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*Competenze organizzative,
manageriali e gestionali dei
dirigenti scolastici in Italia:
sfide e prospettive alla luce del
nuovo sistema di valutazione*

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Giacomo Zavatta*

**Conceptualising school leadership: an exploratory case study
of principals' and teachers' perspectives in Italy and Ireland****La leadership scolastica: un caso di studio basato
sull'esperienza di dirigenti e insegnanti italiani e irlandesi**

Parole chiave: leadership scolastica, secondo ciclo di istruzione, Irlanda, Italia, caso di studio.

Negli ultimi decenni, la ricerca ha riconosciuto l'importanza ruolo dei dirigenti e del middle management scolastico nel promuovere lo sviluppo e il successo formativo della scuola. Tuttavia, nonostante il recente interesse, permane all'interno dello stato dell'arte una lacuna: l'assenza di un quadro concettuale per interpretare la leadership scolastica.

A questo proposito, il presente articolo esamina la leadership scolastica nel secondo ciclo di istruzione in Italia e in Irlanda, proponendo uno studio di caso comparativo, inquadrato nell'ambito del paradigma idiografico. La ricerca propone un'analisi tematica basata su interviste qualitative a dirigenti e insegnanti sull'interpretazione delle categorie di leadership istruzionale, distribuita e trasformativa. Lo scopo finale è offrire una comparazione tra differenti concezioni di leadership pedagogica efficace nel contesto educativo italiano e irlandese.

Keywords: school leadership, post-primary school, Italy, Ireland, case study.

Over the past two decades, research has increasingly recognised the pivotal role of school leadership in fostering educational improvement and school effectiveness. Numerous studies highlight the positive influence of principals on teachers' practices and students' outcomes. However, a key gap remains: the absence of a unified framework for interpreting school leadership, partly due to divergent policy and cultural perspectives.

This article addresses this gap by examining school leadership in Italian and Irish post-primary education. Using an exploratory comparative case study, framed within the idiographic paradigm and informed by the process-oriented comparative case study approach, the study draws on qualitative interviews with principals and teachers. Focusing on instructional, distributed, and transformational leadership, it integrates participants' understanding of how effective leadership is conceptualised and enacted across diverse educational contexts.

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, theoretical and empirical research have recognised the crucial role of the school principal in fostering educational improvement and the effectiveness of school¹. A growing body of studies has documented their positive influence on both teachers' practices and students' outcomes².

In this regard, the principals' effect on education quality³ operates through three primary dimensions: 1) the instructional dimension related to managerial practices to create good educational conditions within the school (e.g., establishing clear educational goals, planning the curriculum and evaluating teachers and teaching); 2) the transformational dimension focused on establishing structures and cultures; and 3) the organisational dimension, often presented as distributed leadership, which coordinates the formal division of labour within a school⁴.

However, the manifestation of these dimensions is far from universal. As highlighted by Pont⁵, the term "school leadership" encompasses a variety of models and styles for interpreting the principal's role, shaped largely by national cultures and legislative frameworks. Within the European Union, two different models of the principal's role can be identified: one centred on administrative and bureaucratic functions, and another oriented towards instructional leadership, where principals actively collaborate with teachers to enhance student learning⁶.

¹ OECD, *TALIS 2013 Results: An International Perspective on Teaching and Learning*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2014; OECD, *TALIS 2018 Results: Teachers and School Leaders as Valued Professionals*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2020; Agasisti, T., Falzetti, P., e Soncin, M. (2020). School principals' managerial behaviours and students' achievement: An empirical analysis of Italian middle schools. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 34(5), 2020, pp. 937-95; Mthembu, P., Bhengu, T., and Chikoko, V. Leading from the middle for improving teaching and learning outcomes: Perspectives from two education districts in South Africa. *Ponte Academic Journal*, 76 (12), 2020, pp. 87-103; Hickey, N., Flaherty, A., & Mannix McNamara, P. Distributed leadership in Irish post-primary schools: mapping the state of the art. *Irish Educational Studies*, 2024, pp. 1-21; UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report 2024/5: Leadership in education – Lead for learning*, Unesco, Paris, 2024.

² Beteille T, Kalogrides D and Loeb S., *Stepping stones: principal career paths and school outcomes*. *Social Science Research* 41(4), 2012, pp. 904-919; Oplatka I., & Arar K, *Context and implications document for: the research on educational leadership and management in the Arab world since the 1990s: a systematic review*. *Review of Education* 5(3), 2017, pp. 308-310; Giunti C., Ranieri M., *Professionalità dirigente e innovazione scolastica*, in *Formazione & Insegnamento*, 3, 2020, pp. 376-390. Harris A., Jones, M. *Nashwa Hashim System leaders and system leadership: exploring the contemporary evidence base*, *School Leadership & Management*, 41:4-5, 2021, pp. 387-408.

³ See Unesco's *Framework of School leadership*, Unesco, 2024, p. 12.

⁴ European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, *Supporting Inclusive School Leadership: Policy Review*. Odense, Denmark, 2018; Gurr D., *A think-piece on leadership and education*, Background paper for *Global Education Monitoring Report 2024/5: Leadership in Education*; Nicolisi, A., *Il modello di direzione scolastica in Italia*, *Educación y Futuro*, 50 (2024), pp. 69-71.

⁵ Pont B., *A literature review of school leadership policy reforms*. *European Journal of Education* (55), 2020, pp. 154-168.

⁶ Pont, 2020; OECD, 2015, 2020.

This heterogeneity underscores a significant research gap: the absence of a unified conceptual framework for understanding school leadership, a situation compounded by divergent policy and cultural perspectives across countries⁷. Furthermore, the evolving nature of school leadership is evident in more recent developments. For instance, Gurr's paper⁸, reflecting on the post-COVID-19 context, identifies the emergence of a more collaborative, adaptive, and relationship-focused leadership style, one that prioritises wellbeing and responsiveness to contemporary challenges.

Drawing on these considerations, this paper examines principals' and teachers' understanding of the concept of school leadership in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, through an exploratory qualitative case study conducted in two European countries: Italy and Ireland. The overarching aim is to contribute to a deeper understanding of these two different secondary leadership models and, in doing so, respond to one of the key questions of the journal call⁹.

1. The context of the research: the Italian and Irish leadership model

Irish national post-primary school policy currently promotes a distributed leadership model¹⁰. In accordance with Section 22 of the Education Act (1998¹¹), and Section 23 of the Education (Amendment) Act 2012¹², the Principal provides leadership to teachers, other staff, students and the wider school community. Under the direction of the Board of Management¹³, the Principal holds overall authority for the day-to-day management of the school and overall responsibility for its internal organisation. This includes recruiting and assigning roles and responsibilities to teaching and non-teaching staff.

In 2018, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) published Circular CL003/2018, *Leadership and Management in Post-Primary Schools*, which outlines the allocation of assistant principal posts of responsibility. These posts created a middle and senior leadership team, consisting of the

⁷ Harris, 2021; Gurr, 2023.

⁸ Gurr, 2023

⁹ Quali modelli di leadership pedagogico-didattica risultano più efficaci nel contesto italiano e internazionale contemporaneo?

¹⁰ Hickey, N., Flaherty, A., & Mannix McNamara, P. Distributed leadership in Irish post-primary schools: mapping the state of the art. *Irish Educational Studies*, 2024, pp. 1-21.

¹¹ Government of Ireland. Education Act 1998
<https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1998/act/51/enacted/en/html> 08/25/2025

¹² Government of Ireland, Education (Amendment) Act 2012
<https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2012/act/14/enacted/en/html> Consulted in 08/25/2025

¹³ For further details see Eurydice. *Key Features of the Education System in Ireland. Secondary and Post-Secondary Non-Tertiary Education* Consulted in 09/15/2025

Deputy Principal, Assistant Principal I (API), and Assistant Principal II (APII) posts¹⁴. Together with the principal, these roles form a leadership team that operates within the *Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools* published in the report *Looking at our School 2022*¹⁵.

In line with the principles of distributed leadership, Deputy Principals cooperate with Principals in fulfilling their role and deputise in their absence. Assistant Principals work in teams, in collaboration with the principal and/or deputy principal, and share responsibility, commensurate with the level of the post (API or APII), for key areas such as curriculum and learning, student support and wellbeing, school improvement, staff recruitment, and leadership and management development¹⁶.

In a different vein, in Italian post-primary schools (*secondo ciclo di istruzione*), the *Dirigente Scolastico* (School Principal) serves as the sole legal and managerial authority of the educational institution¹⁷. Since 1997¹⁸, the role and function of the Italian principal have undergone a significant evolution, shifting from that of a primarily didactic director to the legal representative of the school¹⁹. Today, the principal is responsible not only for teaching and learning but also for financial and instrumental resources, as well as educational service outcomes. This contrasts with the Irish model, where legal and economic responsibility is shared between the Principal and the Board of Management.

As reconstructed by Nicolisi and Le Rose²⁰, and subsequently by Ricciardi²¹, the reform of school autonomy²² introduced a managerial status, unifying the previously distinct roles of the *Preside* and the *Direttore didattico* into the single figure of the *Dirigente Scolastico*. From this perspective, the principal is expected to promote the school as both a cultural and multipurpose centre within the local community.

Legislative Decree 165/2001²³ formalised this transformation by stipulating that principals are accountable for financial and instrumental resources

¹⁴ O'Rourke, M., & O'Brien, S. Implementing distributed leadership in Irish voluntary secondary schools from the principals' perspective. *Irish Educational Studies*, 2024, pp. 1–22.

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/looking-at-our-school-2022/>

¹⁶ Department of Education and Skills. 2018. *Leadership and Management in Post-primary Schools*, 1-30. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills. <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/circulars/leadership-and-management-in-post-primary-schools/> Consulted in 27/08/2025

¹⁷ Le Rose, G., Ricciardi, V. Il Dirigente Scolastico: autonomia e leadership, *Pedagogia più Didattica*, Vol. I (2), 2015, pp. 2421-2946.

¹⁸ Art. 21 of law n. 59/1997 – riforma della Pubblica Amministrazione, in the D.P.R. n. 275/1999 – regolamento sull'Autonomia Scolastica; D.Lgs. n. 59/1998 – Qualifica dirigenziale. <https://www.edscuola.it/archivio/norme/leggi/art21.html> Consulted in 27/08/2025

¹⁹ Zavatta, G. L'identità professionale del docente nella società onlife: democrazia e cittadinanza. *Pensa Multimedia*, Lecce 2024.

²⁰ Nicolisi, 2024.

²¹ Le Rose & Ricciardi, 2015.

²² See note 18

²³ Art. 25 of D.Lgs. n. 165/2001- Dirigenti delle istituzioni scolastiche.

and for the overall outcomes of the service. This introduced a managerial profile that extends far beyond the former supervisory role focused solely on teaching activities. More recently, Law 107/2015²⁴ (*Buona Scuola* reform) further clarified and expanded the principal's responsibilities, identifying, within the flexible staffing pool (*organico dell'autonomia*), up to ten percent of teachers who assist in organizational and educational support activities²⁵. Italian middle management can be divided into system figures, objective and instrumental functions²⁶, though it faces two main weaknesses: the fragmentation of resources and high staff turnover²⁷.

In accordance with the *Buona Scuola* reform, the Principal's responsibilities now include defining and promulgating the school's educational plan (*Piano Triennale dell'Offerta Formativa*), allocating teaching staff within the *organico dell'autonomia*, managing relationships with local businesses and the wider community, implementing strategies to reduce student-teacher ratios, providing cover for absent teachers through the use of the *organico dell'autonomia*, assigning tutoring and mentoring responsibilities for the evaluation of newly hired teachers, and awarding merit-based bonuses to staff.

Taken together, these two national frameworks illustrate two notably different approaches to school leadership: Ireland emphasises a model of distributed authority, embedded in collaborative structures, while Italy consolidates legal, financial, and organisational power within the figure of the *Dirigente Scolastico*.

The comparative case study presented in the following sections addresses a significant gap in the field of Comparative and International Education by examining the Italian-Irish pairing²⁸. It also responds to the absence of qualitative studies investigating the concept of distributed

²⁴ Legge 13 luglio 2015, n. 107 - riforma del sistema nazionale di istruzione e formazione e delega per il riordino delle disposizioni legislative vigenti.

²⁵ Legge 107 del 2015, comma 83.

²⁶ Pirola, L., Middle management and school autonomy in Italy: The case of teachers as «Instrumental Functions», *ECPS Journal*, 2015, p. 93

²⁷ Pirola, 2015.

²⁸ For comparative research see Craig, C. (2016). Structure of teacher education. In J. Loughran and M. L. Hamilton (Eds.) *International handbook of teacher education*, pp 69-135. Springer Publications; Cappa C. (2017). *Sistemi scolastici d'Europa*. Anicia, Roma; Mincu, M. (2020) *Sistemi scolastici nel mondo globale. Educazione comparata e politiche educative*. Mondadori, Roma; Salajan, F., Jules, T., (2023) *Comparative and International Education (Re)Assembled. Examining a Scholarly Field through an Assemblage Theory Lens*. Bloomsbury, 2023; Galvin, C., Gehrman, A., Madalińska-Michalak, J., Kost, J., Ananin, D., Farrell, R., Germer, P., Bárány, T., Fogarty, L., & Salihovic, M. Pushing crisis response towards sustainable transformation? Reflections from a case analysis of crisis-framed policy actions on teacher education in three European settings. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 46(5), 2023, pp. 803–820.

leadership in Ireland in the post-Covid era²⁹, while simultaneously offering insights into the evolving managerial role of Italian principals³⁰. Finally, it reflects on two different ways of interpreting distributed leadership. Consequently, this exploratory case study is guided by one overarching research question (RQ) articulated in two sub-questions (SRQs).

RQ: How do principals and teachers in Ireland and Italy understand and interpret the concept of school leadership in the post-Covid context?

- SRQ1: In what ways do principals' and teachers' leadership influence pedagogical improvement within school?
- SRQ2: How do the Italian and Irish models of distributed leadership respectively contribute to enhancing teacher professionalism and school culture?

2. The design and the framework of the research

This study adopts an explorative qualitative case study design, framed within the idiographic paradigm³¹. The idiographic approach prioritises the in-depth analysis of a limited number of cases, recognising the centrality of subjective experience in shaping social realities, thereby shifting the research focus toward understanding rather than generalisation³².

Drawing on this conceptual framework, the research is based on core elements of the process-oriented comparative vertical case study model as outlined by Bartlett and Vavrus³³. Accordingly, a multi-level comparative strategy is applied along two axes: the meso level, focusing on school leadership, and the micro level, addressing teaching practices. The case examines the perspectives of Irish and Italian principals (meso) and teachers (micro), drawing on interview-derived codes to construct a narrative account. The vertical orientation of the study allows for a process-based interpretation, enabling a comparative reading of responses across the two contexts.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in either Italian or English (according to the interviewee's mother tongue), lasting between 40 to 100 minutes. Consistent with the idiographic paradigm, a non-leading

²⁹ O'Rourke and O'Brien (2024) employ a mixed-methods approach using data collected in 2021, whereas Hickey et al. (2024) rely exclusively on quantitative methods.

³⁰ Nicolisi, 2024.

³¹ Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. *Research Methods in Education*. Routledge, London, 2017.

³² Cohen et al, 2017, p.8.

³³ Bartlett, L., & Vavrus, F. *Rethinking Case Study Research. A Comparative Approach*. Routledge, London 2017.

interview format was used to facilitate the subject's speaking reflection process³⁴.

The empirical research took place between March 2023 and March 2024. Involving a convenience group sample of forty-three interviewees (see Figure 1).

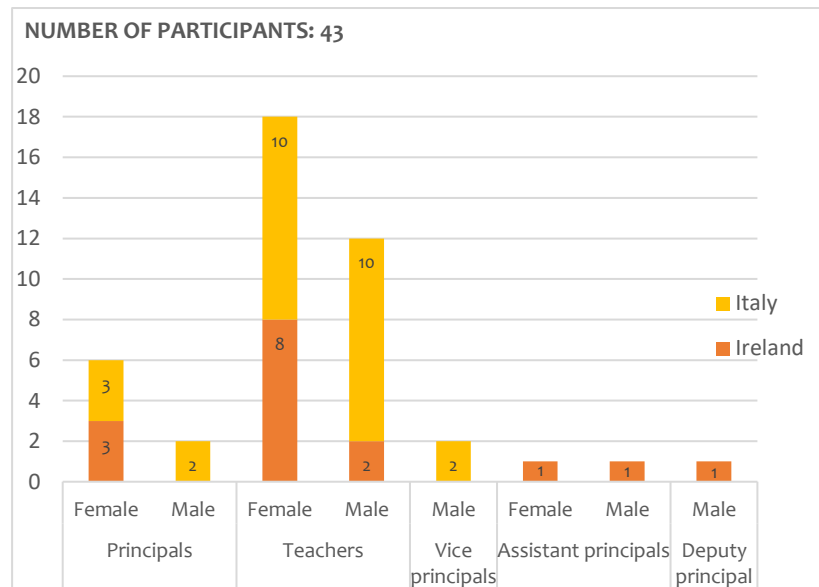


Figure 1. Participants' distribution and roles

The analysis used a thematic approach that blends structured coding with a qualitative, interpretive philosophy³⁵. The goal was to develop a coherent, data-grounded analysis rather than to achieve statistical reliability³⁶.

To address possible concerns about coding consistency, in the absence of multiple coders³⁷, the DIP coding strategy³⁸ was adopted. It concurrently applies Description-, Interpretation-, and Presumption-focused coding.

This method reflects the mixed-method orientation³⁹, where the description phase used inductive coding to generate an initial set of codes, with frequencies tracked in NVivo. The subsequent interpretation

³⁴ Trincherò R. I metodi della ricerca educativa. Laterza, Bari 2004.

³⁵ Adu, P. A Step-by-Step Guide to Qualitative Data Coding, Routledge Publications, New York 2019; Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., & Terry, G. Thematic Analysis. In *Handbook of Research Methods in Health Social Sciences*, Springer, Singapore 2019, pp. 843-860.

³⁶ Braun et al., 2019.

³⁷ Castleberry, A., & Nolen, A. Thematic analysis of qualitative research data: Is it as easy as it sounds? *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning*, 10(6), 2018, pp. 807-815.

³⁸ Adu, 2017.

³⁹ Trincherò R., Robasto D. I Mixed Methods nella Ricerca Educativa, Mondadori, Verona 2019.

phase then grouped these codes into categories aligned with the leadership models analysed in the Inclusive Leadership framework⁴⁰. As such, this stage grouped codes into three categories: instructional leadership, distributed leadership, and transformative leadership. The final stage, presumption-focused coding, generated one overarching theme.

Figure 2 provides a summary of the codes, categories, and themes identified in the case study.

Theme	Categories	Codes
School-as-community	Transformative leadership (4)	Collecting data on students' needs; Setting inspirational goals; Analysing and understanding school needs; Setting inspirational goals.
	Distributed leadership (4)	Co-teaching; Policy reforms; Organisational commitment; Distribution of responsibilities.
	Instructional leadership (5)	Recognition of teacher innovation; Supporting teacher professional learning; Supporting teacher-learner interaction; Impact of digital revolution & AI; Improving teacher collaboration.

Figure 2. The structure of the code book

As can be seen, the overall structure of the codebook is designed to investigate the three core leadership models that form the convergent framework for the categories: instructional leadership, distributed leadership, and transformative leadership. These dimensions are explicitly addressed by European Agency Framework for Inclusive Leadership⁴¹.

Finally, this analysis uses a processual approach, following Bartlett and Vavrus's "logic of juxtaposition". This method treats each case holistically

⁴⁰ European Agency, 2018; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. Inclusive School Leadership: Exploring Policies Across Europe, 2019.

⁴¹ See European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018.

while enabling the comparison of diverse data, thereby broadening the comparative scope.

3. The results of the case study

3.1 Results for SRQ1: In what ways do principals' and teachers' leadership influence pedagogical improvement within school?

The category of instructional leadership responds to SRQ1 by emphasising the importance of establishing clear educational goals, planning the curriculum and making valuable decisions related to curriculum development and the structuring of teachers' working schedules.

As one Irish principal noted:

I think that my role is to support teachers [...]. This is through our schedule for the year. For example, professional learning is planned to facilitate our teachers' development as capable professionals who can collaborate and work together, take care of students' need and fulfil the curriculum goals (Irish principal 1).

However, the data also exposes significant tensions in how this form of leadership is enacted and experienced across the two contexts.

The overall structure of this category (Figure 3), reveals five prominent codes, which highlight:

- the importance of improving teacher collaboration (2 Irish principals, 11 Irish teachers, 18 Italian teachers and 3 Italian principals);
- recognising the impact of digital revolution and AI on teaching profession (2 Irish principals, 11 Irish teachers, 18 Italian teachers and 3 Italian principals);
- supporting teacher-learner interaction (1 Irish principal, 5 Italian teachers and 3 Italian principals);
- supporting teacher professional learning (2 Irish principals, 2 Irish teachers, 2 Italian teachers and 2 Irish principals);
- recognising teacher innovation (2 Irish principals).

Regarding the first code, both Italian and Irish teachers and principals acknowledge the importance of fostering collegiality among staff. A good leader, according to one participant, is someone who “set the tone of interactions” (Irish principal 3). Echoing this view, an Italian principal remarked:

It is fundamental to create opportunities for connection that extend beyond the mere academic programme, both with students and among colleagues. Thus, it is vital to promote a variety of occasions for sharing and collaboration (Italian Principal 4).

Likewise, the importance of integrating digital technologies and Artificial Intelligence into the teaching profession is widely recognised by both Italian and Irish teachers and principals. Notably, the Italian and Irish middle management teams appeared more up to date than principals in their awareness of the impact of AI on pedagogy. This reflects a broader dilemma within instructional leadership concerning the extent to which leaders should maintain an emphasis on curriculum planning and goal-setting, as opposed to shifting their focus towards addressing emerging technological challenges.

The code supporting teacher-learner interaction also emerged as a key element of teacher professionalism and school leadership. As one Irish assistant principal explained:

So for me, particularly in my role, I'm the year head⁴², yeah? And so I'm overlooking the whole year group, the 5th years. And to be honest... there's nothing more important than that. I mean it's equally important as that they leave with their qualifications... the points, getting into college, right? But it is also making sure they leave here as a well-rounded person. [...] So, for me, as a teacher and as year head, the interaction with students is crucial (Irish API, teacher 5).

Moreover, this code is closely connected with the previous one, especially for Italian principals and teachers, who tend to see digital technologies as a tool to facilitate student-teacher interaction:

The goal really is reciprocity, getting the students actively involved. Think about the potential of flipped learning, [...], where it's the student who takes centre stage. That's the kind of goal I'm aiming for, and it's what I would encourage teachers to reflect on (Italian principal 8).

The disparity in the frequency of this code may be explained by the larger size of the Italian sample compared with the Irish one.

⁴² In Irish post-primary schools, a Year Head is a teacher with responsibility for the pastoral care, well-being, and overall coordination of a particular year group. "The most common leadership activity carried out by APIs is the role of year head". Hickey et al., 2024, p. 11.

Another significant code is supporting teacher professional learning. In both contexts, teachers appreciate the autonomy principals grant them to direct their own learning. An interesting difference is that permanent teachers in Italy receive a personal training budget (*Carta Docente*⁴³), whereas temporary teachers do not. In Ireland, teachers typically attend centrally provided courses⁴⁴, though the school's board of management may cover part of the cost for private master's degrees.

As one Irish teacher explained:

In Ireland our education centre provides continuous professional development (CPD) [...]. So yeah, there's a lot of active encouragement here to take part in CPD. I'm doing a Master's at the moment, and the school is helping me out with that, even giving partial funding, which is really motivating (Irish teacher 3)

By contrast, an Italian teacher described the limitations faced by temporary staff:

Right now, since I'm on a temporary contract, I've got fewer rights. [...] If temps had the same rights as permanent teachers, like paid leave, funded training courses, or getting all twelve months' salary, it wouldn't be a bad thing at all. For example, I never got the Carta Docente, so I wasn't free to sign up for training courses. I spoke with the principal about it, he was really kind and even suggested some free courses, but unfortunately his hands are tied too. (Italian teacher 23).

These testimonies illustrate a tension between the rhetoric of professional development and the inequities in access to it.

Finally, the last code, mentioned only within the Irish context, regards the importance of recognising and facilitating teacher innovation: “When I see teachers keeping up with trends, I'm more likely to follow them” (Irish principal 2).

Its absence in Italian data may indicate either a cultural difference in expectations or a leadership style more focused on compliance with external mandates than on bottom-up innovation.

⁴³ For more detail on Carta Docente see https://www.mim.gov.it/ricerca-tag/-/asset_publisher/oHKi7zkjcLkW/content/carta-del-docen-1 Consulted 09/01/2025

⁴⁴ Gilleece L., Surdey, J., Rawdon C., An evaluation framework for teachers' professional learning in Ireland. Educational Research Centre, Dublin 2023.

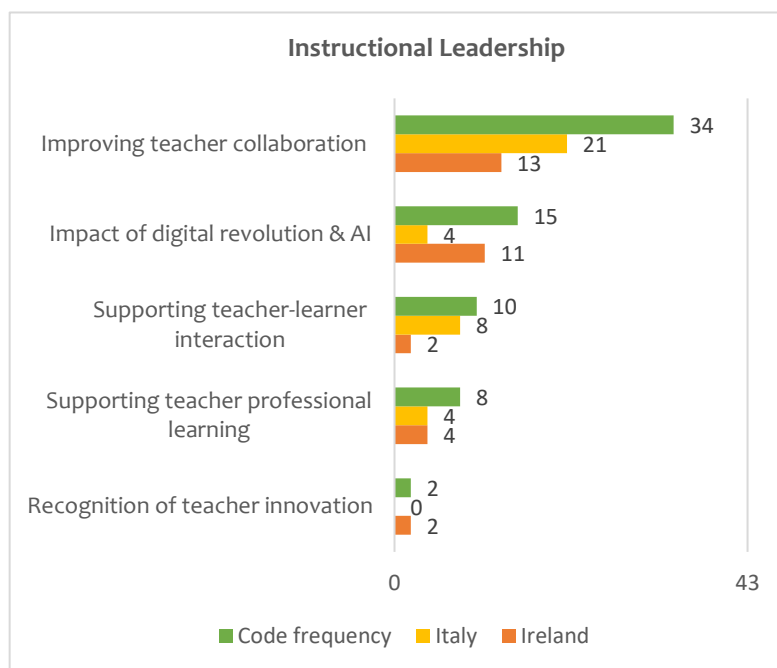


Figure 3. Codes related to the category Instructional Leadership

3.2 Results for SRQ2: How do the Italian and Irish models of distributed leadership respectively contribute to enhancing teacher professionalism and school culture?

In exploring the topic of distributed leadership, two principal categories emerged from participants' responses reflecting two main factors: the development of teacher professionalism and the construction of a transformative school culture.

This perspective is clearly illustrated by an Irish principal's description:

So we do share things. But now it's very much part of the practice, collaboration in every aspect is very much encouraged. And I think it makes life a lot more interesting, and maybe easier, for teachers and for me as a principal. In the sense that you're not on your own. So, as a principal, I can distribute some of responsibilities, and [...] as a teacher, constructive exchanges, you know? (Irish principal 2)

Focusing on the category of distributed leadership (Figure 4) five codes emerged from interviews. The first code has been labelled distribution of responsibilities (2 Irish principals, 7 Irish teachers, 4 Italian teachers and 3

Italian principals). This code covers both the pedagogical and the organizational responsibilities.

For instance, an Italian teacher explains that *“luckily, we have a really good inclusion coordinator, and she’s always the first to let us know about any updates. So, for me, it’s become a habit to check in with her before making any move”* (Italian teacher 15).

Similarly, an Irish teacher observes:

Now, [...] the management are fairly young, they are in their 40s. And it they really embrace this idea that we’re working together. So to have a lot of lunchtime meetings where teachers can go to get advice on how to teach certain subjects, how to deal with certain problems, how to try out different, even about the working schedule and so on... (Irish teacher 13).

A particularly emblematic moment for sharing didactic responsibilities, highlighted in both the Italian and Irish interviews, is departmental meeting time. In general, this code points to a tension: in Ireland, distribution appears organic and relational, whereas in Italy it is formalised and reliant on designated roles.

The second code, organisational commitment (3 Irish principals, 9 Irish teachers, 3 Italian teacher), emerged more prominently within the Irish context, highlighting distinctive organisational practices. Two main catalysts of organisational commitment in Ireland are the staff room (mentioned in 5 interviews) and the ethos/characteristic spirit of each school⁴⁵ (mentioned in 8 interviews). The staff room, for example, is described as *“an institution in Ireland [...]. There are two rooms. [...]. So there’s the social room and the working room. Both are very helpful in terms of environment, building relationships...”* (Irish teacher 6).

An Irish principal highlighted the role of ethos, explaining:

Our school would be under the trusteeship of C.E.I.S.T⁴⁶, which is the trusteeship for Catholic education. Basically, our founding order is the Presentation Sisters. [...]. Their role is essentially to ensure that we remain a Catholic school. In Ireland, Catholic schools are open and welcoming to students of all faiths and none. [...] For me, as principal, my responsibility is to set the tone of relationships in line with the school’s ethos (Irish principal 3).

⁴⁵ McCormack, O., O’Flaherty, J., & Conboy, S. Exploring the enablers, tensions, and sectoral responses to embedding core values within publicly managed schools in Ireland. *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 2023, pp. 1–20.

⁴⁶ See <https://www.ceist.ie/ceist-seeks-patronage/> Consulted 09/19/2025

These testimonies underline how distributed leadership is not only structural but also cultural, grounded in trust and shared values. However, this reliance on ethos may also risk masking dissenting voices or excluding those who do not identify with the dominant culture.

The remaining two codes identified are *policy reform* (3 Irish principals, 5 Irish teachers, 1 Italian teacher, and 1 Italian principal) and *co-teaching* (4 Irish teachers, 2 Italian teachers). The former pertains to collaboration between teachers and principals in implementing structural changes within school organisation. All the Irish schools interviewed, for example, reported adopting a policy banning mobile phones during lessons:

The last topic [...] is... our policies! We're not an iPad school, okay? And we have banned mobile phones. That decision was made together with the whole school community (Irish principal 3).

This is the first year we actually have a complete ban on phones in the school. So, when the students come in the door in the morning, they put their phone into a little pouch, and it's locked. [...] It's really been a team effort to get to this point (Irish teacher 6).

Similarly, an Italian vice-principal notes initiatives driven by national programmes:

So, the reality I've been working in now for a good few years [...] is a school where we do loads of things together. A lot of them are really aimed at building proper working teams. So, many of the activities that come down from the Department actually involve setting up working groups. For example, like I was saying, we were a lead school for training and for organising things at a national level, for the National Digital Schools Plan, and even the PNRR⁴⁷ as well. These working groups happen both at the whole-school level and also within departments. We, the principal and the middle management team, are very involved (Italian vice-principal, teacher 34).

Finally, co-teaching is presented as a valuable strategy for enriching teaching practice in all Irish schools and one Italian school: “co-teaching is where me and you are teaching a class together, so I am learning from you, and you are learning from me. Sometimes you will lead the class and I will lead the class and we support students together as well” (Irish deputy-principal, teacher 1).

Co-teaching, widely adopted in Ireland but rarely in Italy, illustrates the uneven translation of distributed leadership into classroom practice.

⁴⁷ PNRR is the acronym for National Recovery and Resilience Plan

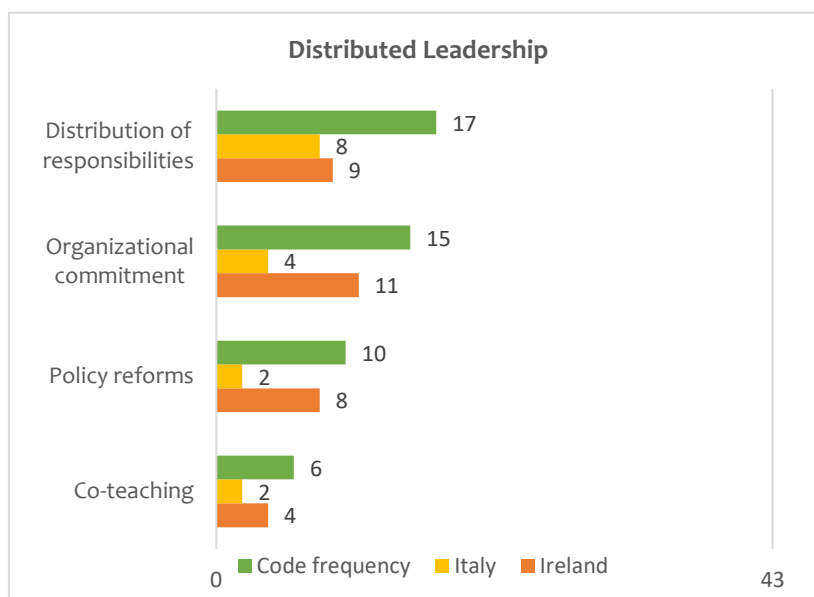


Figure 4. Codes related to the category *Distributed Leadership*

The second category, transformative leadership, highlights the leader’s capacity to engage and inspire individuals, to transform the organisation, and to collaboration in pursuit of shared goals. This is emblematically represented by an Italian principal's statement:

Our role, [...], even if they're pushing us in another direction, is really to promote quality of teaching and collaboration. To help teachers actually work together. In Italy, we kind of get our time stolen by too much paper works. That really stops us from being able to get involved properly with students and teachers. That's the key. Because if you want to promote a positive environment in the school, you need to be moving around, talking to teachers, talking to students, you need to be present. That's what creates the atmosphere that's essential for real learning to happen (Italian principal 6).

This category is composed of three codes (Figure 5):

- organisational development (3 Irish principals, 4 Irish teachers, 6 Italian teachers and 4 Italian principals);
- analysing and understanding school needs (2 Irish principals, 2 Irish teachers, 2 Italian teachers and 1 Italian principal);
- setting inspirational goals (3 Irish principals, 1 Irish teacher, 3 Italian principals);

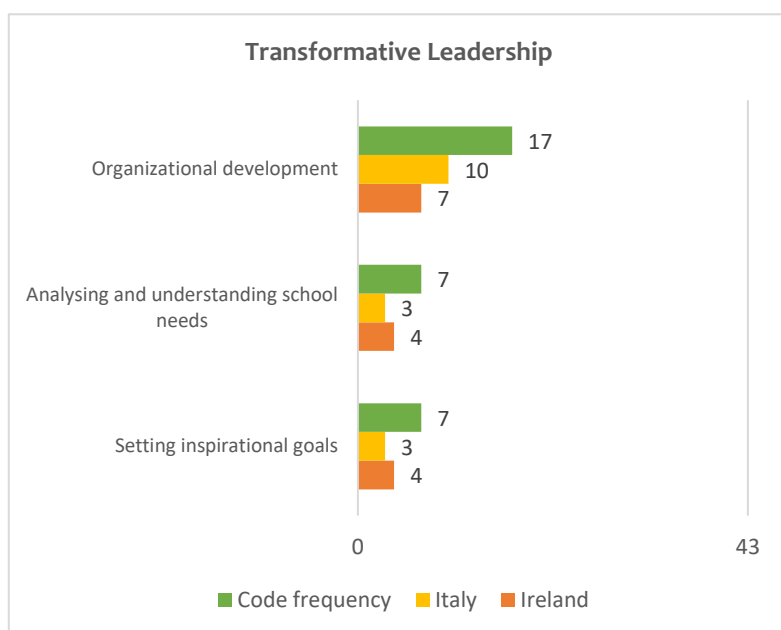


Figure 5. Codes related to the category of Transformative Leadership

Regarding organisational development, a common feature concerns principals' efforts to facilitate teacher collaboration. However, Irish principals' perspectives on collaboration are grounded in the specific ethos of each school, whereas Italian principals' initiatives take place within a broader cultural context in which teachers are often perceived as working individually and are constrained by certain contractual obligations.

We actually have a day called Let's see which focuses creativity, curiosity and collaboration for the full team... and that's our first day together as a whole team. Then our meetings are run very creatively as well. [...] That happens because we are in Educate Together network (Irish Principal 1).

Even when you look at the actual work contracts. The union model is a bit outdated. We're still stuck with this idea that teachers just have to do eighteen hours of face-to-face teaching, and then forty hours for the collegial bodies, another forty for class councils, staff meetings, departments, and so on... Obviously, those hours aren't enough. [...] So if I really want teachers to work together, I can only rely on their goodwill (Italian principal 5).

In the Irish context, principals are also involved in allocating funding and supporting teachers during inspections.

The second code refers to specific tasks performed by principals and middle management. In the Irish case, these include conducting job interviews and collecting and sharing data on students with staff. In the Italian context, they involve organising educational guidance activities (*attività di orientamento*) and managing PNRR funds.

The third code represents the idea of giving direction and sharing goal-setting: “As a principal, I push the school and the teachers to set higher and higher goals, to keep raising the bar. [...] The most important thing is that teachers feel those goals are their own” (Italian principal 8).

The capacity to motivate teachers towards educational goals, in both contexts, is particularly significant, especially when extra activities are not financially recognised. Once again, in Ireland, teachers and principals’ commitment to the school’s ethos can represent an additional motivating factor.

The main thing is to lead by example. And, you know, it’s always about how I interact with the teachers, how I interact with the students. [...] For me, it’s really important that the way I deal with people shows our ethos, which expresses the values of the school (Irish principal 3).

If both contexts show evidence of inspirational goal-setting, Italian accounts emphasize the challenge of ensuring those goals were internalised by teachers rather than perceived as top-down impositions, whereas Irish leaders often draw upon a pre-existing, ethos-based culture to fuel transformation.

4. Discussion of results and theme presentation

The empirical findings provide important insights into the two sub-research questions, revealing both convergences and tensions across three theoretical models addressed by European Agency Framework for Inclusive Leadership⁴⁸.

Firstly, both Irish and Italian respondents recognised the role of principals’ and teachers’ leadership in fostering pedagogical improvement by promoting collaboration, innovation, and professional learning. These findings corroborate recent studies that have documented the positive

⁴⁸ See note 41.

influence of school leadership on both teaching practices and student experiences⁴⁹.

However, a core tension lies in the equity of support and the focus of *Instructional Leadership*. The Irish model emphasises distributed practices that encourage teachers' autonomy and innovation, whereas the Italian context reflects a more centralised approach. Here, principals play a pivotal role in coordinating resources and digital strategies, although structural constraints such as staff turnover and unequal access to training may limit their impact. The Italian case reveals how systemic inequities (e.g., the Carta Docente for permanent staff only) can create a fault line in instructional leadership, limiting principals to foster a uniformly professional teaching corps.

Secondly, the findings on *Distributed Leadership* illustrate the strategic role of principals and middle management in enhancing teacher professionalism in both Italy and Ireland, thus responding to the first part of Sub-question 2. These findings are consistent with Mifsud's assertion that distributed leadership serves as a catalyst for professional collaboration and teacher development⁵⁰. In addition, they illustrate two distinct models of distribution.

In the Irish context distributed leadership is culturally embedded. Collegial structures such as departmental meetings, staff-room interactions, and collaborative policy-making processes, all underpinned by the school ethos, foster a culture of shared responsibility and mutual support. This qualitative evidence resonates with Hickey et al.'s quantitative results, which highlight that principals create and communicate the school vision, while Assistant Principals manage daily operations⁵¹.

In contrast, in Italy distributed leadership is often structurally driven, initiated by national policy reforms and ministry projects. While this creates valuable and formal opportunities for collaboration, it risks being perceived as a top-down mandate rather than an organic professional practice.

Overall, distributed leadership emerges not only as a mechanism for redistributing tasks but also as a catalyst for developing teachers' professional capacities.

⁴⁹ Lee, W. S., & Mao, X. Recruitment and selection of principals: A systematic review *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 2023, Vol. 51(1), 2023, pp. 6–29.

⁵⁰ Mifsud, D. A systematic review of school distributed leadership: exploring research purposes, concepts and approaches in the field between 2010 and 2022. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 56(2), 2023, pp. 154-179.

⁵¹ Hickey et al., 2024.

The study's most profound problematization emerges around transformative leadership. The data suggest that while Italian schools tend to promote teacher professionalism through structured, externally mandated opportunities for collaboration, Irish schools achieve similar outcomes through a culture-driven, ethos-based model that integrates collaboration into everyday school life. In Italy, although the *Autonomy Law* formally defines Principals' leadership as encompassing a broad educational and organisational vision⁵², their agency could be curtailed by bureaucratic constraints.

Across all three dimensions, the overarching theme is that of the school-as-community. This concept is powerfully articulated by the participants themselves:

Okay, so here's the thing: a leadership style isn't built overnight. It's something you build up gradually, through concrete actions. It's about making choices that are consistent with your goals. I'm a firm believer in what I call educational leadership. Because that's what a real school is. A school isn't a corporation; it's a community. So, for a principal, the most important first step is to really get to know your teaching staff. I mean, truly, know them. That way, when you need to step in and address something, you're doing it within a relationship that's built on trust not on top-down orders (Italian principal 8)

So, our school motto is 'Be your best self and that's for the whole school community, [...] We also have our respect values, which are: respect, relationships, empathy, safety, personal accountability, equity, community, and trust and what they look like in action. [...] So, in terms of leadership... You know, trust is built daily through all the small things you do to build confidence in the fact that you are a person of your word and that your values are being shown consistently. So, consistency is probably a key thing in terms of school culture: being consistent in how you facilitate conversations, taking time with people, and knowing what matters to them (Irish principal 1).

To conclude, this theme offers a meaningful framework for interpreting effective school leadership, highlighting that building such a community is neither automatic nor uncontested. It is a complex achievement shaped by structural inequities, policy pressures, cultural norms, and technological change.

⁵² Montanari, M. Il Dirigente scolastico come agente inclusivo nel contrasto alla dispersione e all'insuccesso formativo. *Dirigenti Scuola* n. 42, 2023, pp. 94-108.

5 Conclusion & Recommendations

This study has examined how principals and teachers in Ireland and Italy understand and interpret the concept of school leadership in the post-Covid context, with particular attention to its influence on pedagogical improvement and the role of distributed leadership in enhancing teacher professionalism and school culture. The findings reveal that, while both contexts recognise leadership as a driver of collaboration, innovation, and professional development, the forms it takes diverge significantly.

Overall, the results suggest that effective school leadership in the post-Covid era should be understood less as managerial oversight and more as the cultivation of a school-as-community, grounded in trust, consistency, and shared responsibility.

Due to the exploratory nature and small sample size of this study, the generalisability of the findings is limited. Future research, potentially adopting a mixed-methods or quantitative approach, would be valuable to systematically examine task distribution patterns in these national settings. Furthermore, explicitly linking the three leadership models of the codebook to the concept of inclusion would deepen the analysis and better align it with the perspective of the European Agency Framework for Inclusive Leadership.

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