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School leadership and crisis management in the COVID-19 pandemic: Qualitative research in the Italian context

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ABSTRACT. Lo studio coinvolge un campione di 25 dirigenti scolastici durante le primissime fasi della pandemia da COVID-19 per esplorare minacce, opportunità di crescita professionale e personale, nuove pratiche di lavoro e stili di leadership adottati. Sono state condotte interviste semi-strutturate, analizzate con la tecnica della Template Analysis. I dirigenti scolastici hanno gestito le conseguenze della crisi, identificando anche alcuni aspetti positivi e nuove pratiche di gestione da mantenere in seguito. Alle attività puramente manageriali si è aggiunta l'attenzione ad aspetti psicologici volti all'ascolto e al sostegno emotivo dei follower, cercando di agire per loro come una risorsa.

SUMMARY. The COVID-19 pandemic forced school leaders to identify rapid solutions to adapt to an altered context. We studied a sample of school leaders from a northwest Italian city, investigating how they managed the consequences of the crisis, the threats and opportunities for professional and personal growth they identified, and what they learned with regard to new practices in terms of work and leadership. 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with school leaders (6 males and 19 females, between July and November 2020). From the transcripts, analysed using the Template Analysis technique, 18 themes emerged: 6 addressed the threats encountered (e.g. neglected teaching aspects, work-life conflict, loss of direct relationships, and fatigue); 9 related to opportunities for growth (e.g. change in working practices, new attitudes towards technology, and e-leadership skills); and 3 leadership styles were observed: Transformational, Distributive and Directive. Our findings reveal that school leaders addressed the threats emerging from the crisis but also identified some positive outcomes and useful management practices both to overcome that difficult period and to be maintained once it was over. Finally, changes occurred in the way they saw their role: the managerial focus was supplemented by a psychological aspect, aimed at listening to and emotionally supporting followers, attempting to be a useful resource for them.

Keywords: *School leadership, Crisis management, COVID-19, Emotional support, Leadership styles, Template analysis*

INTRODUCTION

The spread of COVID-19 has had dramatic effects on social relationships and on the world economy, leading to a need to redesign the world of work (Bajaba, Bajaba, Algarni, Basahal & Basahel, 2021). However, due to the enormous changes brought about by this emergency situation, precious opportunities for psychological research have emerged, including studies on leadership: leaders took on the challenge to lead their followers towards adaptation. Indeed, educational leaders had to face and facilitate a high degree of innovation, agility and collaboration (Bauwens, Batistič, Kilroy & Nijs, 2021).

The widespread COVID-19 pandemic also affected schools. In Italy, schools of all levels and universities were closed in March 2020 until the end of the academic year. Italian school workers, from management to teachers, were caught unprepared to tackle the huge changes to their working routines (Pellegrini & Maltinti, 2020). Education could only continue virtually, meaning that teachers and school leaders had to alter their work practices to engage in remote working. Thus, the role of school leaders became significant in managing these abrupt transitions.

In this study, a sample of school leaders of Italian nursery and primary schools was considered. Their dual role as leaders and educators was investigated in order to identify critical issues and positive challenges triggered by the pandemic and how these circumstances affected their work and leadership role.

Crisis leadership

Crisis management encompasses the actions of organisational leaders who work to minimise damage and strive to restore order. Studies on leadership during crises have investigated the type of leadership style effective during these difficult times, e.g., transformational leadership, which fosters value congruence (Zhang, Jia & Gu, 2012).

Crisis leadership is defined by Wu and colleagues (Wu, Shao, Newman & Schwarz, 2021) as a process in which leaders take action to prepare for the emergence of an unexpected crisis, react to the salient implications of crises, and grow from destructive experiences. Their meta-analysis on crisis leadership identified several thematic meta-clusters. The first includes theories on the cognitive processes of leaders during times of crisis. According to Brockner and James (2008), leaders may perceive crises as a threat or as an opportunity: if the leader is oriented towards learning and perceives an opportunity for improvement, s/he can implement positive behaviours, including acquiring the point of view of the various stakeholders involved and encouraging divergent and creative thinking among followers. The second meta-cluster answers questions about how the characteristics and behaviours of leaders influence important organisational results during times of crisis. For example, the theory of threat-rigidity (Stoker, Garretsen & Soudis, 2019) claims that when an organisation faces a crisis an increase in rigidity is observed among individuals, groups and organisations, reducing the processing of information by simplifying communications and centralising authority.

Leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has also affected how leadership is exercised. New leadership styles gained greater prominence, e.g. adaptive leadership, with a tendency to be oriented toward the present, to be flexible, quick to learn and optimistic about change (Bajaba et al., 2021).

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic include an alteration of the relationship between leadership and new technologies, particularly in terms of remote working. Cortellazzo and colleagues (Cortellazzo, Bruni & Zampieri, 2019) identify peculiar skills suited to e-leaders, a new leader profile able to cope with ever-changing technology and to inspire followers to embrace changes: the ability to communicate through multimedia tools, decision-making in a short time, and to maintain direction and sense-making skills for followers.

Finally, other common themes highlighted on leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic include: the relationship between leadership and outcomes in terms of follower well-being, as inclusive leadership styles appear to reduce significantly workers' distress (Ahmed, Zhao & Faraz, 2020); leadership in the healthcare sector (Bauwens et al., 2021); and leadership in the context of education.

School leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic

Bush and Glover (2003) stated that successful school leaders "develop a vision for their schools based on their personal and professional values. They articulate this vision at every opportunity and influence their staff and other stakeholders to share their vision" (p. 8). Furthermore, school leaders must also engage on the management front, focusing on school policies and on the efficient maintenance of school activities.

In the early 1980s, instructional leadership was considered the most effective model for achieving improvements in schools, a style consisting in school principals strictly controlling the quality of teaching and learning. Over time, other leadership styles were found more functional on school outcomes. For example, the transformational leadership model (Bass & Avolio, 1993) focuses on the importance of building the school's vision and goals, providing intellectual stimulation, offering individual support and promoting participation in school decisions (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). Moreover, distributed leadership implies that leadership is not an exclusive prerogative of the school leader but is also distributed to other members of the institution, requiring improvements in the communication of goals, and more active involvement in professional learning by staff (Daniëls, Hondeghem & Dochy, 2019). With regard to the outcomes of these leadership styles in school contexts, Liebowitz and Porter (2019) highlighted a significant relationship between school leaders' behaviours, teachers' well-being and the richness of their teaching methods.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools all around the world were forced to close in order to limit the number of infections and 1.6 billion students had to stay at home (Harris & Jones, 2020). The main themes emerged from studies were: how school leaders coped with the emergency and the leadership styles that proved to be effective; the critical issues they encountered; and the future perspectives regarding educational leadership. School leaders' priority was to take care of their teachers, students and communities, prioritising their safety and well-being. Longmuir (2023) reports that the school leaders perceived the need to be a reference point for their community, returning to the more humane purposes of education.

Communication is another important theme, a fundamental leadership lever for school leaders during COVID-19: they recognised the importance of a more informal communication style during that period, oriented towards supporting teachers, students and their families (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). Conversely, the top-down communication of new rules by political authorities - considered ambiguous by many school leaders - was a cause of great stress (Fotheringham, Harriott, Healy, Arenge & Wilson, 2021). Lastly, McLeod and Dulsky (2021) highlighted that school leaders also emphasised the opportunity, provided by the crisis, to consider the future of education and to question the status quo. According to them, changes should be considered in almost every area of education, including new structures for involving families and an expansive integration of technology. Indeed, research in educational leadership conducted during the pandemic, while also considering the post-pandemic era, identified remote work as a central topic for discussion and development. Therefore, there is a growing need to enhance e-leadership and communication skills. Furthermore, leaders must now deliver information to their followers in innovative ways to help alleviate anxiety (Bauwens et al., 2021). In conclusion, again regarding the post-pandemic era, several themes emerged as crucial for the education system, for example with leaders playing a pivotal role in improving family involvement in their children's education, elevating the quality of students' learning experiences, and ensuring more inclusive decision-making (McLeod & Dusky, 2021).

Aims

In light of the literature review, this study reports the results of interviews with school leaders identifying "the potential for crisis events to become turning points for positive changes through creating opportunities" (Wu et al., 2021, p. 3). Our work pursues two research questions:

1. to explore how school leaders handled the crisis, highlighting the threats and opportunities for growth they identified;
2. to clarify the implications of the COVID-19 crisis on the leadership styles they implemented.

METHOD

Procedure

Semi-structured individual interviews (average duration: 1 hour and 22 minutes) were conducted with 25 school

leaders (6 males and 19 females) between July and November 2020, i.e. between the first and second waves of COVID-19 pandemic in Italy.

The interviews were structured in two sections: the first related to COVID-19 crisis management and its negative consequences, also exploring the opportunities posed by the crisis; the second section involved questions relating to leadership themes (see Table 1).

Participants

The participating school leaders represent the whole population of the middle management working in a large city located in northwest Italy, and leading several zoned nursery and primary schools. School leaders participated in a special agreement with the authors for the implementation of staff retraining activities in order to give support at work. Their tenure in the role ranges from 9 months to 29 years, and they direct from 4 to 7 schools.

This study respects the Declaration of Helsinki (2013), as participants were informed about the research goals and outcomes. Authors ensured participants' anonymity, and their participation was on a voluntary basis, giving their informed consent before participating.

Data analysis

The Template Analysis method (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley & King, 2015) was used to analyse our interviews, since it conceives both a deductive approach, with the categories defined *a priori*, and an inductive one, in which the categories emerge from the data. In this approach,

Table 1 – Interview questions

Themes	Questions
COVID-19 crisis management (threats and opportunities)	How did you work during the pandemic?
	What activities did you carry out? What were your deadlines? What type of interaction did you have between colleagues and families?
	What was your most exhausting experience?
	Which experience still leaves you with a positive memory/lesson learnt?
	Is there anything you will retain in the organisation of your work that you learned or experienced during the pandemic?
Leadership	Thinking about your role, what term would you use to indicate your role of responsibility?
	Thinking about your role, what leadership-related lessons did the emergency teach you?
	What would you do more or less of, as a leader, than you would pre-COVID-19?
	As a leader, what did you do differently that you did not do before?

researchers are allowed to start with *a priori* themes deriving from the literature (King, 2004), refining the final template with emerging themes, to make sense of data. The researchers identified some *a priori* themes both of first order (i.e. COVID-19 crisis management and leadership styles) and of second order (threats and opportunities).

The first phase involved a double independent analysis of the same interviews by two researchers, followed by a comparison and an agreement to ensure that subsequent encodings were aligned. The final template was reached with codes of third order emerging from the coding processes.

In the last step, a third independent coder was trained in the meaning of the categories, before performing the third coding process with the 10% of the set of statements (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). In order to assess the reliability of our categories, an intercoder reliability analysis was performed, reaching a Cohen's k = .70, which indicates a substantial strength of agreement between coders (Landis & Koch, 1977).

RESULTS

The authors specified two main *a priori* themes, i.e. COVID-19 crisis management and leadership styles, identifying for both themes specific elements.

The former theme was divided into two sections regarding the definition of crisis, highlighting both the threats faced by the school leaders and the opportunities they identified. The leadership styles theme was divided into three sections relating to the leadership styles used by the school leaders in managing the crisis, i.e. Transformational, Distributive and Directive leadership (see Table 2).

The following paragraphs will describe each label, quoting the most significant transcriptions from the anonymized interviewees, accompanied by the random code assigned to the individual respondent (e.g. school leader 1 = SL_01).

COVID-19 crisis management: Threats

Neglected teaching aspect. One of the first threats triggered by COVID-19 for school leaders was that of a greater investment of energy into administrative issues to the detriment of the teaching side of their work.

> During this period one of the two areas became too important [i.e. administrative, at the expense of teaching]. Compartmentalising, which was the buzzword of this period, means precisely closing sections within a defined space, forcing teachers into a defined space. It is the opposite of education, which instead means living, breathing, moving. (SL_07)

Loss of direct teacher-pupil relationship. The lockdown imposed on the community triggered a major threat to children from an educational point of view, drastically reducing the quality of teaching and the care of children. Interactions and education took place through purely digital tools, which very young children are unable to use.

> The work was mainly about caring for the relationship, guarding the relationship with families and children who, in some cases, also showed impatience; this is interesting. Almost a little bit of anger. I think the fact that you see the teacher on the video and you can't interact with her normally after a while gets you annoyed. (SL_16)

Impoverishment of peer/follower relationship quality. Also the school leader-teachers relationship quality was impoverished. COVID-19 seemed to increase the selfishness of some teachers, who said:

> "I tried to do…to be on my own, because if I went to help the other teacher, I ended up dealing with other children and other teachers so I tried to be on my own as much as possible." (SL_15 reporting a teacher's words)

Work-life conflict. School leaders witnessed both a significant increase in working hours and an invasion of work into their private lives due to the increased use of technologies.

> For my work, at one point, the most exhausting experience was drawing boundaries [...], so I was getting calls [...] at every hour, at 8 p.m., emails in the middle of the night [...] still now I struggle to feel able to switch off ... (SL_11)

Forced use of technology. Almost all school leaders had to use technological tools they were not accustomed to using in their everyday lives, but that suddenly became essential in order to continue working.

Table 2 – Overview of the main themes and specific elements emerging from the analysis

A priori themes		Emerging themes	Count
First level codes	*Second level codes*	*Third level codes*	
COVID-19 crisis management	**Threats**	Neglected teaching aspect	4
		Loss of direct teacher-pupil relationship	10
		Impoverishment of peer/follower relationship quality	5
		Work-life conflict	10
		Forced use of technology	19
		Fatigue	11
	Opportunities	Positive change of working practices	8
		New attitude towards technology	18
		Online training	5
		Better relationship with families and children	12
		Increased closeness with the team	8
		Communication and feedback	7
		Emotional support	9
		Need for leadership	3
		E-leadership skills	16
Leadership styles	**Transformational**		(N = 9)
	Distributed		(N = 11)
	Directive		(N = 5)

Note. (N =) refers to the number of school leaders to which a specific leadership style was attributed by the researchers.

> Then the work we did was to send materials designed by the teachers, who, by the way, struggled a lot because many of them were unfamiliar with technology. [...] I had become a kind of... director, who had to analyse everything that came to me, from the song, to the video, to the tutorial... everything. (SL_18)

Fatigue. School leaders had also to tackle the COVID-19 crisis while respecting many stringent rules imposed to protect users' health, such as wearing masks and the application of entrance quotas.

> There are so many rules to be followed, it's another school [...] even just banally in the way you come in ... well, freedom is another story. (SL_10)

COVID-19 crisis management: Opportunities

Positive change of working practices. School leaders reported greater attention now paid to the quality of the documentation to be produced and checked before sending it to the children.

> What I think I can maintain is definitely to continue in the vein of documenting products for the children also to be viewing at school or, at any rate, for families to witness the work done at school. So holding the button down more on documentation. (SL_05)

New attitude towards technology. The benefits that technologies can bring to everyday working life, if properly integrated, include the possibility of reducing dead time, such as travel time, by holding meetings online or exchanging information faster via chat, even though digital tools should not replace the possibility of face-to-face meetings.

> We discovered the advantages of technology, being able to have a meeting even remotely. We've been working a lot with Google-related systems, so Drive, Calendar helped us, even me, from an organisational point of view. I believe that the benefit of these tools […] is that, on the one hand, we can continue to use them for meetings, but we can also benefit from the in-person aspect of the direct relationship; the presence of people and physicality even between adults is important. (SL_09)

Online training. Technologies have also given rise to new possibilities, including more opportunities to undertake online training courses.

> One lesson learnt relates to training; we found that through webinars, there is a lot of richness on the web, and this allows staff, even now, to access training paths without having to leave their homes. (SL_19)

Better relationship with families and children. School leaders noticed new and greater attention to the more emotional aspect of the relationship with families. Having to "enter homes" via video calls allowed teachers to gain a clearer idea of each family's particular situation, not allowing social distancing to exclude children from school.

> As these were very young children, the family was included in the contacts and in the relationships, so [...] there was generally a willingness to have conversations with the families, because there was a very strong need for closeness […], to be emotionally supported, by the families. (SL_10)

Increased closeness with the team. There is a trend towards greater closeness and attention to followers as individuals, not only regarding work aspects, with the aim of getting to know each other and creating better group cohesion.

> We met with teachers remotely; we met paradoxically more than we were able to do at school. They did some very nice work. And yes, we eventually had time to get to know each other. (SL_06)

Communication and feedback. Considering the introduction of remote working, feedback, both given and received by school leaders, was also important as it was perceived as a learning opportunity that is not judgmental towards the person, but useful for understanding how best to overcome the crisis.

> I think it is very important to have a discussion with others... I always expect others to give me feedback on the good things I do but also on my mistakes, because it makes it easier for me [to learn and improve]. (SL_13)

Emotional support. Followers expressed a need for emotional support, going beyond mere work tasks. School leaders implemented emotional support strategies to facilitate the emergence of a climate of support with an indirect positive impact on the quality of the relationship with other stakeholders.

> Sometimes it was enough to pass by [in schools], to say "come on, I'll buy you a tea" to see that there was some discontent and perhaps some problems; this is no longer possible now, so we established (online) meetings for a while, once every 15 days. I realised that this was also needed just to hold the group together. (SL_11)

Need for leadership. Team needed guidance. Followers needed a point of reference to follow, to point the way in the fog of uncertainty.

> At this particular time I realised that workers were demanding this service role because the request was "we want to work at our best, and to do that, we need someone to play a coordinating role". (SL_12)

E-leadership skills. School leaders had to change management practices in light of the rapid introduction of new technologies, from purely face-to-face to almost completely virtual working practices.

> I had come up with this thing where I had my Monday morning e-mail with all the teachers in the [school] circle and on Friday afternoon I would close [the working week] with homework; there was a continuous dialogue. (SL_15)

Leadership styles

Transformational leadership. The interviews revealed examples concerning each of the characteristics of transformational leadership, namely the 4 Is (Bass & Avolio, 1993). The school leaders stated that, particularly in terms of the management of emotions, they managed to interact with followers in an individual way, paying attention to the follower's concerns and needs, giving examples of individual consideration.

> One thing I did that I didn't really think about before was during the week I called all of my co-workers individually, at least once, which I didn't do before. (SL_09)

School leaders were called upon to provide motivational inspiration, with teachers challenged to raise the bar of their performance and to take greater responsibility.

> [My role as a leader is to] make sure that everyone has a problem-solving orientation and an active attitude; so not "help, boss, tell me how to solve this problem", because first you activate the energies of the people […]to develop a leaning towards solving problems autonomously. (SL_23)

Aiming for intellectual stimulation, transformational school leaders inspired their followers to pursue bigger objectives with greater awareness.

> To get to a goal and then to a project, you have to know how to create your own project work, but you also have to know how to involve people to achieve a common goal. (SL_21)

Finally, transformational school leaders also provided definitions of their role and relationship with followers through metaphors that conveyed their charisma to ensure followers identified with the leader (idealised influence).

> I am also responsible for this [role], the networking. I'm kind of fixated on this so I always tell the teachers, "We are part of a team; we don't function like a conservatoire instructing the first violin. No, we are the orchestra, we play together". (SL_21)

In conclusion, transformational school leaders provide a metaphor that encompasses their role during the pandemic.

> It requires soft armour. (SL_21)

Distributed leadership. Some school leaders showed a very widespread use of liaison officers, i.e. people who, despite not having a formal leadership role, are appointed to be their spokesperson within the various schools they manage. In this way, school leaders feel that they have more control of the situation, while at the same time appointing people they trust with an authority that holds them accountable.

> I identified a liaison officer for each structure; after identifying them, I asked the group in some way to "elect" them, to recognise that during the COVID period these people would work for a little while with me. (SL_25)

Directive leadership. A style in which leaders create a rigid framework, feeling that he/she can overcome the crisis through actions that do not allow followers much discretion. This involves greater attention to the control of tasks, the establishment of rules to be respected, the provision of precise deadlines and rhythms for the activities, and respecting the hierarchy.

> You cannot overstep certain boundaries. In my opinion, hierarchy helps everybody, because I believe it is right for one person to make certain decisions. (SL_22)

DISCUSSION

Two main topics were investigated, i.e. how school leaders managed the COVID-19 pandemic, both in terms of facing the difficulties and of acknowledging opportunities, and the leadership styles they implemented. Some recurring labels cover themes related to the specific role of the school leader or teacher, while others involve issues that scholars (Kniffin et al., 2021; Rudolph et al., 2021) have highlighted as emerging due to the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of workplace psychology. Moreover, some labels are in line with the results of the review by Wu and colleagues (2021), which have been pinpointed as possible future theoretical advancements (i.e. leader emotion management in crisis contexts) or with their first meta-cluster, recalling the leadership styles of our school leaders, covering their psychological and behavioural responses to the crisis.

As regards the threats of COVID-19 faced by the school leaders, the neglected teaching aspect highlighted that the school leader's work became too imbalanced in favour of administrative tasks rather than teaching goals, with "the priority being to survive day by day" (SL_22). School leaders stopped focusing on long-term planning and instead strove to ensure that educational content was available on a day-to-day basis. The aspects of social distancing and increased workload seem to have seen teachers become less inclined towards collaboration and more inclined towards focusing on their own goals - impoverishment of peer/follower relationship quality. In addition, school leaders felt their role as creators of a workspace based on sociality and continuous knowledge sharing was impoverished. At the same time - loss of direct teacher-pupil relationship - school leaders reported that teachers complained about the new way of interacting with children only at a distance, which became a less empathic learning experience for them, with the impoverishment of education becoming clear.

Among the threats, the interviews revealed issues and implications of workplace psychology (Rudolph et al., 2021), since school leaders complained about work-life conflict issues. They are related both to time-based conflict, when work extended into hours usually devoted to family time, and strain-based conflict, when work-related stress also affected the home domain. For our sample of school leaders, these aspects also related to the construct of techno-stress, which describes how technologies, on one hand, helped them to continue working, but, on the other, increased their workload and invaded other spaces and periods of non-work life (Molino et al., 2020). The difficulties faced by the school leaders included the sophistication level of the devices and softwares that enabled work to continue even at a distance - forced use of technology. Initially perceived as a threat, the use of technologies led school leaders to change the way they managed their followers, with a more results-focused assessment, not being able to monitor their followers' outputs or behaviours directly in person, recalling the characteristics of e-leadership (Kniffin et al., 2021).

All these characteristics led to the fatigue school leaders felt when facing the difficulties of technology, administrative demands, and enforcing the new health regulations. On one hand, they had to ensure that teachers continued to do their work from home, thus adopting a more productivity-oriented perspective and, on the other hand, they had to ensure that teachers had all the equipment they needed to perform at their best, in line with all the issues related to changes in human resources policy (Rudolph et al., 2021). Supervising short video content, sharing materials with families (on the teaching side), complying with anti-COVID regulations, and handling administrative requests (on the bureaucratic side) were the antecedents that led school leaders to feel fatigued.

Shifting to the opportunities that emerged from the crisis, school leaders recognised a better relationship with families and children, also established by teachers. While communicating with children was difficult due to the distance and the lack of practicality in using technology,

school leaders identified a new and greater focus on the emotional aspect of the relationship with families. Having to "enter homes" through video calls allowed teachers to gain a clearer idea of each family's particular situation.

Online training was also a benefit, necessary in order to enhance the resources and to tackle the enforced switch to virtual work and teamwork. Both school leaders and some teachers autonomously searched for and participated in online courses to learn how to use some of the software to improve their work performance (Kniffin et al., 2021). Indeed, school leaders reported that they had changed their new attitude towards technology, despite the initial difficulties, intending to maintain some of these new practices even in the future (Rudolph et al., 2021), e.g. holding online meetings rather than wasting time travelling across the city, however without completely substituting physical in-person meetings, so as not to lose the emotional contents.

Another important feature that emerged was the need for leadership, described in the literature as the demands by employees to have a leader who facilitates actions towards individual, group or organisational outcomes (de Vries, Roe & Taillieu, 2002). In line with this definition, the school leaders reported that their followers explicitly expressed the need for a guide to overcome this new uncertain situation, to clear up the fog of the new work rules and demands.

This need by followers resulted in the leaders' increased closeness to the team, whereby school leaders frequently got in touch with teachers. Leaders' closeness, indeed, could be perceived, in some situations, as a resource for followers which can act as a buffer against negative outcomes (Garzaro et al., 2021).

Among the opportunities, school leaders recognised the increased importance of communication and feedback management (Kniffin et al., 2021). Indeed, school leaders also felt the need to receive feedback from the "bottom up" in order to calibrate their behaviours over time.

One of the most resonant consequences was followers' need for emotional support, in line with the future themes to be studied in the field of crisis leadership after the spread of COVID-19 (Wu et al., 2021). School leaders implemented some strategies to support their followers emotionally: for example, the creation of a supportive climate, in which leaders make themselves available to hear the problems of their followers, including their personal and family issues.

In conclusion, all aspects mentioned thus far could contribute to the definition of the e-leadership skills (Kniffin et al., 2021; Rudolph et al., 2021), a new way of managing a leader's role, which must take account of the evolutions in modern times and the fact that one's skills must be adapted for the effective management of virtual groups. Some practical examples of task management were the use of video-conferences for meetings (to deal with administrative issues), Google Drive folders for document sharing, and fixing online meetings every Monday to draw up a checklist of objectives to be completed by the closing meeting on Friday afternoon.

In line with the review by Wu and colleagues (2021), from our interviews three recurrent leadership styles among the school leaders were identified.

Transformational leadership is one of the most commonly investigated styles to be effective during a crisis. Transformational leaders during crises can foster followers' agreement with the leader's goal and value system (Zhang et al., 2012) while promoting positive emotions and resilience among followers (Sommer, Howell & Hadley, 2016). In our interviews, the teachers' resilience was evident in their increased involvement in educational tasks despite the negative consequences of the crisis, learning to use new technologies to create increasingly engaging content for children (intellectual stimulation). Our transformational school leaders also expressed their attitudes towards listening and emotionally containing their followers (individual consideration), highlighting that each of them has a unique contribution to make by enacting an active attitude (motivational inspiration) and aligning them around a common vision (idealised influence).

Distributed leadership was the most widespread leadership style enacted during the pandemic among our sample. Most school leaders delegated some of their managerial tasks to a "liaison officer" in each of their schools, the reference point for the school leaders when their workload increased. The delegation was aimed not at maintaining control but at recognising the competencies of some followers. Therefore, school leaders shared with these liaison officers both tasks and some influence processes, in line with the very definition of the style itself, according to which leadership is not a prerogative of those "with a formal leadership position at the top of the organisation" (Daniëls et al., 2019, p. 115). This method of managing schools appeared to reduce job demands for school leaders, and to increase resources, i.e. liaison officers' support. The liaison officers also benefited, being recognised as experts involved in improving the school.

Finally, some school leaders seemed to enact a more restrictive and controlling leadership style, recalling directive leadership. They aimed to provide their followers with clear top-down instructions, establishing clear objectives at the beginning of the week to be achieved by its end. They felt that during times of crisis there is no leeway for making decisions collaboratively, and, instead, what was needed was guidance and clear directions. These thoughts are in line with the characteristics of directive leadership, in which leaders are expected to provide followers with a "framework for decision making and action in alignment with the leader's vision" (Somech, 2005, p. 778), centralising the decision-making process. This also accords with the threat-rigidity hypothesis (Stoker et al., 2019), the tendency for leaders, during times of crisis, to give clear and detailed instructions to followers, with which compliance is required, along with respect of hierarchy and adherence to rules.

CONCLUSION

This study proposes some examples of how school leaders managed the COVID-19 pandemic during the first lockdown. The closing of schools increased the job demands for school leaders on the practical side, with regard to the increased administrative demands and the need to learn how to use electronic devices and software to work virtually, on the educational side, linked to the loss of quality of the relationship with children and families, and, finally, at individual level, with regard to the fatigue caused by the invasion of the private life domain.

At the same time, school leaders identified opportunities emerging from the crisis: firstly, technologies offer a new way of working smarter, with the helpful offer of online training; secondly, school leaders answered their followers' need for leadership with an attitude more inclined towards listening and supporting than in the past; lastly, school leaders tested the efficacy of giving feedback and the different way of communicating in virtual teams. Considering the network of school leaders at the national level, our sample's findings about opportunities could be shared with colleagues leading other schools throughout the national context. These best practices could be transversally applied and then adapted to the different organizational cultures in the post-pandemic period.

However, this study has limitations. Firstly, the results should be interpreted with reference to the participants involved as, given the inability to generalise the results due to the sample size, they cannot be fully extended to other contexts. Secondly, online interviews limited the possibility of fully identifying the emotive and nonverbal aspects of the participants' communication and to avoid distractions. Lastly, one limitation of Template Analysis is that the focus is spread across cases rather than within cases, thus losing sight of a more "holistic understanding in relation to individual accounts" (Brooks et al., 2015, p. 218), which could provide more insights.

Further studies are needed to produce more generalisable results, by analysing a wider sample and performing data analysis using content analysis software.

From a practical standpoint, our results highlighted some best practices and consequences emerging from the crisis period, going beyond the obvious negative aspects. Best practices regard both instrumental and leadership topics. Indeed, school leaders may maintain some aspects of virtual teamwork in their everyday work, their stance of considering their followers individually and listening to them, adopting new rules facilitating the achievement of working tasks on a weekly basis. Ensuring that the identified best practices were used in the post-pandemic period could give greater emphasis and essence to the exploratory findings of this study.

Furthermore, on the practical side, consultants should be made aware of the workload and emotional burden that school leaders are required to manage in the early years of a pandemic, in order to help them identify pathways to support their well-being at work and also to reframe their experiences; with regard to leadership training in schools, some positive elements arising from leadership during the pandemic could inspire new working practices aimed at implementing these new behaviours in our so-called new normal.

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