What are school leaders in Italy doing? An observational study

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Abstract
It is widely acknowledged that high-quality leadership is one of the main ingredients of successful schools and that leaders have a significant and positive impact on student outcomes. At the same time, little is known about how principals use their time, what they do on a day-to-day basis and how this may vary across schools. A review of the relevant literature shows that few studies have used qualitative methods as their sole form of data collection. The paper draws on data derived from a comprehensive study involving principals, other school leaders and teachers in the Italian northern region of Trento. It focuses on observation studies of eight principals over five consecutive days each. Whilst respecting the best-known ethnographic and observational studies conducted internationally, we have built a new observational classification tool which explored the work of the principals under different categories/activities. This study shows that in spite of working in a highly-centralised and prescribed context, the Italian principals carried out various acts of leadership in the way they engaged with the different categories of their work. The findings provide evidence that expresses similarities across the eight principals and unique ways of how they were leading their schools.

Keywords
Principal, leadership, observation, schools, Italy

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged and the international research provides 'consistent evidence' (Day and Sammons, 2013: 3) that high-quality leadership is one of the main ingredients of successful schools and that leaders have a significant and positive impact on student outcomes (e.g. Day et al., 2011; Hallinger and Huber, 2012; OECD, 2013). At the same time, observational studies, diaries and logs completed by principals show that their work is fragmented, relentless and stressful. The key question that we wanted to address as part of a more comprehensive study undertaken in Trento, a northern region in Italy, was what can be learned about the principalship from how principals spend their time, and possibly more importantly, what can they learn through the feedback

garnered through such a research approach? Whilst acknowledging the potential limitations of such a methodological approach and that there is no intention of claiming that such a study is representative of what is happening in other schools or regions in Italy, we recognise that such studies can serve as 'a powerful tool which has the potential to support the personal and professional development of … headteachers' (Earley and Bubb, 2013: 795).

For this purpose, we have built a new observational classification tool which explores the work of the principal under different categories/activities and with a different approach. Extant literature shows a clear distinction between what is management and what is leadership, and therefore between the particular activities employed in each function. From a methodological point of view, the practices of school principals are studied using interviews or teacher questionnaires with a detailed categorisation of activities based on the particular interests of the researcher (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood et al., 2003; Scheerens, 2012; Shatzer et al., 2014). On the other hand, observational studies tend to focus mainly on how much time school principals dedicate to different activities during a typical work day. Both interviews and questionnaires and the quantitative analysis on the distribution of time do, however, underestimate the complexity of the work of school principals because they tend to focus the attention on issues related to "what" principals do and for "how long" they do it while they do not allow to investigate in depth "how" they do it, exploiting the behavioural, relational and communicative skills, which are the quintessence of the concept of leadership. Therefore, whilst observation studies mainly report the amount of time dedicated to different categories of the principal's work, we have taken this a step further. Given the elaborate notes taken during the observation period, we could actually identify *how* the different tasks were undertaken, hence exploring the leadership aspects that the principals used in their interactions with others. This helped the observers to see the leadership approaches used by the principal to be an effective leader not only from a task-oriented approach but also as a person who leads by example. This helps to give life and meaning to Sparks' (2005) statement that what leaders think, do and say matters.

The authors are of the opinion that it is the act itself, how one undertakes actions, that determines whether an activity is actually an aspect of leadership or not (Leavitt, 2005; Mintzberg, 2009). So, rather than creating clear-cut categories/dimensions to fill in, we asked the researchers as observers to note and reflect on how they perceived the various activities were undertaken following a template on transformational leadership developed by Leithwood et al. (1999; 2003), and initially described in Leithwood and Poplin (1992).

This paper begins with an overview of the literature on what is known about how principals spend their time. This is followed by the contextualisation of the study by briefly presenting the Italian educational context. After a description of the research methodology adopted, the paper presents the findings about how the eight principals spent their time. The paper then presents a critique of the findings and concludes by presenting a number of implications that can influence how principals look into their use of time, be a tool for leadership development, and influence further research.

The principals' use of their time

Comprehensive and increasingly systematic reviews on leaders and leadership demonstrate that the quality of leadership can be a critical factor in supporting school improvement (Day et al., 2011; OECD, 2013). Recently there has been a move towards mixed methods approaches to investigate the role of leadership (Sammons et al., 2014) providing a broader perspective and understanding of the impact leaders have on school improvement and student attainment. This review highlights the

observational research that has been undertaken to address the question of how principals actually spend their time, providing us with another 'piece' of the 'mosaic' that is so important to understand the complexity that leaders engage themselves in on a daily basis.

The substantial time constraints under which principals operate, have tackled the question of the effectiveness of their time in relation to school success. Grissom et al. (2013) find no relation between time spent on instructional activities and school improvement, while walkthroughs provide ambiguous results, proving to lead to professional development as well as creating negative results. On the other hand, principals who allocate time to teachers enhance trust among teachers, building shared commitment to school goals and improving performance (Bryk et al, 1993). Therefore, the way principals spend their time impacts considerably on the school climate and students' learning (Camburn et al., 2010; Leithwood and Poplin, 1992).

The first observation studies conducted in the late 1970s (e.g. Edwards, 1979; O'Dempsey, 1976) and those conducted in the early 1980s (Earley and Bubb, 2013; Kmetz and Willower, 1982; Martin and Willower, 1981) to more recent studies (Camburn et al., 2010; Horng et al., 2010; Willis, 1980) showed that principals' work was susceptible to interruption, superficiality of treatment and shifts of location. Work was characterised by variety, brevity and fragmentation. They dealt with things as they arose. Their day tended to be dictated by others and events rather than by planned activities. Principals exhibited a marked preference for verbal rather than written communication. This manifested itself through a focus on interpersonal relationships, use of meetings, visits and tours of the school. They devoted a substantial part of their time to face-to-face discussion, telephone conversations, attendance at various structured meetings, tours and visits, and lastly but much frequently, desk work (Duignan, 1980; Willis, 1980).

The more recent studies (e.g. Earley and Bubb, 2013) have helped to confirm the findings of other studies, namely the relentless nature of the principals' workload, the fast-paced nature of the work, the stress, and the wide variety of activities they engaged in.

The studies referred to above highlighted the need for principals to be flexible as they multitasked, being responsive to the unexpected. Other aspects of their working lives included personal relationships, in particular responding to the needs of others, conducting managerial tasks and engaging in leadership.

In summary, all of these studies consistently show that the work of principals is fast-paced, stressful, relentless, fragmented, involving a wide variety and range of activities and responsiveness to the needs of others. The principals spent much of their time dealing with administrative and managerial aspects of their job and this also involved them being more visible outside the school on official business. The ever-changing and dynamic contexts in which principals operated left an impact on the way they related to their job. What also stands out is the direct contact that principals sought with their staff. These are issues that have also surfaced in this study.

The Italian educational context

Against this backdrop, it is worth exploring, albeit briefly, the Italian educational context with particular reference to the study that the authors have been involved in. It helps us to appreciate how the research methodology and study reported in this paper came to be. This study was conducted in the Autonomous Province of Trento situated in the North East of Italy, bordering both Austria and Germany. The education system of the Province consisted of 78 school principals, 7690 teachers and 70,472 students. Public funding accounts for around 80% of the total expenses incurred by the schools.

The examination of the work of the school principal in this region was deemed important owing to the fact that the region has more autonomy than other parts of Italy and also greater levels of

school accountability. The national and regional education authorities define the objectives that schools need to address in addition to the objectives that each school identifies for itself and follow through a two-year School Development Plan. These objectives, in turn, are used in the evaluation of the school's performance, which also includes the principal's performance.

The region of Trento claims an evaluation system that was implemented in 1998, but it went through quite a number of changes over the years. Advances in the use of technology brought about changes related to the compilation, gathering and use of data. The regional authorities in Trento reorganised the use of data related to education, teaching and learning, in particular, responding to the needs of each school.

The student population has also changed dramatically over the past few years. Whilst in 1998 the foreign student population was 1264, by 2013 it had grown to 50,833, equivalent to 9.5% of the total student population. Furthermore, the possibility of conducting a regional, national and international comparison of results through participation in PISA (2012) showed that students in Trento achieve relatively higher grades than students in other regions of Italy, and are second only to Hong Kong, Singapore and North Korea internationally. Student results in the Trento region are on a par with those countries from continental Europe, and on various occasions have surpassed those in Central Europe such as Germany, Austria and Switzerland to which it has been linked to for geographical, historical and cultural reasons.

Given the geographical mountainous landscape of the region and the way the communities are spread out, it has been natural to create networks that respect the diversity within the localities. Two forms of networks have been established – networks that bring schools together, and another at an administrative level. The educational institutions are strongly attached to the context that they form part of and build their educational programmes based on shared needs.

The study

The main objective behind the use of the observation study was to find out how principals spent their days, the challenges they were facing and how acted as leaders. The observation study was also aimed at enlightening responses given to the interviews and questionnaires carried out as part of a comprehensive study undertaken by the authors (Gentile, 2015).

The Provincial Institute of Educational Research and Experimentation (IPRASE) in Trento launched in 2014 the project entitled 'Leadership and the process of school improvement'. This project was in line with a series of initiatives being undertaken by IPRASE in the field of leadership. The project came about as a result of a concerted drive to carry out research work in the area of leadership during 2010 to 2012. The continuing professional development programme was focused on the role of school administrators as change agents and instructional leaders. Eight schools were selected from a total number of 46 schools participating in the project which acceded to the request to participate in the observational study. The schools were chosen from across the region whilst having an equal distribution of school population, academic performance, representative of the various types of schools in the Italian school system, and a good heterogeneity of the principals' characteristics (age; gender; background). It is within this context that this study was undertaken. There were two main objectives behind this study: (1) to respond to the request from school leaders to receive feedback about their leadership, and (2) to provide the education authorities with research findings that would identify the professional development needs of school leaders.

To collate the data, we reviewed various collection methods used in other research studies, including the International Study of Principal Preparation (ISPP) (Cowie, 2011; Cowie and

Crawford, 2009, 2012), Bristow et al.'s (2007) categorisation of headteachers' activities, Horng et al. (2010), and a more recent study by Earley and Bubb (2013).

The method chosen to collate the observations can have an important bearing on the final outcome and how things may be interpreted. Earley and Bubb (2013) bring this out quite clearly as they revised and refined the categories that Bristow et al. (2007) had developed. So, whilst following a predetermined template with specific categories/dimensions to fill in the researchers were encouraged to take field notes and to reflect on how these activities were undertaken by the principal. The eight dimensions of leadership are based on the transformational leadership framework developed by Leithwood et al. (1999, 2003), and initially described in Leithwood and Poplin (1992). The eight dimensions of leadership are: (i) promoting a shared vision; (ii) building consensus around school objectives; (iii) providing intellectual stimulation; (iv) providing individual support; (v) setting a good example; (vi) having high expectations for performance; (vii) building a collaborative organizational structure; (viii) recognizing and strengthening the culture of the school. The categories of managerial work are distincted in (i) management; (ii) administrative and (iii) personal matters. The researchers also spent time with the principals during and after the school day to clarify issues that needed more elaboration. At the end of each day of observation, the researchers kept in touch to engage and discuss matters related to the days' observations. The notes were later given to the principals in order to have a confirmation on what and how the researcher interpreted the events. The conversations held between the researchers and the principals did not only help the researcher to clarify observations and conclusions drawn or provide an opportunity for the principals to justify their actions and behaviours, but it served as an opportunity to reflect on their practices, the way they went about their daily work. The principals saw this as another 'learning opportunity', one that provided them with the possibility of engaging with someone who was directly observing their work and hence an opportunity to improve their practices.

Whilst observation studies mainly report the amount of time dedicated to different categories of the principal's work we have taken this a step further. Given the detailed notes taken during the observation period, we could actually identify *how* the different tasks were undertaken, hence exploring which aspects of leadership the principals used in their interactions with others. The eight dimensions of leadership are based on the transformational leadership framework developed by Leithwood et al. (1999, 2003), and initially described in Leithwood and Poplin (1992).

Findings

The observation studies presented us with some interesting findings. The work of the principal was characterised, for most of the time, by variety and fragmentation. To a large extent the school principals' activities were frequently of short duration. Most of these activities tended to arise spontaneously out of the milieu of the daily life of the school. A substantial amount of the principals' work appeared to involve what may be termed 'putting out fires', as the school principals responded to situations arising throughout the school day. The trend was for them to move from one encounter to another, both by their own choice – following their own agenda, and because of the pressure of work.

The principals' work also alternated between school affairs, common affairs shared with other schools (mostly within the same network) and external business. The overall impression given was that the school principals were beginning, in the middle of, and ending numerous issues all at the one timesome dormant but any of them likely to re-emerge to demand their attention. Although handling such issues may drain one's energy the school principals seemed in control of things. As

Table 1. Duration of activities (in minutes).

		1^0	2^0	3^0	4^0	5^0	6^0-11^0	12^0-15^0	16^0-20^0	$>20^0$	Total
School 1	no. activities	20				44	33	22	12	47	178
	%	11%				25%	19%	12%	7%	26%	
School 2	no. activities	35	41	25	13	33	52	15	17	30	261
	%	13%	16%	10%	5%	13%	20%	6%	7%	11%	
School 3	no. activities	1	1	3	1	39	29	16	9	59	158
	%	1%	1%	2%	1%	25%	18%	10%	6%	37%	
School 4	no. activities	5	5	9	3	15	20	20	8	44	129
	%	4%	4%	7%	2%	12%	16%	16%	6%	34%	
School 5	no. activities	1				24	27	15	10	46	123
	%	1%				20%	22%	12%	8%	37%	100%
School 6	no. activities	125	37	48	25	17	73	20	23	27	395
	%	32%	9%	12%	6%	4%	18%	5%	6%	7%	100%
School 7	no. activities	2	1	4	2	13	11	5	7	36	81
	%	2%	1%	5%	2%	16%	14%	6%	9%	44%	100%
School 8	no. activities	0	0	1	2	14	19	10	4	38	88
	%	0%	0%	1%	2%	16%	22%	11%	5%	43%	100%
	Sum (Σ)	189	85	90	46	199	264	123	90	327	
	Average (μ)	23.63	14.17	15.00	7.67	24.88	33.00	15.38	11.25	40.88	
	Std. Dev. (σ)	42.79	19.35	18.36	9.58	12.25	20.22	5.66	6.09	10.32	

all this was happening most of the principals observed took notes of points that needed further discussion or looking into, things that could finally be ticked from the list that they had prepared or that needed more reflection.

The principals accepted these short bursts of work activity. On no occasion was there any overt sign from the principals or others in the 'disturbed' situations that such shortened attention to an issue was anything but an everyday phenomenon. The brevity of the principals' activities is shown in Table 1. The majority of activities are between 1 and 5 minutes (43.09%). A significant percentage of time (23.14%) involved work taking longer than 20 minutes. This usually entailed reading through documents, preparing and drafting reports. In fact, the majority of activities that occupied more than 20 minutes were usually held in the afternoon or else involved sessions such as preparing reports for the regional office, attending networking sessions, attending regional meetings, driving to venues, and going out for lunch. This goes to show that the principals were, in spite of the brief encounters, in control of events. This was due to strong organisational skills, the ability to delegate responsibilities, giving clear directions, acting upon issues immediately (when possible), and if not, taking notes to tackle at a later stage, and summarising decisions taken.

Scheduled and unscheduled time

A significant determinant of the varied and curtailed nature of the principal's work was the occurrence of interruptions that contributed to the sense of discontinuity in the principal's performance. Table 2 shows the proportion of time, both scheduled and unscheduled spent on different types of work. For instance, conversations and internal calls are characterised by a balanced distribution of programmed and non-programmed activities, while desk work, internal calls, meetings and visits are mainly programmed. Most scheduled events took place in the principal's office. On the

Table 2. The distribution of time in programmed and non-programmed activities.[1]

		Conversations	Desk Work	External Calls	Internal Calls	Meetings	Visits	Other
School 1	Programmed	1.2	18.2	1.3	0.1	17.3	4.9	5.0
	Non-Programmed	2.7	0.3	2.0	0.5	0.4	0.9	-
School 2	Programmed	9.6	0.4	0.1	0.1	7.4		
	Non-Programmed	14.1	3.8	0.1	0.5	1.7	1.7	2.5
School 3	Programmed	1.0	7.4	2.0	2.4	11.5	3.1	4.0
	Non-Programmed	0.7	0.0	0.2	0.5	2.8	0.0	1.3
School 4	Programmed	0.5	13.6	1.0	1.0	17.1	1.5	9.5
	Non-Programmed	0.6	0.3	0.1	0.8	3.8	-	1.4
School 5	Programmed	10.6	35.2	0.1	26.6	8.9	1.8	8.1
	Non-Programmed	2.0	0.3	0.6	2.8	1.8	0.4	
School 6	Programmed	7.3	0.1	0.1	-	5.2	-	-
	Non-Programmed	0.3	0.8	0.7	2.3	10.9	0.8	5.0
School 7	Programmed	1.7	1.5	-	-	32.5	-	3.7
	Non-Programmed	4.2	1.2	1.9	0.2	0.4	-	2.4
School 8	Programmed	0.8	14.6	0.2	0.7	12.6	0.3	5.4
	Non-Programmed	2.2	1.2	0.1		2.1	0.1	
Total Activities (Σ)	Programmed	32.57	90.96	4.72	30.90	112.32	11.59	35.80
	Non-Programmed	26.78	7.88	5.69	7.49	23.88	3.86	12.55
Average of Activties (**μ**)	Programmed	4.07	11.37	0.59	3.86	14.04	1.66	5.11
	Non-Programmed	3.35	0.98	0.71	1.07	2.98	0.48	2.09
SD (σ)	Programmed	4.31	11.90	0.76	9.22	8.59	1.82	3.11
	Non-Programmed	4.54	1.20	0.81	1.02	3.38	0.61	1.67

[1]Driving time is excluded.

other hand, non-programmed events included brief conversations, outside and internal calls. The data show that principals spent most of their time engaged in scheduled matters, even though in two cases (schools 2 and 6), the scheduled activities have less frequency than unscheduled ones (see Figure 1).

Location

The greatest proportion of the principals' time at work was spent in their office (48%). This entailed addressing school matters of an educational or administrative nature, answering emails, handling files and other tasks, taking notes, meeting people. In their office principals were practically accessible at all times. People, whether teachers, administrative staff and students, knew where to locate them. Most of the principals adopted an 'open door' policy. Over almost 25 hours (42%), amounting to an average of 79 activities (61%), were spent there. The office is the hub of the principal's life in these schools, the central place where most activities take place. (see Table 3).

Although for most of the time the principals were in their offices carrying out a variety of tasks, pressures and duties called them to move around during parts of the day. Most of the interactions,

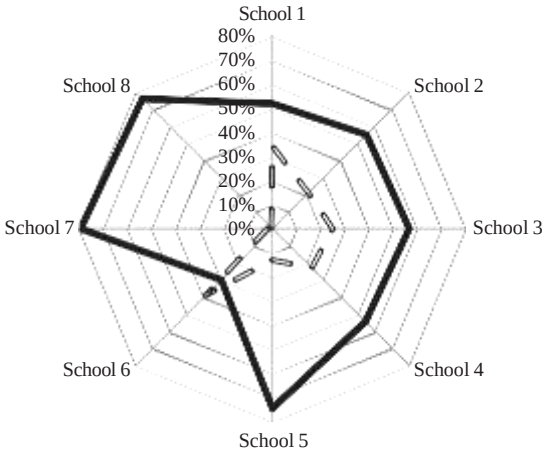

Figure 1. Distribution of activities with individual or combined aspects of leadership. Individual dimensions of leadership are presented with a straight line; combined aspects of leadership are presented with a dotted line.

Table 3. Time (in hours) spent in various places and number of activities within the working day.

		Office	Hall/Corridors/Classrooms and Auditoriums	Administrative Offices	Other Places	Home
School 1	No. activities	141	13	6	3	1
	Time	33.52	2.5	0.75	15.95	2
School 2	No. activities	118	67	29	14	
	Time	14.9	7.9	3.4	11.3	
School 3	No. activities	56	61		41	
	Time	31	19.25		12.55	
School 4	No. activities	89	22		18	
	Time	38	10.5		10.45	
School 5	No. activities	68	14	11	36	2
	Time	24.18	1.2	2.85	17.5	2.5
School 6	No. activities	81		28	51	4
	Time	18.8		35	11	4
School 7	No. activities	33	13		17	
	Time	13.31	11.95		24.7	
School 8	No. activities	47	11	1	18	
	Time	30	10.5	0.17	7.23	

whether taking place in the office or elsewhere, were mostly of the conversational type bringing out the people-oriented nature behind the work of the school leader.

Personal Contact

The school and its external environment provided a range of people with whom the principals came in contact. Despite the time spent on their own, their work is essentially a people-centred one. Only the principal of school 1 showed to be inclined towards indrawn activities (40% of the time alone).

Table 4. Time spent alone or with other persons (time in hours and minutes).

	Alone	School Personnel	Other Persons
School 1	20:57	12:52	17:10
School 2	06:08	03:52	05:06
School 3	02:25	00:56	11:45
School 4	18:44	21:02	10:31
School 5	21:32	22:56	01:16
School 6	14:11	21:33	06:21
School 7	07:49	10:33	07:35
School 8	07:49	04:35	11:33
Total (Σ)	99:35	98:19	71:17
Average (**μ**)	12:26	12:17	08:54

Table 5. Time spent with coordinators, teachers, administrative staff and students.

	Coordinators	Teachers	Administrative Staff	Students
School 1	06:46	03:26	02:13	00:27
School 2	05:20	18:51	09:07	00:57
School 3	08:55	11:55	03:00	00:40
School 4	07:25	08:01	05:05	00:31
School 5	07:29	10:59	01:13	00:19
School 6	00:54	03:13	06:32	13:12
School 7	02:25	06:41	05:57	00:31
School 8	05:13	10:33	07:21	04:08
Total (Σ)	44:27	73:39	40:28	20:45
Average (**μ**)	05:33	09:12	05:03	02:35

Contact with other people occupied 27% of their time. Table 4 summarises their time with people both internal and external to the school.

Table 5 shows the time spent with other people internal to the school. Most of the time was spent with teachers. Only the principal of school 1 exhibited more interest in having coordinating activities with close collaborators (06:46) while the principal of school 6 spent more time with the administrative staff rather than teachers or collaborators. In fact, this particular principal had strong channels of communication with the administrative staff that kept her informed of developments. The majority of the principals relied more on relations with teachers rather than collaborators or administrative staff.

The categories of the Principals' Work: Distribution of time on management, administrative and personal matters

The distribution of time in management, administrative or personal matters is shown in Table 6.

Under the category 'management', principals spend an average of almost 18 hours in managing teaching and learning (dimension A.1) with most of the focus on school improvement, planning

Table 6. Distribution of time by category and function during the observation.

School	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Tot.	Aver.
Category/Function										
A. MANAGEMENT										
A.1. Managing Instruction and Learning										
School improvement, planning and implementation	08:02	12:38	18:22	11:33	20:15	02:31	04:48	07:01	85:10	10:38
Mentoring and coaching		00:17	00:12	00:05	00:36		00:10	00:15	1:35	00:15
Monitors and examines regional and national directives	02:36		00:36	01:14				02:45	7:11	01:47
Classroom observations		00:31		01:03	04:23			00:16	6:13	01:33
Discussion on students learning		00:03	01:20			01:45	02:16	01:08	6:32	01:18
Assessment and examination	00:42							07:24	8:06	04:03
Observing students work		00:14				00:01	00:41	01:10	2:06	00:31
Student behavior	02:24	01:41	01:25	00:34	00:52	01:09	02:00	00:12	10:17	01:17
Walkabouts	01:31	00:30	05:38	01:52	00:50		02:42	01:25	14:28	02:04
Tours with students						00:35			0:35	00:35
Classroom teaching						00:32			0:32	00:32
Promotes CPD	00:15		00:47						1:02	00:31
Management (A.1) Total	15:30	15:54	27:33	16:21	26:56	06:33	13:02	21:36	143:25	17:58
A.2 Managing Relationships with Families and Community										
Builds learning relations with families	03:24	00:06		03:29	00:19	03:38	05:39	00:34	17:09	02:27
Builds partnerships with stakeholders	01:24	01:33		01:10	01:15	00:21	03:55	07:06	16:44	02:23
Relates and responds to the political, legal protocol to access additional funds	00:05	00:17					07:15		7:37	02:32
Forms part of a Network	03:35	02:55				00:04	05:55		12:29	03:07
Participates in regional and national debates and activities	05:50			00:45					6:35	03:17
Management (A.2) Total	14:18	04:51	00:00	05:24	01:34	04:03	22:44	07:40	60:34	07:34
B. ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS										
Allocates resources						00:54			0:54	00:54
Plans, organizes and coordinates the work	03:09	05:26	04:08	05:25	01:34	04:40	00:05	04:44	29:11	03:38
Addresses maintenance matters	00:48	00:23	00:05	02:07	00:15	05:15	00:22		9:15	01:19
Addresses HR matters	02:12				00:46	01:07		00:11	4:16	01:04
Manages finances and budget		00:10		00:10	01:42	00:50			2:52	00:43
Monitors school premises	00:07	00:16		00:11	00:30	00:24			1:28	00:17
Responds to emails, written communication; completes/ writes reports; takes calls	09:08	03:10	12:28	08:24	04:10	15:47	05:00	07:34	65:41	08:12
Addresses administrative matters		02:39				02:18	00:03		5:00	01:40
Travel	04:13	03:52	06:19	02:05	01:26	02:35		01:50	22:20	03:11
Administrative Matters (B) Total	19:37	15:56	23:00	18:22	10:23	33:50	05:30	14:19	140:57	17:37

(continued)

Table 6. (continued)

School	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Tot.	Aver.
C. PERSONAL MATTERS										
Discussion with the observer	01:33	03:39	01:25	01:51	04:40	05:34	01:55	02:35	23:12	02:54
Personal time	03:50	07:22	03:15	07:19	04:56	02:19	03:00	01:37	33:38	04:12
Personal Activities (C) Total	05:23	11:01	04:40	09:10	09:36	07:53	04:55	04:12	56:50	07:06
TOTAL	54:48	47:42	56:00	49:17	48:29	52:19	46:11	47:47	402:33	50:19

The eight dimensions of leadership are: 1. Promoting a shared vision; 2. Building consensus around school objectives; 3. Providing intellectual stimulation; 4. Providing individual support; 5. Setting a good example; 6. Having high expectations for performance; 7. Building a collaborative organizational structure; 8. Recognizing and strengthening the culture of the school.

and implementation, while dedicating 07:34 of time on managing relationships with family and community (dimension A.2).

The category 'administrative matters' represents the majority of activities undertaken by most of the principals. In fact, this category represents an average of 17:37 hours per week with some cases the amount of time dedicated going up to 33:50 per week. Most of the time is spent answering emails, preparing and writing official reports, answering phone calls, averaging at 8:12 hours per school. The principals travelled an average of three hours per week. In one particular case, travelling averaged at 6:19 hours. A similar amount of time was dedicated to planning, organising and co-ordinating work.

The category 'personal matters' involved an average of 7 hours per school. This time was mainly dedicated to short coffee breaks and lunch. Principals used this time as an opportunity to engage in discussions with others on work related matters or merely to socialise with members of staff.

From a task-oriented (what they do) to a behavioural (how they do it) analysis

The analysis on the distribution of time underestimates the complexity of the work of school principals because they tend to focus attention on issues related to 'what' principals do and for 'how long' they do it. Such analysis does not allow for in-depth investigation as to 'how' they do it, thus exploiting the behavioral, relational and communicative and emotional dimensions which are particularly important and central to effective and successful leaders' work (Berkovich and Eyal, 2016; Robinson et al., 2009). In order to counter this limitation, the researchers took detailed notes so that we could identify *how* the different tasks were undertaken, hence exploring the leadership aspects that the principals used in their interactions with others. This helped the observers to see the leadership approaches used by the principal not only from a task-oriented approach but also as a person who leads by example. This approach allowed the researchers to reflect on the notes they took following a template on transformational leadership developed by Leithwood et al. (1999; 2003), initially described in Leithwood and Poplin (1992).

Table 7 presents the activities with a focus on leadership. One can note that the activities that are leadership oriented within each school are: school improvement, planning and implementation; mentoring and coaching; student behaviour; walkabouts; building learning relationships with families; building partnerships with community stakeholders; planning, organising,

Table 7. Distribution of activities with individual or combined dimensions of leadership.

	Individual Dimensions of Leadership	Combined Dimensions of Leadership	No Dimensions of Leadership
School 1	52%	34%	14%
School 2	55%	21%	24%
School 3	57%	25%	19%
School 4	54%	23%	23%
School 5	74%	13%	13%
School 6	30%	39%	31%
School 7	79%	2%	18%
School 8	76%	1%	23%

co-ordinating and scheduling work, and answering emails. Figure 2 shows particular differences between the principals as they relate to leadership. For example, school 8 is mainly characterised by dimensions 1, 3, 5 and 7 of leadership as noted above. On the other hand, the principals of schools 1 and 6 adopt more activities related to 'providing individual support to teachers' (dimension 4 of leadership). School 7 is focused on dimension 1 – developing a collective sense of purpose. Dimension 8 is the most common feature in all schools with a focus on 'recognising and reinforcing the culture of the school'.

The results show that principals of schools 1 and 6 lead by putting clear and high expectations of performance and by providing individual support and intellectual stimulation to teachers. The principal of school 2 relies on the school culture to create a positive workplace climate for the school while setting a good example. The same can be said for the principals of schools 3, 4 and 5, which together show a common pattern of leadership behavior. Principals of schools 7 and 8 have a better distribution than the others on all the dimensions of leadership. They made a point of dealing personally with teachers and students, in creating a shared vision and setting a good example, and building the schools' culture.

Whilst the principals are transactional in nature – given the drive for external accountability (which we believe is needed) – we see these principals operating at a higher level which sees them not only ensuring that regional and national requirements are met but they act in a transformational mode. We conclude that it is this that ultimately makes a difference. They respect the fact that teachers need to be first and foremost treated as professionals and as such require less control and more inspiration. It is here that the character of the principals is crucial. The type of person you are, the values you uphold, the aspirations you have can inspire others to higher goals.

The findings reported in this paper show that the majority of the principals used leadership approaches to carry out their tasks. In most cases the principals, through what they did and said, were concerned with reinforcing the cultural dimensions of the school and nurturing a collaborative approach to doing things. Given current legal expectations this can be considered as a relatively significant finding. To take a few examples, one can conclude from Table 7 that in most situations principals adopted at least one dimension of leadership or combined different dimensions of leadership accounting for around 80% of activities. At least one dimension of leadership was used in 60% of initiatives whilst various dimensions of leadership were used in 20% of activities as they went along addressing school matters.

School goals are mostly determined by the demands of national and regional authorities. One notes that the eight principals observed do, however, show that various initiatives that give a

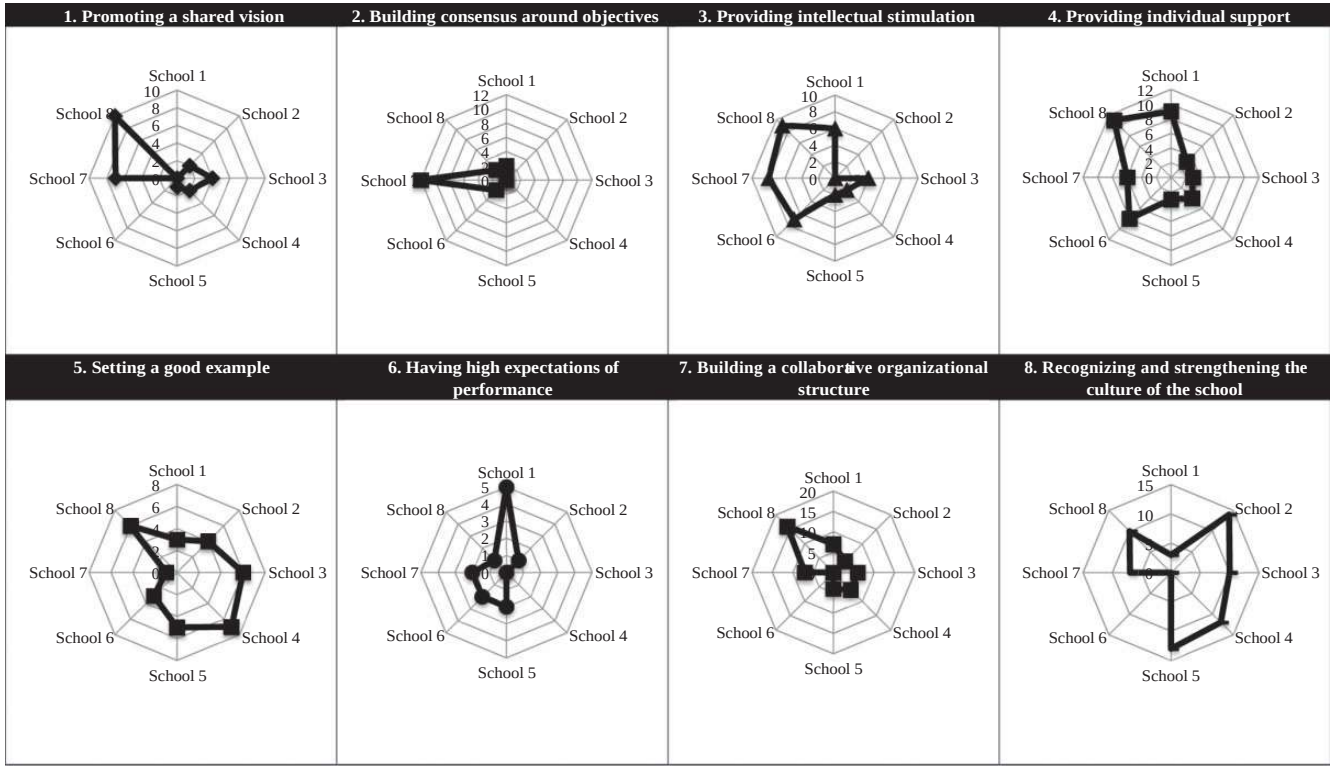

Figure 2. Distribution of activities of the eight dimensions of leadership between schools.

Table 8. Frequency of leadership dimensions within schools.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
School 1	6%	0%	0%	6%	17%	2%	23%	47%
School 2	0%	13%	15%	28%	1%	14%	28%	1%
School 3	19%	0%	8%	1%	21%	0%	22%	30%
School 4	12%	0%	3%	7%	25%	0%	21%	32%
School 5	13%	0%	6%	3%	22%	7%	17%	31%
School 6	13%	11%	0%	14%	21%	7%	13%	20%
School 7	17%	22%	18%	7%	4%	4%	9%	20%
School 8	17%	7%	15%	16%	11%	1%	17%	16%
Average (μ)	12%	7%	8%	10%	15%	4%	19%	24%

The frequences represent the time of the activities on which the principal showed a leadership characteristic of one of the eight dimensions, on the total time of the activities conducted. The eight dimensions of leadership are: 1. Promoting a shared vision; 2. Building consensus around school objectives; 3. Providing intellectual stimulation; 4. Providing individual support; 5. Setting a good example; 6. Having high expectations for performance; 7. Building a collaborative organizational structure; 8. Recognizing and strengthening the culture of the school.

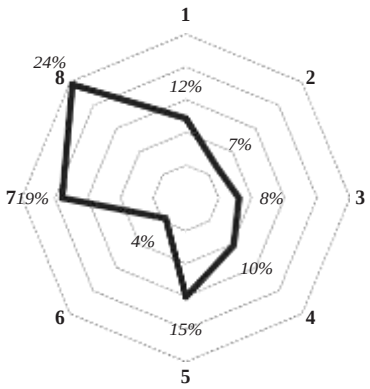

Figure 3. Average distribution of leadership dimensions between all schools.

particular character to the school are determined by the specific focus of the school leaders to take a leadership stance and as a result the involvement of their staff.In fact, one main finding across a number of the case studies is that the principals who promoted a leadership stance were those who created varied opportunities for engagement (e.g. time to meet up for a coffee before the start of the school day; visiting the teachers' staff room), allowed others to take initiative and bring forth ideas (e.g. participation in local/national events), provided genuine time for others to discuss professional and personal matters (i.e. staff knew that the principal was available), asked for clarification (i.e. showed interest and was focused), summarised and reviewed decisions taken (i.e. was task-oriented), and provided ongoing support (e.g. professionally and empathising with personal needs).

Table 8 presents the distribution of each leadership aspect per school, highlighting how much principals used different aspects of leadership to address school matters. On the other hand, Figure 3 presents the percentages of the overall distribution of the eight aspects of leadership for all schools. From Figure 3 we can see that there is emphasis on dimension

8 – recognizing and strengthening the culture of the school, followed by dimensions 7, 5 and 1. This shows that principals were mainly focused on creating opportunities for teachers to be directly involved in determining the way forward for the school, what the school stands for and they did so by modelling good practice thus reinforcing the transformational approach to leadership.

Discussion

The principal as person – the human dimension

The character of the principal. Whilst all the eight principals observed are unique individuals and each related to their school mission in particular ways they shared certain characteristics which help us to identify with particular traits, values and principles that they upheld. These, in turn, determined their practices. The principals are exemplary in nature. They believe that followership can be nurtured if people are shown exemplary beliefs and practices and do not just expect people to follow blindly.

As Northouse (2012) succinctly put it 'Your virtues, and hence your character, are derived from your actions' (p. 231). The principals gained *respect* because they expressed good manners throughout their encounters; were accessible to people both internal and external to the school. They expressed *care* by being receptive to individual needs, providing help to those who needed support and guidance. They expressed *responsibility* by reflecting, considering options, identifying choices, and held themselves accountable for their decisions.

The complexity of the work helps to bring out the personal characteristics, traits and attributes of the principal. Whilst there is a strong focus on IT systems and the systems in place guarantee open communication with staff, the community and regional/national agencies, they rely on face-to-face encounters. These help to show from their end an unfailing focus on the 'personal encounter', on engagement, on motivating staff as they get on with their work. In fact, the eight principals average at around 63% of their time interacting with others. This helps to nurture a positive culture, one based on open communication, collaborative endeavour and mutual support. The principals move around, communicate openly, share ideas, motivate, challenge staff, discuss, debate, deliberate, listen and take decisions.

Relationships are central to the principals' lives (Earley and Bubb, 2013). The way they interacted with staff, students, families and the wider community allowed us to appreciate the dynamics of school life. At times, what is needed is to ensure that things are in place – an administrative, matter-of-fact style is enough. For example, signing a letter or seeing that the school transport has arrived engages people in a particular manner. At given times of the day secretaries came in with forms or circulars to sign. Points were raised and clarified and documents signed. These usually took place either first thing in the morning or else early afternoon. Other issues, however, demanded more attention. For example, when the transport was late, then interactions were deemed critical. How people responded helped us to appreciate the way people viewed and undertook their roles. Were they assertive or aggressive in dealing with the administrative staff who needed to ensure that things were addressed? When a teacher was tardy, how did the principals react? Did they just mention regulations and that repercussions would follow if there was a repeat of the same thing the following day? This may be considered an administrative response. Or did the principal find a quiet time to engage with the person and try to understand what was happening, how she/he could help address the matter. This showed the human dimension, the compassionate

side of the principal, as she/he engaged with people in a context that first needs to be understood and then addressed. This engagement is a leadership one.

The way principals acted showed that attitudes, dispositions and approaches were contagious as the leaders made sure to engage with their staff in different and varied ways such as creating time for staff to engage with them socially; going to the staff room to greet the staff early in the morning; having the occasional coffee in the school canteen; taking time during lunch to talk shop in an informal setting; being available for students; and supporting after-school programmes. They took time to read legislation, and in Italy everything is centred around documents! However, they found time in the schedule to be able to go through it and know what needed to be done. They also gained respect for their ability to answer queries related to obligations, responsibilities and procedures that needed to be adhered too. They went prepared for sessions and made sure to have all the documentation needed. So, whilst they ensured that they complied with the demands of the regional and national policies, they also made sure to focus on developing a sustainable school life based on the knowledge, interests and skills of staff and community members.

Furthermore, confronted with a variety of tasks and frequent interruptions, the school leaders managed to create a working environment for themselves and those around them where most of the demanding work that requires research, reflection and more deliberation takes place in the afternoon or after school hours. They have created a modus operandi where all personnel know that they can be reached easily by the personnel in the morning and in the early hours of the afternoon. This is an interesting finding. It contrasts with a number of observational studies reviewed. Although part of the day may see the principal engulfed with various activities, we cannot state that the principals were caught up with the fast-paced, unrelenting nature of administrative work, or the garbage-can character of decision making (March and Olsen, 1976), or the problematic nature of decision making (Clerkin, 1985; Kmetz and Willower, 1982). These principals, although at times they were confronted by unscheduled events, they managed to adopt a proactive stance

The principals are reflective by nature and disposition. They do not rush into decisions and they explain and show the people that they encounter – internal and external to the school – that they take all concerns seriously. The principals allocated time to be on their own, to be with others to address and resolve issues. They are proactive by nature and whilst the demands may be on the increase, they do not take any rash decisions.

These eight cases show a group of principals who are committed to reflection. Whilst acknowledging and accepting their role in taking decisions, they do make staff aware that particular issues need more time and the involvement of others before decisions are taken. A more transformative style of leadership is being adopted.

Values and principles. Whilst there is strong evidence of professional autonomy at all levels, with a work ethic that is indeed commendable, this takes place within a formal and informal organisational structure based on the values of trust, integrity, open communication and mutual support. The schools in which the observational studies were conducted can be described as strong in what Bryk and Schneider (2002) describe as relational trust. The principals gained the trust of others by extending trust to them. In a context which lacks formal recognition of middle management this takes unprecedented importance. Leadership is being distributed through *acts of trust*: the principals encouraged and enabled the increasing distribution of leadership roles and responsibilities, broadening the level of participation where possible. They identified teachers with particular aptitudes to lead working groups focused on particular targets; they allocated time to being with them and addressing their needs and concerns.

They also *built and reinforced individual relational and organizational trust*: they interacted with staff, socialized and introduced structures and strategies to facilitate participation and collaboration.

They made sure that personnel knew where they were at all times. They operated an open door policy with staff knowing whether principals were available or not. Their office was the main meeting point. This is where they were mainly sought and found. This is where they engaged with whoever needed them. The fact that everyone came freely to their office shows that they had nurtured an atmosphere of trust and support. Staff knew that they could trust them with their own concerns, even personal problems. Principals also made sure to have coffee with staff and engaged during their official lunch break to establish networks with school staff and the community.

What is worthy of note is that these principals took each request made by teachers seriously. They were never dismissive. The fact that they, at times, took time and informed teachers or other stakeholders that they needed to reflect, seek information, etc., actually helped to gain them respect and trust. The personnel, students and community members knew that their input/concerns were being taken seriously. This resonates with the findings of Earley and Bubb who note that principals 'need time for reflection: to step back from the hurly-burly of school life to think about things' (2013: 795).

People skills. Given that the Italian education system lacks a formal and recognised middle management structure, the principal has the onerous task of choosing 'co-ordinators' to help them manage their institutions. Here we have encountered situations where the principals have chosen personnel on the basis of different criteria, with the main ones being a clear commitment to the school's vision; an unconditional commitment to serve; to work beyond the norm; to provide expertise and direction in identified areas. Furthermore, the principals have chosen from amongst their teaching staff teachers who are assigned the responsibility of addressing specific tasks related to national/regional and school initiatives. This implies that they have to know their staff really well at both the personal and professional level so as to identify those people who can be trusted to undertake specific duties beyond their subject/class teaching. Such engagements very much rely on the rapport established between the principal and staff members and maintained over time in view of the voluntary nature of such positions.

These eight observation studies have shown that the principal has to be extremely good at understanding the character of people and capable of motivating staff through encouragement and ongoing support. They acknowledge that it is this that brings people together and determine whether people come inspired to work and engage (Day and Sammons, 2013). At the same time, they know that this puts extra demands on them to provide the necessary support structures that are needed to engage as many of their staff as possible.

Some of the principals were described as authentic, trustworthy, dependable and fair. These are values that were evidenced to have helped bring out the best in people, at least those who want to give of themselves to the profession. The principals knew that if they were exemplary in the values they upheld, in the main, they would get a similar response from staff. Many staff responded positively and bonded with the principals who were seen to be genuinely there for them. Such principals were sought out not only to address professional matters, but also to handle issues of a personal nature, to seek counsel from someone they had learnt to trust.

Conclusions and implications

The observational study, whilst acknowledging its limitations, helps to give particular meaning to other research methodologies – both quantitative and qualitative – and at the same time highlights specific needs. The following conclusions regarding the principals' work pattern can be drawn:

The principals' job is mainly people-centred with a predominance of one-to-one encounters calling for intensive interpersonal contacts and competence (Blease and Lever, 1991). The core element of the principal's work is primarily verbal communication which is both interpersonal and informational (Bristow et al., 2007).

The workload shows variety of activities as highlighted in other studies (e.g. Bezzina, 1995, Earley and Bubb, 2013; Horng et al., 2010). The range of people involved, together with the need to present, prepare and share information, showed a particular dominance of information transmission to both internal and external bodies. This emphasises the importance of having enough personnel both within the administrative set-up and the academic staff to take on particular management and leadership positions. The delegation of responsibilities is paramount given the excessive work load and growing demands being made (Bristow et al., 2007; Gaziel, 1995). The principals show a clear preference for engaging in aspects of their work that would help to enhance student achievement, but growing demands means that they have to learn to delegate work to others which sees them sharing and distributing work more and more (Cowie, 2011).

The work that they are involved in is complex and at times can be stressful. They are often caught in what Mitchell and Castle (2005: 431) describe as the crossfire between competing demands, conflicts and tensions. They are resourceful in bringing order to chaotic situations. The principals show a clear preference for reflection before acting (Bush and Glover, 2014).

The principals have created work patterns, structures and processes that reflect who they are as leaders and what they believe can help them reach their goals. Their personal and academic backgrounds and their life experiences impinge on the way they relate to work and the people in their school/community.

The eight principals observed come out as strong in the transactional dimension as they ensure that the legislative aspects of the work are carried out. This resonates with the research carried out in Italy by Cavalli and Fisher (2011) who note that principals report that they spend quite a lot of time ensuring that legislation is met by their respective schools.

Whilst Italian school principals may have little authority and control over issues such as selecting staff and allocating resources, these case studies have shown that leadership in their schools is less about giving orders and more about leading through what Smith and Piele (2006) describe as ' persuasion, idealism and intellectual excitement' (p. 90). In most cases these principals spend considerable time working with others, rather than imposing top-down directives (Bush, 2011). They express what Marzano, Waters and McNulty describe as 'situational awareness' (2005: 42–43). Their focus was on building personal and interpersonal capacity as they created opportunities for personnel to work together on shared purposes, to take collective responsibility for each other's learning and well-being. In leadership acts the school leader was exemplary in nature, showing a love for learning, an observation already noted by other Italian researchers (Grimaldi and Serpieri, 2014).

Furthermore, these observational studies have taken us beyond what the principals state that they are doing to one that whilst acknowledging what they do helps us to appreciate whether what they are doing is a leadership act or not. This is a marked departure from previous studies in the international literature and gives more meaning to the term, 'leadership'. The case studies have

helped us to appreciate the transformational dimension of the work carried out. This implies that whilst it is true that the Italian principal has to respect the legislative demands being made on their schools and ensure that all personnel are working within the stipulated directives, it is the way that they do it that determines whether it remains a transactional exercise or becomes a *transformational* one. It is here that one distinguishes between an act that is and remains transactional in nature and an act that is fulfilled through transformational means. Therefore, the observational study has helped us to note not only what is done but how it is done.

Given a context that is highly centralized, with work practices being determined by regional or national authorities, the results go a long way to show that even in such a context, leaders and their leadership matters. A centralised context can dictate practices that are more administrative or managerial in nature. Fulfilling objectives or targets set can be the rule of the day. These principals show that for a clear vision to be set, for objectives to be reached, they need to ensure that staff are on task, that they are there to ensure that they have the resources and the opportunities to take on the challenges facing them (Hallinger and Huber, 2012; Kythreotis et. al., 2010). They lead through example, persuasion and support, hence the time spent on being with people, in engaging in supportive and transformative ways. That is why principals focus on sharpening their soft skills: they give people time to talk, they listen attentively, take notes and then act. The staff and the community are aware of this and respond in similar fashion.

These principals serve as role models. Modelling is highly evident in their interactions, making them at times more of facilitative leaders. In the Italian context this makes a lot of sense given the autonomy teachers still enjoy. The facilitative power they use is power with rather than power over. It is a facilitative approach that operates within a context of governance which Karlsen (2000) describes as *centralized decentralization*. Whilst the principals believe in distributing leadership across different levels, they also acknowledge the existing limitations within the Italian system which still does not officially recognise the role of middle management. Therefore, the importance of relying mainly on intrinsic rewards to motivate and encourage staff is a determining factor. The principals acknowledge the difficulty of creating and maintaining a context which relies heavily on the intrinsic nature of the job. Such involvement whilst central to school improvement is not established within formalised terms of reference and does not help sustainable development.

Such events express the transformational nature of the principals. They have developed a strong culture by emphasising particular values, being of service, nurturing a love for learning, and supporting collaborative problem-solving. Deal and Peterson (1994) beautifully describe such principals as 'anthropological detectives', always looking at ways of engaging people, of telling stories that connect people to their past, their community, the present and the future; of creating rituals and celebrations. Staff and the community can therefore connect, see meaning in the school, in its mission. They express commitment to strong ideals, have high aspirations for the school, and are exemplary in what they think, do and say. They live on a day-to-day basis what they believe in and espouse to others. They rely heavily on the invitational nature of leadership (Novak, 2002).

Whilst the intention is not to generalise our findings to suggest that the observed principals always function in this manner or to conclude that all principals in Trento act in similar ways, we can take the opportunity of learning from what the principals have done and can gain from this experience. It is to be noted that the principals observed all want to know what the observer (as researcher) has to share through the study carried out. Principals often lead solitary lives with limited points of reference. The opportunity to engage with an observer actually provided them

with some time to share their concerns, their practices, maybe to some extent to justify their particular way of doing things. The individual case studies should provide them with an opportunity to reflect on their practices personally and collectively. It should also provide them with opportunities to share with others who want to take on such positions in the future, hence serving as facilitators and potential mentors.

In fact, the intention now is for the Provincial Institute for Research and Educational Experimentation to work on the overall findings (IPRASE, 2015) and act on at least two levels. On the one hand, and more concretely, they aim to develop varied professional learning opportunities for school leaders. The intent is, for example, to use these case studies for discussion and seminars involving the principals and researchers involved. On another level, the research institute will be developing a discussion document to present to the regional education authorities so that they could act on the findings of this study.

At a more general level, the implications of this study relate to the increase in workload for school leaders in Italy. The growth of the Italian education system in general and the resulting pressures, internal and external to the school, are making increased demands on the principalship. All the principals observed are working between 27% and 175% more than the contractual obligations of 36 hours per week. This resonates with the international literature that shows that school leaders are being expected to shoulder a lot of the responsibility that society at large is expecting from educators (OECD, 2013). This raises the concern of sustainability over time and the issue of support. The first concern, that of sustainability, is how long is it humanly possible for the principals to keep up such a momentum without it affecting the quality of their work provided and ensuring they maintain psychological equilibrium?

The second concern relates to support. If we truly believe in the role that the principal plays, we need to find ways of creating the right support structures within and outside the school. These case studies have highlighted the need to review existing governance structures. This has also been noted in the White Paper of Ministry of Education, '*La Buona Scuola*' [the good school], which states that 'there is the need for more collegial structures, which are more open, responsive and effective' (MUIR, 2014: 64). Unless the appropriate support structures are created within schools and across networks, quite a number of principals may face burnout after a few years in position.

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