachers were engaged in intensive training activities focused on the integrated use of digital technologies and online platforms, as well as on the adoption of new assessment practices suited to remote or hybrid learning environments. Internal coordination activities were intensified and, concurrently, extended to the territorial dimension, fostering the active involvement of students, families, local authorities, and third-sector organizations.

The study also highlighted that, in response to the health emergency, many schools strengthened existing relationships with universities and school networks or established new ones in order to address the challenges of the crisis more effectively. These relationships can be considered strategic instruments for innovation, support, and organizational learning (Moretti et al., 2025).

Another relevant aspect emerging from the analysis concerns the intensification of decision-making and participatory processes that incorporated informal and voluntary dimensions alongside the predominant flow of highly formalized decision-making processes, based on rigorous and predetermined institutional procedures. The analysis of the cases revealed that the management of the health emergency was significantly supported by informal and voluntary initiatives promoted by organizational, social, and territorial actors, particularly at the meso- and micro-system levels.

### **3.2 Addressing emergency situations in VUCA contexts: interviews**

In light of the evidence emerging from the case studies, the interviews provide insight into which strategies are considered effective for enhancing reflexivity, fostering a positive socio-relational climate, and promoting shared decision-making in VUCA contexts and emergency situations.

A first thematic cluster concerns reflexivity as the outcome of intentional training and discussion-oriented practices capable of fostering shared interpretations of the context and sustaining professional dialogue. In particular, one school principal describes a systematic investment in cultural and educational initiatives aimed at “bringing the word back to the center” and promoting structured opportunities for discussion. From this perspective, reflexivity is configured as a collective practice of questioning the present and seeking new incentives with the aim of transforming reality, rather than as an individual exercise:

I initiated a very extensive program of events and training [...] stemming from the need to bring the “word” back to the center of classrooms, in order to question an increasingly complex and problematic present, to reflect together and seek new incentives. [...] Participating in moments of information, exchange, and discussion with experts, scholars, and intellectuals from diverse backgrounds is an effective and stimulating way to share and weave dialogue [...] on present and future issues, in order to “transform” reality (ES3).

Furthermore, reflexivity is understood as the ability to design and redesign, balancing educational mission, organizational constraints, and the needs of the school community. In this sense, reflexivity translates into processes of (re)design that realign curricular and assessment frameworks while simultaneously supporting participation and coherence with institutional objectives, as clearly illustrated in the following excerpt:

I intensified the process of internal reorganization [...]. Teachers are encouraged to proceed collegially (within departments) in developing curricula, defining competencies, elaborating assessment criteria and evaluation tools, and increasing forms of documentation, dissemination, and enhancement of best practices [...] in order to make departmental work structured and functional to the achievement of strategic objectives (ES3).

A second thematic cluster concerns the positive socio-relational climate as a condition for professional cooperation and the effective functioning of decision-making processes. Interview responses reveal a tension between relational proximity and the maintenance of professional boundaries: the quality of the climate is associated with cooperation regulated by respect and clarity of roles. This is exemplified in a passage where the positive effect on the climate is explicitly described as occurring “in forms and modes of absolute respect for reciprocal roles, so as not to risk degenerating into conviviality or individualism” (ES1). From this perspective, a positive climate does not coincide with a generic sense of “harmony,” but rather with a relational configuration that supports collaboration and reduces the risk of unproductive friction. Distributed leadership is thus associated with the ability of the school principals to “build a climate of collaboration and respect [...] for the operational autonomy [of their staff], coordinating them without creating unnecessary conflict” (ES1). In this sense, attention to climate and professional boundaries can be interpreted as part of a broader effort to build a collaborative culture and promote organizational and workplace well-being, particularly in situations of uncertainty and emergency.

Alongside this understanding of climate as regulated cooperation, some responses also highlight factors that may undermine its stability when organizational constraints and workloads increase: “the scarcity of resources, the overload of teachers’ duties [...]”

are among the aspects that negatively affect it” (ES4). In these terms, the quality of the socio-relational climate appears closely linked to the sustainability of working conditions, an aspect that becomes particularly critical in VUCA contexts and emergency situations.

A third thematic cluster concerns shared decision-making, and in particular how it is made compatible with urgency and ultimate responsibility. In several accounts, the most effective strategy is described as activating a “virtuous cycle whereby, through continuous dialogue [...], a context is created in which everyone feels a sense of belonging to the institution” (ES2). In this direction, recurring references are made to spaces and practices of dialogue that ensure continuity in decision-making and a shared sense of purpose, even when conditions change rapidly: “all actors involved must engage in dialogue to reach a point of synthesis. It is necessary to involve people so that everyone feels included, thereby enabling effective solutions” (ES5).

At the same time, the importance of a unified direction in decision-making emerges, one that integrates listening with final responsibility: “the person ultimately responsible for the final decision is the school principal, who embodies and exercises a unified action. The synthesis preceding decisions nonetheless arises from listening to all components” (ES5). From this perspective, distributed leadership does not eliminate hierarchical responsibility but rather recalibrates it; the final decision is legitimized through processes of consultation, feedback, and shared responsibility. This highlights the complexity of leadership functions and the need for systemic, relational, and distributed leadership, in which the school principal operates as a regulator of the organizational system in highly complex contexts (Domenici e Moretti, 2011; Moretti, 2022). In emergency situations, therefore, participation is not framed as a source of delay, but rather as a means to reduce errors, increase commitment, and improve the effectiveness of solutions.

In summary, in emergency situations, distributed educational leadership emerges as a situated organizational capability that generates meaning and direction through shared reflexivity, sustains a climate regulated by respect and collaboration, and constructs participatory decision-making processes that nonetheless culminate in responsible synthesis. These findings also point to the need to strengthen governance tools capable of facilitating timely and flexible intervention, with a view to building resilient educational ecosystems (Moretti et al., 2025).

### **3.3 Enhancing middle management: case studies**

The second challenge explored concerns the potential to leverage middle management in order to foster the development of a collaborative culture and a systemic, relational, and distributed form of leadership (Moretti et al., 2026). The ten case studies selected investigate the decision-making dynamics and negotiation practices characterizing the processes through which middle management roles are identified within school contexts. The analysis examined the ways in which school principals enact educational leadership in defining and developing middle management functions, identifying and valuing the individuals who occupy these roles, and fostering a positive collaborative culture that supports organizational and workplace well-being within their schools.

The analysis of the case studies highlights a widespread critical issue in Italian schools, namely the difficulty of identifying system-level actors who are both willing and sufficiently competent to assume middle management roles. Teachers, who are already heavily engaged in daily teaching practices, school organization, and in addressing students' disciplinary, personal, and emotional needs, often decline additional middle management responsibilities. When they do accept such roles, their work is frequently insufficiently recognized and compensated. Moreover, the few teachers who demonstrate willingness and commitment are often overloaded with responsibilities, with consequent risk of fatigue, personal distress, and even burnout.

The analysis of the ten case studies also reveals the inherently complex nature of the school principal's role within school contexts. The school principal emerges as a central regulatory figure within the organizational system, required to interpret regulatory frameworks, mediate between divergent interests, ensure operational continuity, promote workplace well-being, and balance administrative efficiency with educational aims. The findings indicate that the effectiveness of the school principal's action is closely linked to the ability to exercise systemic, relational, and distributed leadership.

Across the ten case studies analyzed, conflict emerges as a recurring dimension within school organizations, taking different forms (interpersonal, collegial, union-related, institutional) and requiring advanced competencies in mediation, listening, and negotiation. The analysis shows that leadership practices grounded in dialogue, transparency, and shared responsibility facilitate the transformation of conflict into opportunities for organizational learning and the strengthening of the professional community. Conversely, rigid or exclusively normative approaches tend to generate resistance, disengagement, and oppositional behaviors.

Another key finding concerns the strategic role of middle management and a school principal's staff, which function as essential mechanisms for organizational stability and continuity in decision-making processes. In selecting collaborators and teachers for middle management roles, school principals place strong emphasis not only on technical-professional competencies but also on relational and communicative skills, fostering relationships based on trust and a shared vision of the educational mission. In several cases, school principals deliberately avoid concentrating decision-making power and responsibility in a few individuals, instead favoring broader and more articulated organizational structures.

### **3.4 Enhancing middle management: interviews**

Consistent with the findings from the case studies, the interviews highlight how middle management is interpreted as a mechanism of mediation and organizational coordination, capable of promoting reflexivity, a collaborative climate, and shared decision-making processes.

A first thematic cluster concerns reflexivity understood as professional growth, the development of awareness, and the progressive autonomy of middle management figures. In this perspective, reflexivity does not coincide with individual introspection but with processes of organizational learning and competence development within a shared framework. One of the interviewed school principals emphasizes that reflexivity "takes

shape in practices of distributed delegation,” which must evolve “toward the sharing of scenarios and the definition of objectives and pathways that go beyond and integrate the very notion of delegation” (MM3). Reflexivity is thus described as a transition from delegation to informed participation, enabled by “widespread information and the involvement of collaborators in decision-making processes” (MM3).

In other excerpts, reflexivity is associated with intentional processes of “support that enable individuals to become autonomous in different tasks” (MM4). One school principal provides a concrete example of growth through guided practice: the “first calls for proposals prepared to gain funding were developed together with those responsible, correcting them word by word; now these same individuals are autonomous” (MM4). Reflexivity is therefore described as a practice of empowerment and gradual transfer of competencies. In this perspective, investment in training, process documentation, and the construction of organizational memory are identified as key levers for ensuring the sustainability of middle management functions (Moretti et al., 2026).

A second thematic cluster concerns the positive socio-relational climate as the outcome of communicative intentionality, trust, and recognition. Emphasis is placed on empathy as an organizational competence: “the relational climate is extremely important and means understanding others and entering into empathy... with teachers, administrative staff, parents, with everyone” (MM6). Interview responses converge on a model of leadership described as “collaborative, empathetic, and shared” (MM8), highlighting that a positive climate requires transparent communication, active listening, and participation:

Distributed leadership cannot disregard continuous and particular attention to communication, which must enable all actors involved to feel part of the organization and of the school project. Interpersonal communication, both formal and informal, as well as institutional communication must always be grounded in transparency and impartiality (MM5).

A positive climate is also linked to the perception of active involvement, namely “ensuring that all individuals feel engaged” (MM6), and to the feeling of being part of a shared project, which means “enabling all actors involved to feel part of the organization and of the school project” (MM5). Within this framework, middle management acts as a connective structure, translating a shared vision into everyday practices of coordination, support, and communication, thereby preventing disengagement and fragmentation.

A third thematic cluster concerns shared decision-making and how it is put into practice through collegial bodies and leadership teams, while avoiding two opposing risks: centralization and delegation understood as mere “offloading” of tasks. The interview responses depict middle management as a domain in which distributed leadership takes concrete form through relational and communicative practices that enable shared responsibility. In several accounts, indeed, distributed educational leadership is not described as a “sum of delegations,” but rather as a process requiring listening, dialogue, and mediation: “distributed leadership takes shape and develops at the level of leadership teams, deputy principals, committees, and the teachers’ council, through best practices: listening, dialogue, openness to others, shared decision-making, reception and analysis of criticism, and exchange of ideas” (MM1).

Nevertheless, shared decision-making requires a coordinating function capable of synthesis: “it is essential [...] to welcome their ideas and requests and then be able to synthesize [...] we come together as a group to reach a synthesis” (MM6). The school principal’s staff thus becomes a mechanism to “share and then synthesize” (MM6), ensuring that the plurality of competencies represents “all the areas in which the school must operate” (MM6). Moreover, the management of dissent is recognized as an integral component of this process: “it is necessary to also accept opposing views, mediate, and reach agreement” (MM1). Conflict therefore emerges as a recurring feature of school organization and can be transformed into organizational learning when managed through dialogical and shared-responsibility practices. Overall, middle management emerges as an intermediary structure: it detects signals and needs, distributes tasks according to competencies, and recomposes them into shared and sustainable decisions (Moretti et al., 2026).

From this perspective, distributed leadership is presented as a “radical paradigm shift [in which] the idea of collaborative, empathetic, and shared leadership emerges” (MM8). Middle management thus becomes the locus where this paradigm becomes visible, through shared responsibility, participation, transparent communication, and the construction of a “common vision of the school” (MM8).

## 4 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

The overall findings of this empirical research indicate that the Italian education system, which is characterized by a well-established process of school autonomy, has demonstrated sensitivity to contextual factors, a strong capability to adapt to emerging needs, and a solid ability to respond effectively to new challenges. In particular, in addressing contemporary challenges, schools have undertaken actions and activated decision-making processes aimed at developing cooperative educational ecosystems, also recognizing them as transformative resources capable of supporting all involved actors in progressively co-evolving. This evidence is marked by the convergence of relationships oriented toward the development of integrated and resilient educational ecosystems (Moretti, 2022).

Furthermore, as a result of their commitment to developing diverse, reflective, and plural ecosystems, schools have given significant space to the recognition of different perspectives. This has occurred through both formal and informal processes, including forms of participation involving volunteers and third-sector organizations, which have undoubtedly enhanced reflexivity through dialogue, flexibility, adaptive capability, and awareness of the limits inherent in any undertaken action. In this sense, educational leadership appears to be more effectively understood in its multiple dimensions when examined by adopting a perspective that frames decision-making processes and individual and collective agency using concepts found in the literature such as “distributed educational leadership” (Spillane, 2006; Earley, Greany, Moretti & Barzanò, 2024) and “imperfect leadership” (Munby & Bretherton, 2022; Munby, 2024).

In responding to the two educational challenges under investigation, concerning the exercise of leadership in addressing emergencies and in enhancing middle management, the schools examined did not limit themselves to immediate crisis management, the promotion of generic forms of collaboration, or the mere delegation of tasks. Rather, they demonstrated the ability to adopt, at a systemic level, a critical stance open to learning and change, both of which are essential dimensions for the generation of resilient ecosystems. Positive outcomes in addressing the challenges posed by the health emergency and issues related to coordination and middle management clearly emerge from the analysis of case studies and interviews. These include insights into decision-making dynamics, the development of reflective practices, the involvement of various stakeholders called upon to collaboratively address encountered challenges, and the identification and mobilization of resources within local communities.

The transition from an individual to a cooperative model of middle management appears to respond both to the need to ensure operational continuity, even in the case of sudden absences, and to the intention of valuing the competencies of multiple individuals while distributing the workload more sustainably. From this perspective, it is strategic to invest in the training of middle management figures, in the systematic documentation of processes, and in the construction of a robust organizational memory. The research findings further suggest strengthening the process of school autonomy. Indeed, the development of resilient educational ecosystems entails the consolidation of governance practices and the identification of tools capable of ensuring rapid and flexible intervention. In this direction, the findings point to greater attention to necessary tutoring and mentoring (Petrache, Mara & Bocoş, 2023; Fiorucci & Moretti, 2024), as well as the need for a clearer definition of the roles and functions of middle management, which is an area that remains underdeveloped in the Italian context (Domenici & Moretti, 2011).

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