Schools as learning organizations where everyone thrives

La scuola come *learning organization* per valorizzare le potenzialità di ognuno

Antonella Nezzo, upper secondary school head teacher, MIUR

Anna Raneri, upper secondary school teacher of English and teacher trainer, MIUR

ABSTRACT

Since the start of the pandemic, keeping the learners at the core of the learning process has assumed an increasing importance, inspiring assessment for learning and learner agency while being connected with the so-called "visible thinking". But schools are also requested to be learning organizations to cope with change of environment and circumstances, reorganizing the management team to tackle the current situation. The solution has involved creating brand-new middle management roles, meant to support all the teachers while relying on the team members' skills and the principal's broader vision and managing expertise. Communication is enhanced and teachers are fully supported, while being nurtured in terms of didactic innovation embedded into lessons, promoting the teachers' tendency to work together, upskilling or reskilling themselves.

SINTESI

Dall'inizio della pandemia, mantenere gli studenti al centro del processo di apprendimento ha assunto un'importanza crescente, ispirando la valutazione per l'apprendimento e la *learner agency*, in riferimento al "pensiero visibile". Alle scuole è altresì richiesto di essere *learning organizations* per far fronte al cambiamento di ambiente e circostanze, riorganizzando il team di gestione. La soluzione ha comportato la creazione di nuovi ruoli di *middle management*, destinati a sostenere tutti gli insegnanti, facendo affidamento sulle competenze dei membri del team e sulla più ampia visione e abilità gestionale del dirigente scolastico. La comunicazione è migliorata e gli insegnanti sono supportati anche nell'innovazione didattica incorporata nelle lezioni, promuovendo la tendenza a lavorare e aggiornarsi o imparare insieme.

Introduction

The ongoing and unprecedented period affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, also resulting in the alternation of initial lockdown periods, distance learning and face-to-face teaching, often only for part of the classes, has brought to light the need to perceive and experience the school as a system in which all its parts interact, aimed at achieving a final objective. The construction of learning pathways, whose outcomes combine quality and inclusiveness, requires the involvement of all the actors in this process in a challenge to question and remodel methodologies on the one hand and organizational structures on the other. Measures to contain the contagion have challenged the organizational variables inherent in the system of most Italian schools in terms of informal communication and flexibility in the management of procedures, often supported by informal coordination mechanisms. As an upper secondary school with an emphasis on languages, Math and Sciences, including 1.084 students and located on the outskirts of a lively but complex city in the North of Italy, all of the above elements have requested a set of actions and practices to be taken.

The physical distance imposed required an adjustment of the ways in which internal communication and the organization of daily practice were carried out. Collegial meetings, and more generally the formal communication traditionally carried out by means of internal mail, the management of shared work deprived of informal communication flows consisting of exchanges of information, suggestions, ideas that naturally occur among teachers in the teacher's room, have proved markedly ineffective.

In particular, some activities carried out by specific working groups have seen a lack of internal dialectics and shared planning in the making of process.

The ultimate goal of an educational institution is the improvement of its pupils' learning outcomes, both in terms of equity (extension of real learning opportunities to all, taking into account necessary differences and reshaping possible teaching strategies accordingly) and quality (building the capacity to "learn to learn", of analyzing, interpreting and critically selecting information and external stimuli in order to act autonomously in a changing and varied reality). Therefore, the road ahead is an internal challenge, passing through the empowerment of all its components.

The context in which our experience is still being carried out is characterized by a relaxed working climate, and it is common practice for the various departments to work together on an equal footing in the various working groups. Despite a shared idea of a school that promotes the development of its students' learning, the initiatives in this regard are essentially subject-related and mostly linked to the strictly personal sphere of an individual teacher's area of expertise. A resulting need has emerged so to involve everyone more in sharing a quality, multidisciplinary and transversal training process, using the tools offered by some new teaching methodologies.

Two priorities have therefore been outlined:

- to create the conditions for developing the empowerment of all the components of the school community;

- to improve communication flows, trying to use the dissemination of information to all staff as a tool to raise involvement, providing everyone with objective evidence for the development and sharing of operational and strategic choices.

1. The challenge of internal reorganization and empowerment

All these elements of discontinuity have consequently enhanced the promotion amongst teachers of a new approach to educational issues, within a framework where a vision of the school as a learning community and organization underpins the choices to make. A culture based on enhancing the skills of internal resources has involved those willing to take on different, significant and challenging roles in addition to the already complex role of teacher. An organizational model of diffuse leadership has therefore been adopted, within which the empowerment of each figure develops potential and exploits personal competencies and skills.

The key elements in this process are:

- the personal and professional potential of each person;

- the mobilization of internal resources, in terms of skills and motivation, being asked for critical awareness in carrying out their accomplishments, providing the opportunity for group members to assume diversified, significant and important roles;

- the participation of different members in decision-making, in an environment characterized by shared leadership involving both individual members and the organization, guided by a formal leader acting as a facilitator.

An attempt has been made to apply and develop what Peterson and Zimmerman (2004)[1] refer to as the three components in the organizational empowerment model:

- intra-organizational component, which covers aspects and characteristics that describe the internal structure and functioning of the organization;

- interorganizational component, which emphasizes the role of the link between organizations;

- extra-organizational component, which refers to the actions implemented by each organization or network of organizations to influence the wider society.

Bearing in mind that each component influences and determines the others, providing each with opportunities for growth and means to interact with and

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[1] Peterson, N. A., & Zimmerman, M. A. (2004). Beyond the individual: Toward a nomological network for organizational empowerment. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *34*(1-2), 129–145.

exercise control over the community, an ecological perspective has been therefore identified and put into action. Regarding the practical development of this theoretical model of organizational empowerment, through the synergy of the individual parts it might result in levels of analysis that go beyond the individual and interface with the whole school community and external users.

2. Brand-new middle management roles

The starting point was the decision to create a brand-new staff, whose members were asked to take part in it following the needs analysis emerging at that time within the school. First, the design and implementation of an internal organizational structure that would allow to clearly identify roles and tasks, to avoid that some issues and/or some areas of work risked not being supervised, while giving value to each role and creating the conditions for recognition, in terms of authority, by all the teaching and administrative community.

The appointment of staff members took place thanks to the mixture of professional skills and individual characteristics, namely of "knowledge, skills, attitudes and values"[2]. In other words, once the objective of the project had been set, we chose each other, paying attention to the ability to work as a team, mutually recognizing each other's areas of expertise, but tacitly binding each other to take over and support in daily practice.

Cohesion and team spirit in the management of workflow are proving to be the most effective tools for dealing not only with daily problems, but above all for offering colleagues and students a concrete example of collaborative practice and unity when it comes to making important decisions.

Choices are indeed always discussed and shared, and operational documents are drawn up on a shared basis.

2.1. Roles and expertise

Each figure involved develops his or her own potential to the full, some more exquisitely organizational, some more of mediation and dialogue, some more of a driving force for educational innovation. Each of these aptitudes is indispensable and each of us recognizes it in the other, achieving the assumption of a true managerial role, even if the formal reference continues to be to the school principal.

Indispensable for working together was the preparation of a shared work area, organized by themes and different degrees of sharing, the constant updating of which makes it possible to always get access to the necessary data for the decisions to be taken daily. The design of this architecture was entrusted to the first vice principal, who also set up work areas shared with the whole school staff, both teaching and administrative. This has also made it possible to cope with periods of

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[2] https://www.oecd.org/pisa/35070367.pdf, page 4.

acute shortage of administrative staff and staff without the necessary experience and/or training.

The second vice principal deals with the organization of the timetable of lessons and the compatibility of the various initiatives with the planned commitments of each teacher or class. He presides over the support area for all COVID-19 related issues. Another middle-management figure is the teacher who collaborates in the planning of all the activities, takes care of the external communication also in terms of privacy policy, while also implementing and updating the school website.

2.2. Shared knowledge

The activity perceived as most involving is the one represented by the teacher in charge of the training area. The willingness to be personally involved in the training and refresher courses for teachers, the emphasis on the possibility of modulating and refining the teaching method by everyone, starting from their own personal knowledge and skills while keeping the learner at the core, led to a qualitatively very significant participation in the learning path outlined. Interaction and enthusiasm amongst the teachers have really characterized each CPD module, which has triggered both the actual use in the classes of the practices just approached, and the sharing of the results and activities carried out. This willingness to share has also opened new spaces for a collaborative and cross-subject approach. Comparison is not seen as competition or as a difficulty in revealing any areas of knowledge that require energizing, but only as a productive exchange. Moreover, the participation in the courses has involved teachers from different departments and this implicitly paves the way to the possibility of experimenting together, on transversal themes, of what is being learned.

The internal cohesion of the staff has made it possible to build up and to set as an example the sense of identity and belonging, which acts as a sort of "affective glue" in the community, while enhancing awareness and inspiring decision-making.

The conscious sharing of choices aims indeed at uniting the different choices thus preparing the conditions for their realization, which is at the core of leadership itself. «Leadership in open education is the promotion of sustainable open education activities and initiatives via a transparent approach from both the top-down and the bottom-up. It paves the way to creating more openness by inspiring and empowering people»[3].

Effective leadership is characterized by reflexivity and critical thinking, introspection on values, artistry and emotional dimensions and, finally, focus on professional development and management of conflicting actors in the school ecosystem.

The commitment of each staff member is strong and genuine, resulting from an exceptional circumstance, namely the "earthquake" caused by the pandemic in the

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[3] Romano, T., & Serpieri, R. (2006). Competenze di leadership, Revue suisse des sciences de l'éducation, 28(S), 77–101. 77 ISSN 1424-3946, Academic Press.

previous working habits that made it possible. In any case, the main idea is to reconcile the achievement of personal and professional development goals with those of the educating community, interpreting the necessary actions from time to time according to the stimuli and opportunities that the operational context offers and adapting one's strategies accordingly.

3. Enhanced communication

Communication has been vital to share this vision with the entire community. Only through dialectical interaction, dissemination and availability of data and information is it possible to involve all the teaching community in the choices and stimulate the individual action of each one.

However, effective communication needs to be enhanced and this has proved to be our main challenge. We are used to conceiving language as a means of communication to convey ideas and as dialogue between teachers and students, but we are not always willing to listen. As a result, communication, in the sense of passing on necessary information, has been sometimes ineffective, especially if written and official. In our own school context, a sort of tendency to ask for verbal information instead of reading it on official statements (the so-called *circolari*) had developed over the years, which is why the need to communicate and involve effectively the teaching community has been pursued.

Staff members have been appreciated in their role and specific competences and are therefore themselves a driving example of motivational leadership. Colleagues turn to them for advice, and at the same time interpersonal relations are strengthened, motivation has been increased.

The school principal is committed, through the coordination of the human, professional and financial resources available, to motivate the team in creating the conditions to unlock individual potential to be deployed in the pursuit of the school improvement. In other words, it aims to extract from the available professional capital the potential for school improvement. However, above all it must seize or create opportunities for exchange and collaborative work, involving as many people as possible in an empathetic way, reinforcing the positive outcomes of everyone's action and supporting personal leadership development.

Moreover, the extension of leadership and the sharing of the ability and responsibility to take decisions implies the spread of a communication system that allows access to all information and data that can allow decisions to be taken on an objective basis (evidence based), otherwise the multiplication of decision-making hubs would only lead to organizational anarchy.

Shared leadership is a determining factor in promoting change in teaching and a commitment on the part of teachers to improve professional practice.

Shared leadership is an organizational approach that aims to involve all those within the school community who are perceived as leaders, even if only in reference to a specific professional or organizational area, namely the leadership of teachers

is often manifested especially in the specific area of teaching and its methodologies. Therefore, this approach involves not only the school manager or middle management but is also animated through mutual exchanges with other components (students and families mainly).

4. Innovation

On the one hand, what makes a good school are its teachers in terms of impact they have on learning and ways they make it happen (Wiliam, 2006), while keeping the learners at the core of this process. This assumption has inspired assessment for learning, learner agency (Driver, Gao, Larsen-Freeman & Mercer, 2021) and relates to the so-called «visible thinking and learning» (Hattie, 2008), whose importance has overwhelmingly increased since the start of the pandemic.

On the other hand, schools are requested to be learning organizations to cope with change in terms of «environment and circumstances as its members, individually and together, learn their way to realising their vision» (Stoll & Kools, 2017, p. 10). As a secondary school on the outskirts of a complex city, the need to reorganize the management team since the beginning of this new year has appeared as a priority to be dealt with to respond to the current and ongoing "unprecedented" situation. The solution provided by the school principal has sprung from both above-mentioned approaches in terms of creating brand-new middle management roles, meant to support all the teachers while relying on the team members' skills and the principal's broader vision and managing expertise.

The ambition has been indeed to build up within our own school a learning organization where communication is enhanced and teachers are fully supported, find answers to their questions on school procedures, privacy issues and COVID-19 affected school routines, while being nurtured in terms of didactic innovation embedded into lessons. Re-organizing and clarifying procedures but also double-checking them amongst the middle-management team and the principal, before sharing them and turning them into official procedures, has had a positive outcome under the current circumstances.

Furthermore, finding effective solutions to always changing learning challenges has been carried out by means of customized CPD (Continuing Professional Development) training, after a survey so as to be delivered according to the teachers' needs (namely, synchronous or hybrid delivery mode) and to enhance teachers' tendency to cooperate and work together, above and beyond the very subject they teach.

5. A more effective student-centered vision

Aiming at developing a more effective student-centered vision amongst teachers and supporting professional learning of all staff, a customized training program has indeed been established. To give it value, the school principal has also uploaded it onto the official CPD portal of the Italian Ministry for Education, known as SOFIA,

so to enable the teachers willing to attend it to get a certificate and credits in terms of hours.

In order to maximize teacher impact and learner agency, a twenty-hour asynchronous and synchronous learning path has indeed been carefully planned so to cover:

- a selection of thinking routines (Church & Ritchard, 2020) to enhance some thinking moves deeply affected by the pandemic amongst students ("describe what is there", "build explanations", "wondering", "making connections");
- learner agency "boosters" (Driver et al., 2021) in order to allow learners to take ownership of their own learning;
- feedback delivery at different levels (teacher to student/ student to student) to raise learners' awareness on where they are in their learning/task achievement and how to get to the desired outcome;
- equity, diversity and inclusion together with a selection of Global Goals to embed into teaching and syllabi.

The full learning path has been delivered via Google Meet (seven hours in total, two-hour sessions, once a week together with weekly activities to be carried out asynchronously and a sort of capstone project to be delivered in the classroom). Furthermore, to avoid too large groups and reduced interaction, two editions have taken place (November-December 2021 and January-February 2022). The first cohort was smaller, while the second was larger, but in both cases, interaction, co-operation and enthusiasm have been remarkable. Newly recruited, but also experienced teachers of the most diverse subjects have been willing to adopt this hands-on approach and embark on the workshop-style training also experimenting during and after taking it.

Moreover, they have interacted synchronously via shared Jamboards (Figure 1) and Padlet (Figure 2) while a Google Classroom has also been set and used as a LMS to get access to resources and materials and to complete weekly steps toward the final capstone project. The latter was meant to be a real lesson to deliver to a class including a thinking routine, an activity characterized by enhanced learner agency, an exit ticket and a Global Goal, where suitable.
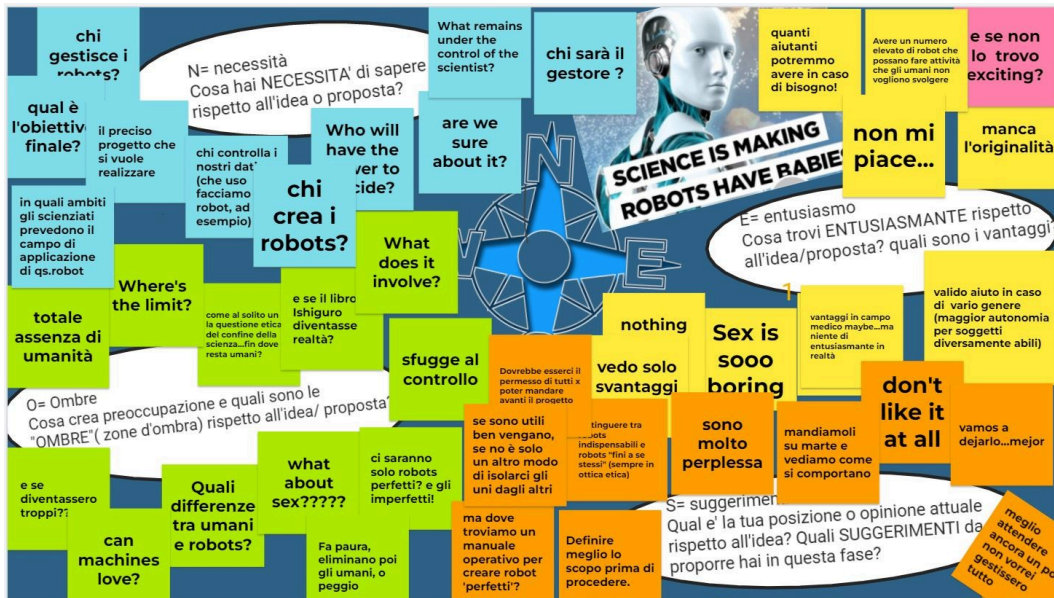
FIGURE 1 – A SHARED JAMBOARD TO DOCUMENT EACH STEP OF THE THINKING ROUTINE NAMED "COMPASS POINTS"
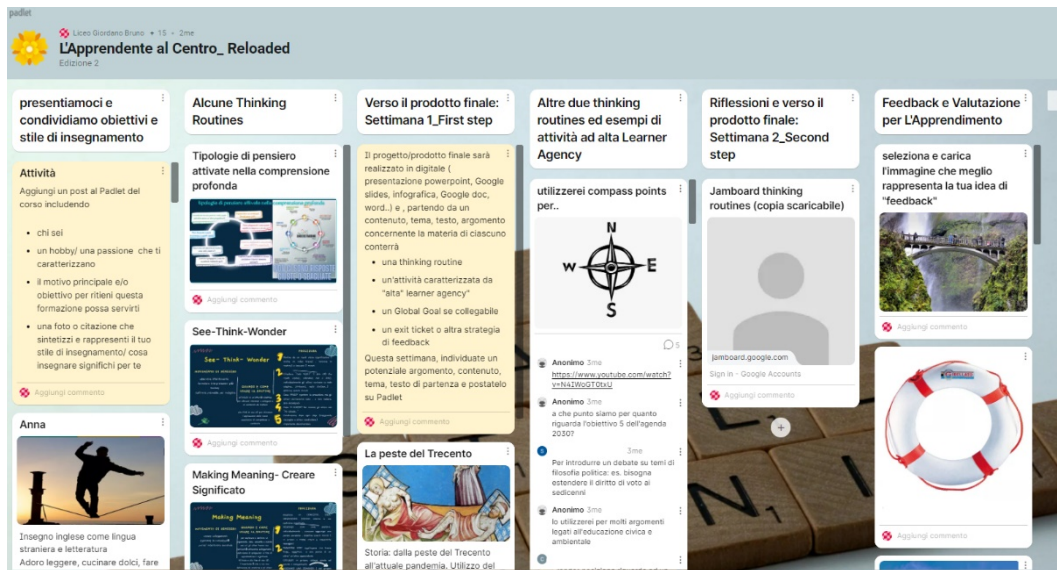

FIGURE 2 – THE COURSE PADLET TO INTERACT SYNCHRONOUSLY AND ASYNCHRONOUSLY AND BECOME MORE FAMILIAR WITH STRATEGIES TO DOCUMENT CLASSWORK

To encourage cooperation amongst teachers, above and beyond their own area of expertise, cross-subject projects have come highly recommended and the very nature of the training has been hands-on so as to give them the opportunity to experience what their students would in the real classroom. The routines, activities and strategies have in fact been carried out without "formal" introduction and limited "acquisition" phase but in terms of "learning by doing". Shared reflections

and infographics have been later provided to go over the steps put into action and explore further use in the classroom.

It must be remarked that a lot of teachers involved have immediately used the suggested routines and high-learner-agency activities, proudly sharing their Jamboards with other teachers and with the trainer.

It must be remarked though that the school principal and middle management team, including the teacher trainer, aimed at encouraging immediate use of the thinking routines, formative assessment and higher learner agency practices at the core of the training itself. By remarking voluntary participation in it and creating a hands-on set of training sessions, the teachers involved have indeed been encouraged to immediately use learner-centered strategies and practices in their own lessons. Ideas and actual "deliverables" have been shared on the course Padlets (one per session) and uploaded onto the courses' classroom.

The immediate embedding of learner-centered practices and strategies into actual lessons has to be seen as the most valuable measure of teachers' appreciation of the training. Obviously, a post-training survey is meant to be delivered before the end of the ongoing school year. It is already available[4] and based on Kirkpatrick model and its results will be analyzed to determine areas of improvement in future training, while measuring its actual efficiency.

Furthermore, some thinking routines or protocols (i.e., the ladder of feedback) have sparked the conversation and led to a revision of the very capstone project starting from the concerns stated[5].

The possibility to involve teachers also in English as a foreign language courses together with the school staff from other departments and, depending on their level, has effectively responded to the increasing need for upskilling and/or reskilling as a community where learning is shared.

At the beginning of the school year, by means of another survey, the whole school staff has had the chance to select a suitable day and delivery mode together with course level. For those who needed, a link to a twenty-minute level test was provided in October to distinguish these courses from the more traditional ones and to boost learner agency too.

Due to the different levels requested, three courses have been planned and scheduled on a weekly basis, namely beginners, intermediate and advanced. The lesson materials have been created by the course trainer and also included topics and materials as suggested by the learners of each group. Every course has been

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[4]https://docs.google.com/forms/d/18KauM_iqN2trz0t97SLeAB-CilN_DIOLZjCxgOeJ-TQ/edit?usp=sharing.

[5] The flexible nature of the project and the fact that no actual submission deadline had been set, instead of creating a more "relaxed" and livelier attitude towards the project, was causing some anxiety. As a result, while experimenting the very protocol meant to be promoted amongst learners (i.e., the ladder of feedback), the trainer decided to adjust the guidelines of the final project also providing an example to help her colleagues visualize what to do and feel more at ease and motivated.

built and delivered to enhance conversation and listening while boosting core vocabulary, as clearly stated by the learners involved. Materials have been created on purpose and themed-lessons have gradually involved the course takers also due to customized feedback sent individually via email after lessons.

Each course has been planned to bear in mind the main principles of andragogy in terms of adults' involvement, value of previous experience, relevance and impact to personal life and problem-centered learning (Knowles, 1984). Furthermore, the so-called "principled eclecticism" (Larsen-Freeman, 2020) has underpinned each lesson thus involving the use of a variety of customized language learning activities with different characteristics and motivated by several assumptions, in order to achieve the established outcomes.

Due to the ongoing pandemic, delivery has been carried out via Google Meet while interaction has also been promoted by means of multiple means, namely speaking corners during classes, typing on the chat, adding up posts onto Padlet boards or sticky notes on shared Jamboards.

Apart from increasing competence and effective use of English amongst the course takers, this kind of learning development and upskilling has also proved effective in terms of team building and enhanced communication, having both areas been deeply affected by the pandemic.

Conclusion

The work sharing carried out so far has been appreciated by most of the teachers, thus inspiring a sort of propensity for active involvement in the various initiatives put in place. This represents the first step towards the construction of a learning organization centered both on the exchange and sharing of expertise and learning and on constant support, resulting in effective answers to be found or co-created.

This ongoing progress is a driving force meant to lead to holistic improvement, seen as a potential and effective trigger for a more widespread and lasting change. The motivation that has sprung from this experience has also resulted in improved relationships and a stronger desire to learn, actively promoting a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) in a workplace where everybody is willing to thrive and embrace change.

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