

Participatory Communication and Shared Leadership: The European Project Learning Leadership for Change (L2C)

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Abstract

Schools are a complex system made up of not only relationships, infrastructures, and challenges, but also constraints. It seems essential that schools, as complex organizations, work in synergy, according to a shared vision with all the actors involved in the educational process. School management is now part of a process that is increasingly implemented in a shared way; a single person in charge cannot manage the complexity that the school requires.

In order to observe and narrate this complexity, the National Institute of Documentation, Innovation, and Educational Research (INDIRE) has carried out several research projects in recent years that focus on the analysis of school leadership. In particular, the European project Learning Leadership for Change (L2C) aimed to promote and support the experimentation of a shared leadership approach in some strategic areas for schools.

The results of this project highlighted the importance of the lighthouse leaders in implementing shared leadership, whose main function is to involve all school actors keeping the community active and growing. These more informal teams do not remove the need for the so-called formal intermediate management structures. It is also essential for the shared leadership approach to create sharing networks that include local and regional strategic partners to reinforce the sustainability of these innovative practices.

Keywords: Governance; School–community relations; European cooperation

Introduction

Schools are not only a complex system of relationships, infrastructures, challenges, but also constraints. With school autonomy, they are increasingly called upon to account for their activities in a transparent manner (Logozzo, Previtali, Stancarone, 2019). It appears fundamental that the school, as a complex organization, works in synergy, according to a shared vision, with all the actors involved in the educational process. All stakeholders are required to inform themselves and participate by contributing to the growth of their school community.

The school head has a leading role and must foster the exchange and promotion of communication and cooperation skills in the school community, combining coordination and support for his/her teachers and also playing a linking role with the outside world and other schools in the area (Profumo, 2018).

Leadership is now part of a process that is increasingly implemented in a shared way; a single person cannot manage the complexity that the school requires. The role of the school leader increasingly requires the support and collaboration of a team of people who, together with him/her, carry out the work of the school, but it is necessary to outline within each school institution how leadership is organized.

1. The National Institute of Documentation, Innovation, and Educational Research School Leadership Research

In order to observe and narrate this complexity, the National Institute of Documentation, Innovation, and Educational Research (INDIRE) has carried out some research in recent years which focuses on the analysis of school leadership. As

part of the VALeS (Valutazione e Sviluppo Scuola) project, INDIRE, in collaboration with the University of Bologna, has carried out the research *Educational leadership and improvement of the quality of education* to deepen the theme of the leadership of the school head, by carrying out an in-depth study about the practices implemented for the guidance and management of self-evaluation and improvement processes. School leaders may be the singularly most important figure within education systems for promoting school improvement and efficacy (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Scheerens, 2012; Halliger, 2010; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008), but it is crucial to investigate their capacity building, how they do *the difference*, and through what practices they contribute to developing effective organizational and professional environments for teaching and learning.

The head teacher is supported in his/her day-to-day activities by a range of staff who hold middle management organizational positions in schools. In the research *Teacher career development paths towards middle management in schools*, also conducted in collaboration with the University of Bologna, emerged the need to recognize and incentivize teachers engaged in activities of teaching and organizational coordination because the contribution of these teachers is crucial to promote quality and equity and to build professional communities oriented to experimentation and innovation, focusing on collaborative learning of students and teachers (Paletta, 2020).

1.1 The research 'Educational leadership and improvement of the quality of education'

The first study has been carried out since 2014 within the VALeS project. VALeS was an experimental project that made it possible to analyze schools' self-evaluation and external evaluation paths and to offer support for improvement actions. VALeS schools anticipated practices that became mandatory for all Italian schools later. The study of school leadership in these schools offered food for thought to analyze the organizational implications of the National Assessment System regarding the practices implemented by school leaders in the management of self-evaluation and improvement processes.

The focus of the research was to examine the leadership styles of school leaders about guidance of self-evaluation and improvement processes. The main aspects investigated concerned the priorities assigned in the school's improvement plan, the role of the school head in building organizational capacity to support improvement, the promotion of distributed and shared leadership, teachers' commitment to improvement processes, the study of how improvement processes are changing professional practices and teaching, and continuous professional development and its coherence with the improvement processes activated within schools.

1.2 The research 'Teacher career development paths towards middle management in schools'

The study of the role of system figures and middle management has become of central interest in order to deepen the theme of school governance. For this reason, INDIRE and the IUL Telematic University took part in the research project coordinated by the Department of Business Sciences of the University of Bologna together with the Regional School Offices (USR) of Emilia Romagna, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Lazio, Tuscany, and Piedmont; the National Association of School Heads (ANDIS); and the Agnelli Foundation.

The research project is aimed at studying middle leadership in Italian schools as a prerequisite for the recognition of middle management profiles and organizational roles, also with a view to differentiated development of teaching careers.

The research intended to go beyond the focus on the leadership of the head teacher and address the issue of enhancing the value of teachers as leaders for learning by promoting

- the identification of teachers who carry out leadership activities in the school in the pedagogical–didactic field and in the managerial–organizational field and
- the definition of professional standards at various stages of the new and differentiated teaching leadership figures.

2. The Project Learning Leadership for Change

In recent years, the INDIRE research group has sought to explore the theme of shared leadership in a broader sense than the concept of distributed leadership. The concept of shared leadership has an extensive scientific literature in the Anglo-Saxon world but is less present in Italian scientific research. It refers to a social process that influences and mobilizes the commitment of a group in view of the achievement of specific objectives, linked to a common vision (Harris, 2014). According to this approach, it is recognized and emphasized that it is necessary to support the taking of responsibility by all school actors in the process of decision-making and in dealing with the problems and difficulties that concern and involve the whole educational community. Together with the head teacher, teacher leaders and student leaders capable of taking charge of projects and educational and organizational paths of change and innovation can emerge.

To share this guiding factor means diversifying the people involved in decision-making, ensuring that the different skills and experiences complement each other with positive effects on the whole organization (Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2008; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2007). This management mode requires a high level of collaboration and commitment among teachers, the school head, and other actors formally or informally involved in the school environment, such as families and representatives of local institutions and associations.

It is important to underline that school leadership differs from management by first ensuring the stability of existing institutional processes and resources. School leadership is more concerned with preparing for the future by analyzing changes in the school context and proposing a strategy to ensure that all students are prepared for the society in which they will live (Kools & Stoll, 2016). According to research findings (Spillane, 2008), school leadership correlates with student achievement, influences student motivation and the quality of school organization, and acts as a catalyst for the potential of school staff, all factors that in turn directly influence student learning.

Shared leadership can be exercised by both groups and individuals, in some cases even independently of the formal position an individual may hold. Depending on the context, school leadership may correspond not only to formally assigned roles, but also to informally recognized roles within the school community. In this way, leadership is distributed among different leaders who are recognized as having influence and competence, which is expressed through shared responsibilities, peer collaboration, teamwork, and so on. As an example, each teacher can be a leader in his/her own way: providing and/or creating resources and acting as a mentor, curriculum expert, learning facilitator, change agent, data analyst, digital expert, and so on.

However, some research points out that this type of shared leadership can also introduce a few complications that could be avoided in a top-down leadership model. For example, the practice of shared leadership can make the whole decision-making process more difficult, increasing the complexity and frequency of communications related to school management, to the point of making it counterproductive (Harris, 2014; Duignan & Marks, 2003; Waite, 2014).

In this regard, in the 3-year period 2018–2020, INDIRE participated in the European project Learning Leadership for Change (L2C), approved under the Erasmus+ program Action KA3 and coordinated by European Schoolnet (EUN), a network of 33 European ministries of education.

The overall aim of the project was to develop innovative approaches to change management at the whole-school level, promoting and supporting through European cooperation innovative practices of shared leadership that would have a school-level and political impact.

Based on these assumptions, the project was inspired by research evidence in the area of leadership, where school leadership is defined as a process of social influence (rather than authority), mobilizing (not imposing) other efforts to achieve goals that are part of a broader vision (sometimes even beyond the level of the individual school). The starting point of the L2C project was to move away from the traditional vertical leadership model of decision-making toward a shared leadership approach by fostering a new culture in schools in which teachers, students, nonteaching staff, and potentially parents take on some leadership responsibilities with the intention that such participation in collaborative decision-making will strengthen everyone's commitment to the school.

The L2C project developed and tested new ideas related to the impact of applying shared leadership to areas of strategic school development, such as the STEM disciplines, innovative use of ICT in teaching, and digital citizenship, through self-evaluation, training, sharing of good practices. The project addressed school leadership as a means of change, through the creation of a distributed leadership network, which aimed at professionalizing staff. The target group included both formal leaders and all other teachers in the school. It focused on tools that strengthened the profiles of the teaching and school leadership professions, with the aim of improving the quality of services and the inclusiveness of the school.

In addition, since the first year of activity, the project has combined work in the school with an ongoing dialog with national policymakers to jointly define the conditions for success of the proposed actions, with a view to disseminating shared leadership practices in the daily activities of schools at national and international levels.

2.1 Project phases and activities

The L2C project involved five European countries, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Malta, through the participation of a number of schools varying between three and five. The selected schools were involved in a participatory research–action process articulated in three phases over 3 years of work.

The project partners were responsible for the identification of the schools. Partners took into account the following criteria:

- interest in the topic and commitment;
- English language competence;
- commitment and engagement from the school to set up a shared leadership team;
- support from the school principal;
- interest/level of proficiency in one of the three areas of the project (STEM, ICT, and digital citizenship);
- selection of schools according to a geographic area; and
- selection of schools according to the level (representatives of lower and upper secondary schools).

According to these criteria, the Italian schools that took part in L2C were Istituto Comprensivo Figline Valdarno (FI), Liceo Scientifico Paolo Ruffini in Viterbo, and Istituto Tecnico Artemisia Gentileschi in Milan.

The articulation of the project consisted of the following phases: identification of the schools and planning of the intervention, implementation of improvement plans, and construction of the international network and dissemination of project results.

The first phase involved the schools in an initial self-evaluation process and in meetings and training webinars. A questionnaire about the state of the art of leadership practices that was structured on the following sections was administered to

all school staff: professional background, decision-making processes, levels of school organization, curriculum and teaching management, and initial and continuous professional development. To detect the starting condition of each school with respect to the three strategic areas, the following self-assessment tools already tested within European projects were used: for the innovative use of ICT, the Future Classroom Lab Maturity Model; for digital citizenship, the eSafety label; and for STEM, the STEM School Label.¹

The Future Classroom Model is a self-assessment tool that allows schools to reflect on their teaching and their ability to introduce and use technology-supported innovations. This model is part of the Future Classroom Toolkit, a set of tools developed by the EUN to support schools to enhance the innovation process and build technology scenarios for the classroom of the future. The other tool proposed to schools participating in the L2C project was the eSafety, with the aim of providing European educational institutions with tools for acquiring knowledge and awareness with respect to the level of online safety of the school. L2C participants had the opportunity to use the self-analysis tool and to take advantage of the support of the project's online community.

Finally, through the STEM School Label, participants could evaluate their school according to the criteria that define a STEM school. This self-assessment tool identifies areas that require development and provides training and resources, with the goal of improving activities in the STEM field.

The focus of the implementation phase was the creation of a Shared Leadership Team within each school and the definition of an improvement intervention related to one or more strategic areas based on the results of the self-assessment. The Shared Leadership Teams were supported by the national and European project groups through training that included participation in national in-person workshops and the Shared Leadership in Your School MOOC on the EUN Academy platform.

For planning of the intervention, specific planning tools were used, inspired by the Theory of Change² used by all schools involved in the project in Italy and in other countries. During the implementation phase of the interventions, the members of the Shared Leadership Teams could confront each other by participating in exchange visits between schools, focus groups and policy meetings at the national level, and international workshops.

The final phase of the project included moments of final assessment through a new administration of the leadership questionnaire and a new use of self-assessment tools. In addition, this phase was characterized by the construction of the international network and activities for the dissemination of project results. The network of experimenting schools and MOOC were opened to all interested schools, both at the national and European levels.

At the end of the project, two international events were held: the L2C 2020 Final Conference and the Shared Leadership School Webinar. The closing conference of the project was an important opportunity to emphasize how shared leadership can be an effective approach for the school system to proceed in its educational mission with a spirit of collaboration and solidarity, considering the emergency period related to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (Harris & Jones, 2019). The Shared Leadership School Webinar was an online meeting open to all European schools, in which teachers and head teachers exchanged experiences and ideas to put into practice shared leadership at school.

2.2 Lesson learned and recommendations

During the three years 2018–2020, the L2C project provided some quantitative and qualitative research actions to appreciate the effect of the project on the participants' readiness to implement shared leadership practices. A sequential explanatory mixed-method research model was adopted (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), which involved the administration of questionnaires and the use of pre- and post-intervention self-assessment tools for the quantitative part and the implementation, at the end of the project, of focus groups to examine in depth some of the dimensions covered by the questionnaires.

Below are described and analyzed the results of the questionnaires, the deviation in the positioning of the schools with respect to self-evaluation, and a cross-sectional reading of the focus groups on the enabling and hindering factors to the implementation and dissemination of shared leadership practices in schools.³

Between August and October 2020, a questionnaire had been run concerning leadership practices in the schools after the whole set of activities took place.

A total of 21 schools received the questionnaire (five schools each from Spain, Belgium, and Portugal; three schools each from Italy and Malta), for a total of about 1600 participants in the survey.

The questionnaires were structured around four main areas of shared leadership, each one divided into several subdimensions: setting a direction, redesigning school organization, managing instructional programs, and developing people. The results have been compared to the same questionnaire run before the start of the activities, that is, in autumn 2019.

In total, 620 respondents took the final questionnaire; 17% of them were school leaders and the remaining 83% were teachers. The most frequently encountered profile pointed to female professionals with more than 10 years of teaching experience, between 40 and 59 years old, and working full-time.

¹ <http://l2c.eun.org/tools>

² <https://www.nesta.org.uk/toolkit/theory-change>

³ The analysis of the results and the elaboration of the graphs were taken from the project deliverable. J. De Creamer, E. Martin, P. Wastiau, P. Garner, (eds.), *Innovative guideline for school leadership. Learning Leadership for Change (L2C)*, 2020.

Below are presented some of the results that emerged, maintaining the comparison between the two perspectives of the head teachers and the teachers.

The survey questions were closed with a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = this has not been practiced by teachers or school leaders in our school; 2 = we have started to move in this direction; 3 = we have made good progress here; 4 = we have had this condition well established; and 5 = we have refined our well-established practice in this area. Series 1 (blue line) corresponds to the run of the questionnaire in the 2019 autumn and series 2 (orange line) to the results at the end of the project.

At the end of the project, school heads consider *The capacity and action to set a direction in a shared way* has progressed in all its dimensions and, in particular, in its originally less-developed dimensions, like providing professional support to teachers, demonstrating trust and mutual respect, collaborating with the school community, and involving parents in a structured way. Such a result suggests a positive effect of the set of activities involving the participants on their capacity to further develop shared leadership in their school; it also suggests a strategic capacity to address the weakest points and better balance the diverse components of the overall capacity of the school to define a direction for its development (see Fig. 1).

Teachers also agree with this opinion, but to a lesser extent than school leaders do; teachers even consider some dimensions did not progress or slightly regressed; such an opinion applies to sharing a vision, whole school collaboration, and discussion concerning new ideas about teaching and learning. Such a result might suggest a possible high level of expectation from the teacher side that has not been fulfilled (see Fig. 2).

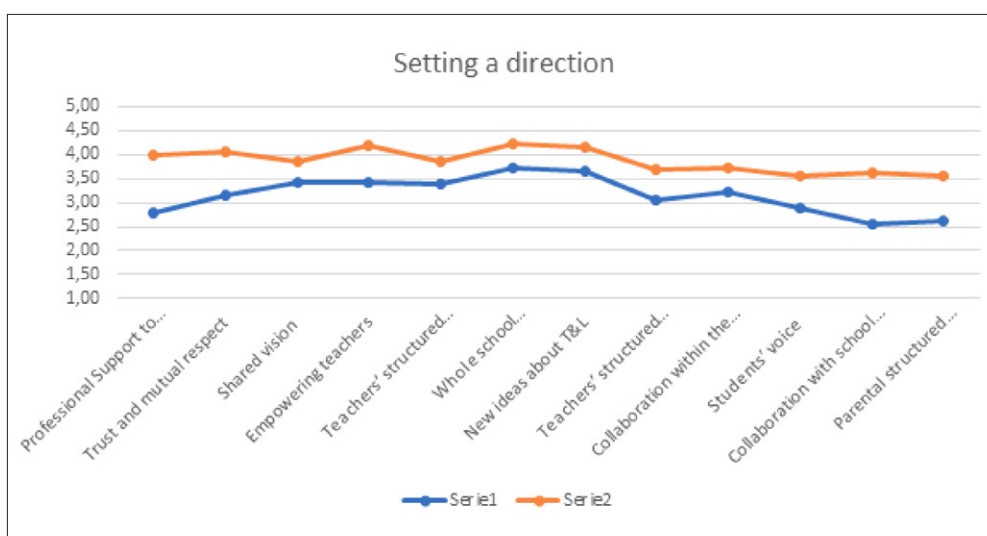


Fig.1. Setting a direction – school leaders' answers

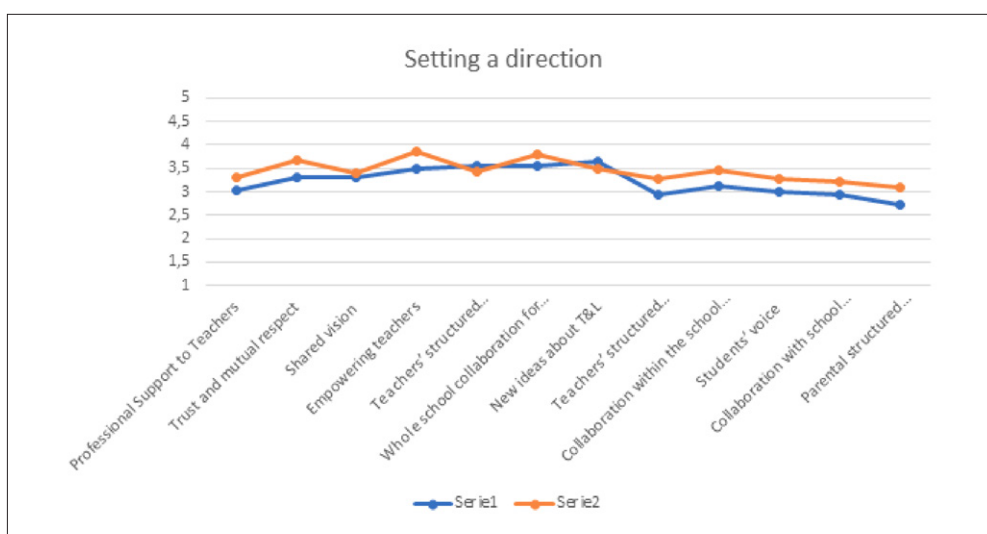


Fig.2. Setting a direction – teachers' answers

Concerning the dimension *Redesigning the school organization in a shared way*, both teachers and head teachers agree that it was already well established from the start of the project, and that it has remained almost the same at the end, except for what concerns the organization of structured peer learning, where they perceive, and teachers even more, noticeable

progress has been made (see Figs 3 and 4). Teachers also appreciate an important improvement in planning dedicated time for collaboration and concerning professional development. Such different perceptions of teachers could be explained by three factors: the peer-learning component of the L2C project itself has been inspiring for similar practice and arrangements to be *replicated* or *adopted*; teachers' expectation has been better matched; and teachers are direct beneficiaries of such practices, and their benefits are more concrete and *tangible* for them.

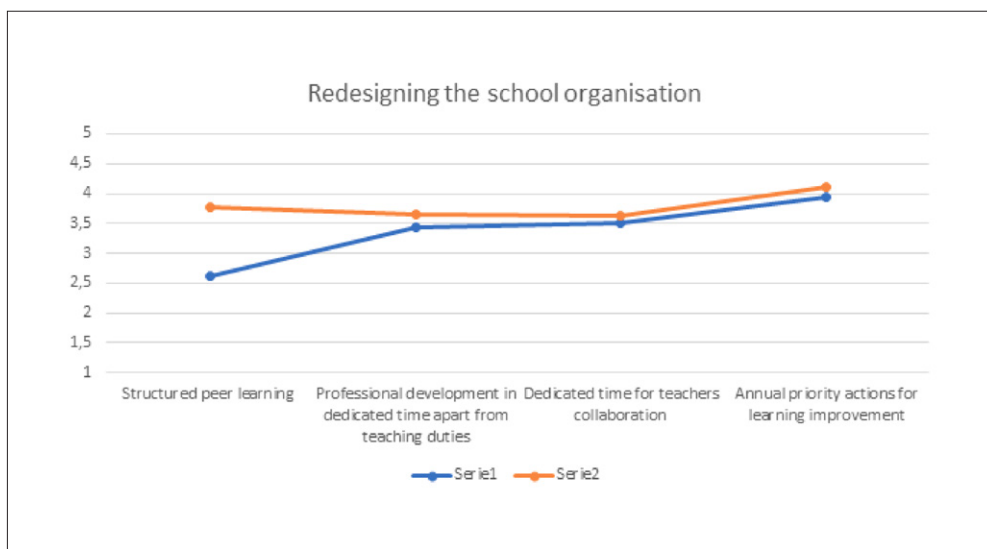


Fig. 3. Redesigning the school organization – school leaders' answers

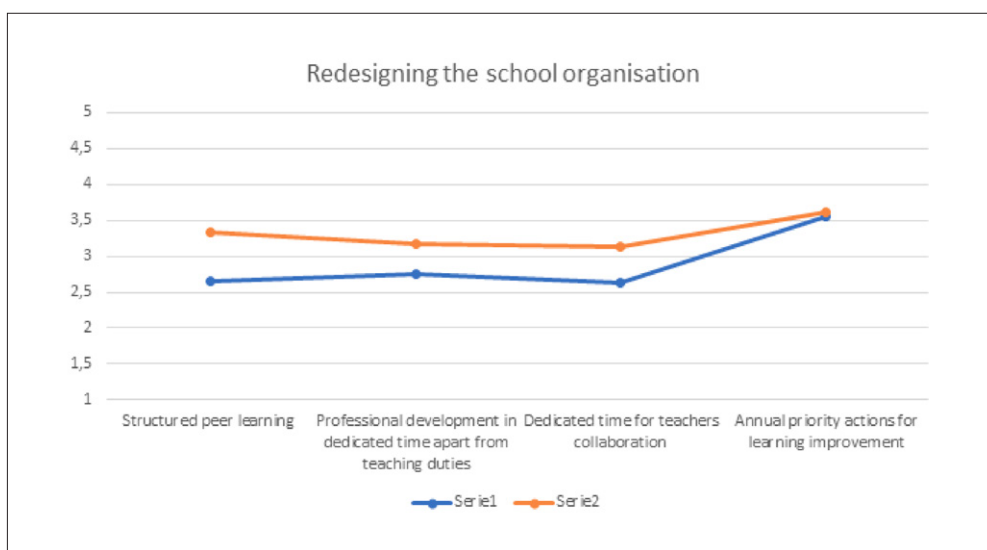


Fig.4. Redesigning school organization – teachers' answers

The dimension that highlighted the greatest discordance of vision between head teachers and teachers is the one related to the management of instructional programs in a shared way in two areas: teacher leadership in assessment and in leading meetings. Both head teachers and teachers agree that the pedagogical–didactic leadership of the teachers was already well established before the project and there were no substantial changes. Head teachers do not consider teachers leading meetings has become a more established practice, contrary to teachers thinking it has progressed, even in a noticeable way. With respect to the definition of evaluation practices, the head teachers see the most significant improvement, in sharp contrast to the opinion of the teachers (see Figs 5 and 6).

Regarding the first point, the different opinion between teachers and head teachers can be linked to the activities and meetings that teachers have managed for participation in the L2C project, which were, therefore, not considered by head teachers as established practices but connected to project needs. Regarding the second aspect, the divergence of opinions can be explained in part by the period in which the final questionnaires were administered, that is, during the COVID-19 sanitary crisis that began in March 2020. With the lockdown period and the starting of distance learning, it was necessary for the teachers to substitute usual assessment practices by *self-crafted* assessment solutions designed as a matter of urgency and need. While this action was considered positively by the school leaders, the teachers had a different perception, considering it a practice linked to the emergency and therefore with limited potential for sustainability.

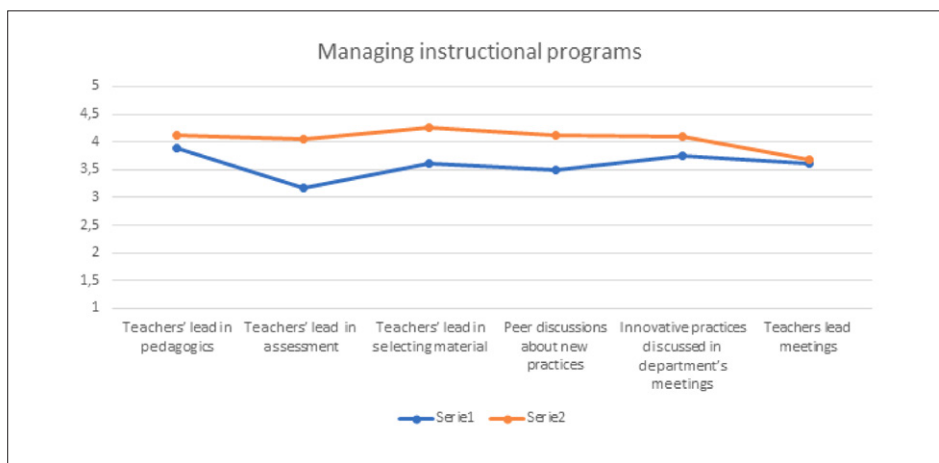


Fig. 5. Managing instructional programs – school leaders' answers

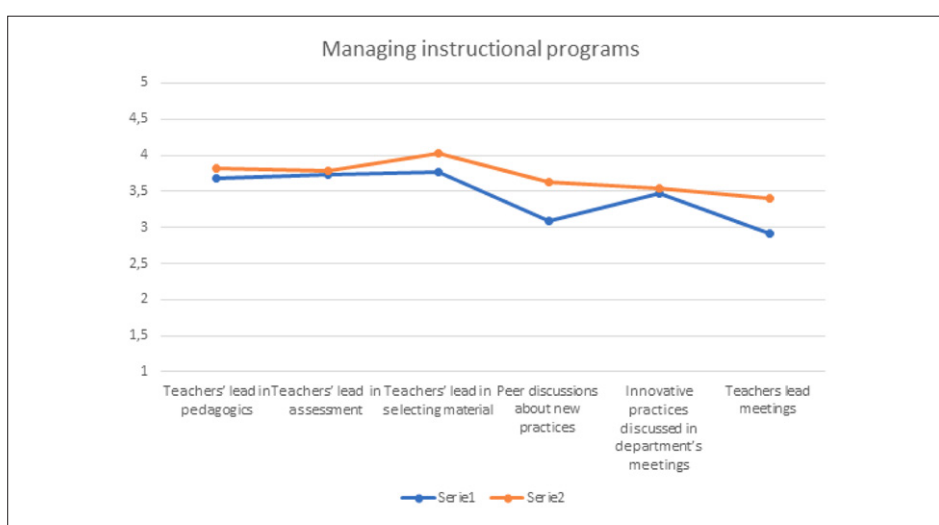


Fig.6. Managing instructional programs – teachers' answers

The last dimension examined by the questionnaires, related to *Developing people*, appears from the responses of teachers and school leaders to be one in which the practices shared at the beginning of the project were absent or at an initial level, especially regarding teachers' voice in hiring staff and determine professional development programs (see Figs 7 and 8).

At the end of the project, all the indicators were significantly improved in both the teachers' and the school leaders' questionnaires, especially the answers concerning these latter two items and the teachers' use of colleagues' practices in their classrooms. Again, these results can be read as the synergistic effect of two variables: participation in the L2C project and the experience of distance learning during the lockdown. In fact, the emergency allowed teachers to move with greater autonomy to meet urgent instructional needs, while at the same time reinforcing the need to join forces to address those difficult circumstances.

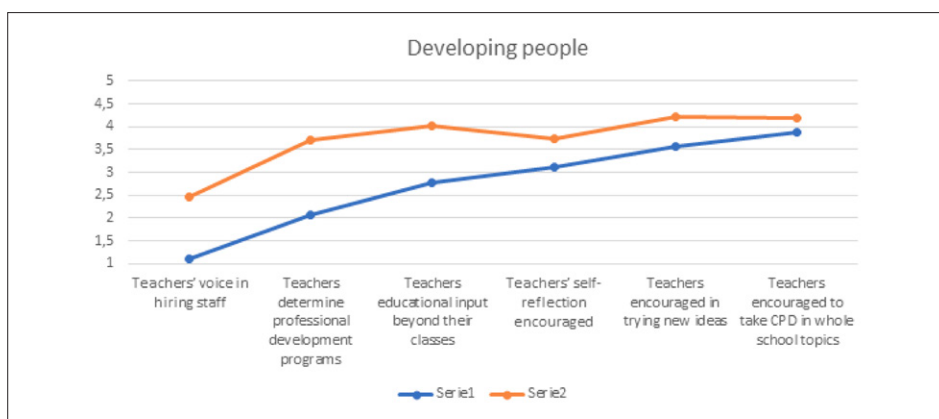


Fig.7. Developing people – school leaders' answers

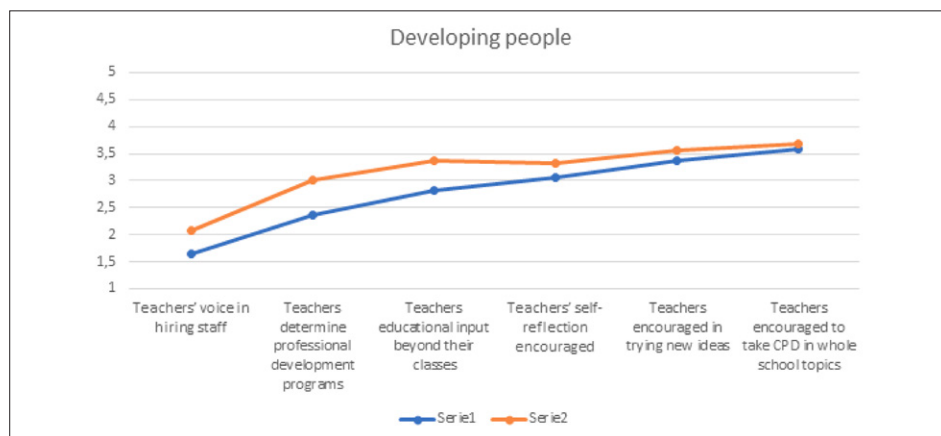


Fig.8. Developing people – teachers' answers

Beyond the progress observed in the various dimensions with respect to adopting a shared leadership approach, the analyses note that small but significant changes can occur even in a time frame as limited as the one examined (just over a year). The research suggests that being able to make these small changes organic is the best way to transform an autocratic and paternalistic leadership style into an expanded shared leadership approach. Although this model is not easy to implement and involves a large investment in terms of time and commitment and effective collaboration, the analysis shows that both teachers and school heads were able to appreciate its potential and positive effects.

In addition to the questionnaires, the overall design of the research also included the pre- and post-intervention administration of the self-assessment tools described in the previous paragraph and the conduct, at the end of the project, of national focus groups in which each partner involved the teams of participating schools, a representative of the EUN, and an external evaluator.

The comparison between the initial and final results of the self-evaluation tools highlighted how the project activities had a positive effect on the perception of schools in relation to the three strategic areas, significantly about the Future Classroom Maturity Model and especially for the indicators, student involvement and the school's ability to support innovation in the classroom, which went from level 2 to level 3 and in some cases to level 4 (scale from 1 Exchange to 5 Empower).⁴

Finally, a cross-sectional reading of the five focus groups has made it possible to understand, even with the characterizations of the different national contexts, what were the enabling conditions and the impeding factors for the implementation and diffusion of shared leadership practices.

In all five countries, some shared leadership practices were already in place, but participation in the L2C project allowed schools to become more aware of the processes and to promote their dissemination both internally and through the creation of school networks. Especially during the lockdown period, the level of collaboration and sharing of responsibilities increased, which allowed for a quick and effective response to the emergency, ensuring the inclusion of all students and facilitating the building of a sense of community. The role of the head teacher is indeed fundamental but can be ineffective if it is not supported by the willingness and responsibility of all the actors involved to support the transition from teaching school to educating school.

Some structural critical issues also emerge from the focus (except for Spain) that could represent significant obstacles: the possibility of recognizing and valuing professionally the teachers most committed and involved from the organizational point of view (Italy), a certain resistance to change on the part of some teachers who fear an increase in workload on the implementation of this approach, and the lack of time to devote to discussion and listening to all the actors in the school community. Finally, it was noted that the initial and continuous training of teachers is not adequate for the tasks that await teachers in the school of complexity, and the emergency period has precisely highlighted these gaps.

Overall, at the end of the project experience, the research team identified as a positive aspect the international nature of the partnership that made the project a broad and diverse laboratory for pilot testing. In addition, it was possible to investigate a wide range of different policy contexts and school systems and compare the results obtained, identifying conclusions and recommendations based on practical experience. However, it is worth mentioning that, despite the effort to involve key policy actors, one of the difficulties faced by the project (especially in the Italian context) was the lack of capacity to integrate policies and develop large-scale approaches to disseminate good practices, although, at the end of the project, participants proposed effective strategies for sustaining a network focused on shared leadership practices.

The project results were shared back with the community of the partners at the European level through multiple dissemination actions as follows:

- a final conference that took place online on the 26th and 27th of November 2020;
- innovative guidelines;

⁴ <http://fcl.eun.org/documents/10180/14691/2.2+FCMM+reference+guide.pdf/5fe0addb-3934-436c-aba3-8693bf90a95a?version=1.0>

- project website (<http://l2c.eun.org>), where stakeholders can find videos, the materials of the final conference, the final report, and MOOC;
 - project Facebook group (facebook.com/groups/l2c.eu); and
 - dissemination materials (brochure entitled “Lessons learned and recommendations”).
- Moreover, all partner countries shared reports at the national level with participating schools.

Conclusions

In most EU countries, school leadership is traditionally shared (when shared) among formal leadership teams (Eurydice, 2013). In most cases and depending on the school's size, this means that the deputy head, an administrative assistant or an accountant, possibly joined by main subject teachers and/or pedagogical adviser, supports the school head. Several countries (like Spain, Italy, Portugal) also refer to the participation of teaching and nonteaching staff, parents, students, and the local community through school boards, student councils, and teachers' assemblies in governance. The school head is then exercising collective leadership by collaborating and negotiating with these stakeholders.

Shared leadership at school, based on autonomy and accountability, is an important driver of change toward inclusive learning and teaching (Licht et al., 2020).

Finding better and more innovative ways to communicate and disseminate evidence from policy, practice, and research about shared leadership is strategic. Internal communication has a crucial role to ensure that no one is left behind (UN-SDG, 2019; Booth & Ainscow, 2008) and to involve nonteaching staff in the shared leadership processes (Martin et al., 2018). Reflection and sharing within and between schools have to become a common and frequent practice. Communication should be seen as part of the democratization process of the school, opening its practices and bringing transparency to the whole educational community (Cocco, 2020; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1997).

When implementing shared leadership, there should be a focus on the lighthouse leaders, whose main function is to involve people in the process and keep the community active and growing. These more informal teams do not remove the need for the so-called formal intermediate management structures. Formal leaders, however, must be in line with and supporting these lighthouse leaders. It is also essential for the shared leadership approach to create sharing networks that include local and regional strategic partners to reinforce the sustainability of these innovative practices (Murray, Caulier-Grice & Mulga, 2010).

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