Innovation in teaching and educational leadership: rethinking the role of teachers in twenty-first-century schools

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Abstract

The article explores the role of teachers in contemporary schools in light of the cultural and technological transformations taking place in today's society. Through a critical review of the scientific literature, an analysis has been made of innovative teaching methods such as project-based learning, service learning and dialogic practices, highlighting their impact on student engagement, development of transversal skills and improvement of social inclusion. The reflection also focuses on the concept of distributed leadership, which promotes an educational community capable of integrating school, family and locality in a participatory and co-built formative process. Teachers emerge as facilitators of know-how, reflective practitioners and transformative intellectuals, capable of guiding students towards an active and conscious citizenship. Finally, the article underlines the importance of teachers' continuing training in order to promote a pedagogy oriented towards dialogue, creativity and building essential skills to tackle the challenges of complexity.

KEYWORDS: Teaching, Educational Leadership, Teacher Training, Distributed Leadership, Innovative Methodologies.

1. Introduction

In recent years, education has undergone significant transformations, guided by the necessity to adapt teaching and educational practice to the cultural changes underway. Schools have to be able to respond not only to the students' cognitive needs, but also to their relational and social requirements, by promoting an education that fits the young people's life context. This exigency is particularly great in upper secondary school, where the need emerges to develop not only disciplinary knowledge but also active citizenship skills, critical thinking, self-awareness, autonomy and self-efficacy, all essential elements in the formation of the future citizens of this planet (Morin, 1999). In light of these transformations and students' new needs, today

we have to have a clear idea of the type of teacher we want to promote, while giving "an organic perspective and overall sense to the list of skills, so that they may give substance to this idea" (Baldacci et al., 2023, p. 37, own translation). Not only must their skills dovetail with their cultural awareness, but teachers also have to be well aware of their purpose, namely, to prompt in students the life skills they need to respond effectively to the challenges posed by contemporary society. As Baldacci, Nigris and Riva (2020) remind us, over the course of the history of pedagogy, various ideas of teachers have emerged: from artist-teachers, whose role was mainly to bring out the class's intuition and creativity; engineer-teachers, who set value on planning the teaching programme; researcher-teachers who, drawing inspiration from the Deweyan tradition, highlighted the capability to tackle practical teaching problems through reflection; and intellectual-teachers, of Gramscian inspiration, who instead prioritized historical-cultural awareness of educational issues. Each of these portraits casts light on fundamental aspects of the teaching profession, but can end up

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neglecting others. Hence, the necessity to seek to slot these perspectives together and formulate this figure anew, so that it takes account of the historical context we are living in (Baldacci et al., 2023; 2015). For a new definition of the figure of teacher, first we have to reflect on the characteristics of contemporary society, at once defined as "liquid" (Bauman, 2000), "postmodern" (Lyotard, 1979), "complex" (Morin, 2008), and also the "age of the sad passions" (Benasayag and Schmit, 2003). There is no escaping these terms' emphasis on the intricacy of the changes and social, cultural, economic, political and educational transformations that humankind finds itself having to face (Ceruti & Bellusci, 2023). Suffice it to think of the so-called digital revolution and all the implications that the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI) will have on teaching, but also the changes that it will cause in teenagers' formative process, with the ever greater necessity to balance the use of technology with educational practices in which relations and empathy retain their central worth, and guarantee inclusive and significant learning for all (Lavanga & Mancaniello, 2022). Doing this also means accustoming teachers to a reflective and metacognitive attitude. In order to find their way in the uncertainty and complexity so characteristic of both contemporary society and the adolescent mind, teachers have to have the ability to reflect on their educational action (Michelini, 2013; 2016). As Schön (1991) reminds us, teachers have first of all to be reflective practitioners, capable of calling themselves into question, reflectively assessing the actions, practices and approaches they enact in the classroom in order to single out room for improvement and development, given the heterogeneity, multiculturality and richness of contemporary schools. Dewey (1998) already deemed reflective thinking the highest form of thought insofar as it is capable of promoting a research-oriented mentality that strives to discover talents, intelligence, desires, dreams, aspirations, as well as fears, anxieties and limits. The idea of transformative learning proposed by Mezirow (1991) further expands these concepts, highlighting how reflection is a process that allows critical analysis of the contents, processes and premises we use to interpret and give meaning to experiences. The key element of this evolution consists in developing the capability to go beyond the aspects concerning the efficiency and efficacy of the action, in order to recognize and critically analyse one's frame of thought and interpretative perspectives, that is, what Mezirow calls meaning perspectives and frames of reference. Through this process, one can adjust them when they prove unsuitable, obsolete or warped, fostering personal and professional growth that is more conscious and open to change. Another aspect to add to this reflection derives from the pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1970) and concerns the fundamental emancipatory role that teachers should have. Indeed,

Freire imagined teachers as professionals capable of guiding students towards a critical understanding of reality and accompanying them along their path of personal and collective liberation (Freire, 1976). For the Brazilian scholar, teachers also have to facilitate dialogue and be capable of creating an educational space where know-how is not imposed from above but co-built through mutual exchange. Teachers start from the students' experiences and socio-cultural context, using their stories and perspectives, as well as so-called "generative words" as a springboard to build a genuine relationship with the context, and from there rethink the subject matter. Hence, dialogue becomes a tool for liberation and to build a critical consciousness, transforming the students into active players in their stories. Hence, teachers promote conscientization. In other words, they boost the young people's awareness of the dynamics of oppression and power that structure society and provide them with the tools to recognize and transform these structures. For Freire, education is therefore a practice of freedom, and the teacher's role is to support the students' autonomy, encouraging them to develop critical thinking and actively take part in creating their own know-how (Freire, 1970; 1976). For this task, teachers need a strong sense of ethics and social responsibility that goes beyond the transmission of knowledge to include the promotion of values such as empathy, justice and respect for diversity. At the same time, teachers have to carefully reflect on their educational action, critically analysing their methods and impact on pupils to avoid unconsciously perpetuating dynamics of oppression. In this vision, teachers become not only guides, but also allies in the students' transformation pathway, helping to build a fairer and more aware society. Nevertheless, the path towards conscientization is rather complex, requiring a critical understanding of both history and its social and cultural dynamics to overcome oppression, passivity and every form of discrimination. Hence, it is evident that the emancipator-teacher needs to dovetail with the intellectual-teacher of Gramscian inspiration to remind us of the cultural, social and political scope of educating. Alongside these figures, teachers need the characteristics of the researcher-teacher to reflect on and assess their action in light of the complexity of contemporary society. Finally, good educational practitioners also have to be able to bring out the incidental side of education in order to arouse interest in the students (Ward, 1978). This means going outside the school walls, knowing how to live all spaces and grasping situational stimuli as potentially educational. In this sense, teachers facilitate knowledge, by picking up the cues that everyday life gives, stoking their pupils' curiosity and love of knowledge. Herein lies the emancipatory drive, according to Ward, possessed by incidental education, which deserves to be grasped and fostered. Every one of these aspects comes together to outline a new idea of teacher. Obviously, it can only

take shape by investing in continuing teacher training and deciding to give economic and professional, cultural and social institutional support to schools. Indeed, if there is no longer a global vision, with a future outlook, the figure of teacher risks becoming more and more obsolete.

2. Tools and methods: a review of innovative teaching methods and practices

As also highlighted in many Italian and European reports, it is becoming an increasingly urgent need to place the students at the centre of education and go beyond transmissive and theory-based teaching methods towards workshop discovery learning approaches. Learning is an interactive process; together teenagers build know-how by comparing and negotiating meanings. This vision transforms the role of teacher from simple transmitter of static knowledge to guide and ally in the journey of discovery that fuels learning. Schools become a place of learning-together, where a spectrum of ideas, experiences and lives transform into a shared wealth generating collective growth. A central role in this process is played by distributed leadership (Jäppinen & Sarja, 2012). In Branson's (2010) assertion, this approach no longer sees the teacher as the sole holder of know-how, but as a facilitator of shared learning experiences, in which the educational responsibility is distributed among teachers, students, parents and local subjects. In fact, it is a model that promotes an educational community logic. It does not just involve the family but goes further to include the surrounding environment and its resources, thus creating a support and collaboration network that adds another dimension to the formative process (Senge et al., 2008). Distributed leadership is a radical change with respect to the traditional model of school management. It brings all the players involved in the formative process together to create a cohesive educational environment. Some key strategies are needed to make this transformation. This includes encouraging student involvement, for example, through student committees or workgroups that can take part in planning school activities and decision-making. This involvement is fundamental to solder the students' sense of responsibility and belonging. Another method is to promote collaboration among teachers, through communities of practice that share strategies, experiences and challenges. Periodical meetings can also become fora for co-planning innovative teaching programmes. Finally, parent participation is also important. They can be involved in regular meetings in which they are not only the recipients of information, but fellow educators, sharing ideas and projects to enrich their children's formative pathway. Links with the locality can be strengthened through partnerships with institutions such as local libraries, cultural associations and companies. They can support school projects, creating genuine learning opportunities anchored in the social context. Further contributions could be given by organizing community events, such as open days or other events providing a space for dialogue and collaboration. At the same time, in addition to transforming the role of teacher from a distributed leadership perspective, it is important to revise and introduce to the school context new approaches and methodologies promoting those transversal skills deemed fundamental for students to be able to live in complexity. In particular, it is essential to adopt innovative teaching methodologies in upper secondary schools owing to the benefit teenagers' learning requirements draw from more interactive and constructive approaches. The methodologies at present considered most effective include project-based learning (PBL) and dialogic practices. Indeed, these approaches offer concrete tools for developing transversal skills that are essential in the contemporary world, such as critical thinking and problem-solving capabilities (Bell, 2010). This method, supported by investigative learning, allows young people to explore the subject matter in a critical and interactive way, taking on an active role in their formative journey, stimulating autonomy and a sense of responsibility (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). For example, planning a cultural event can combine organizational, artistic and social skills. Other transversal skills considered central are empathy and collaboration. Approaches such as service learning instead develop students' sensitivity towards other people's problems, stimulating relational capabilities and cooperation. Integrating activities that can respond to community needs, such as regenerating urban spaces or services for vulnerable sections of the population, teaches students to see learning as a means to make a positive impact on society.

Finally, it is of primary importance for teenagers today to develop autonomy and self-esteem, as well as a sense of self-efficacy. Dialogic practices and participatory activities allow students to acquire confidence in their capabilities and give them the lead role in their learning pathway (Kedian et al., 2015). Classroom dialogue becomes the practical means to translate pedagogical reflection into concrete action. It is a fundamental tool in co-building knowledge, helping students to develop a growing awareness of their thoughts. Founded on enquiry- and research-based teaching, this approach does not revolve around memorizing cultural content but making enquiries and sparking a heuristic process. This makes the classroom a research community. The teacher takes on the role of facilitator and guide who, through a maieutic approach, brings out and sets value on all the participants' reflections and points of view. Know-how is continually created and renewed by sharing knowledge, social negotiation and collectively building meanings.

This approach allows action to be carried out on both the development of cultural contents through active learner involvement, and the formation of conscious, democratic citizens. Words are the solid basis of this type of education, serving not only as self-expression, but also as a tool to emancipate and valorize the person. Words become a personal attainment, transforming individuals from the passive object of the educational process to its active and aware subject, capable of dialoguing and contributing to their own growth process. In this model, teachers take on the role of transformative intellectuals. As educators, they use words not only to transmit knowledge but to generate freedom and create a reciprocal relationship with the pupils. In the same way, this relationship removes the students from the simple role of addressees of imparted know-how and makes them social and historical beings, active parts in a personal and collective transformation process, able to have an effect on the contexts where they live (Freire, 1970; Don Milani, 1967; Dolci, 1988; Buber, 1993). The teachers' task, therefore, is not just to transfer information. They have the wider task of creating a learning environment where know-how is co-built. Students are thus encouraged to see themselves as playing the lead role in their cognitive journey, as they experience an education that is not only transmissive but generative, capable of stimulating critical thinking, dialogue and transformative action. This educational approach enables students to develop not only intellectual skills but also a deeper awareness of their identities and roles in society, strengthening their capability to actively take part in building a fairer and more inclusive reality. In short, teachers become actors that not only transmit knowledge, but build the fertile ground on which autonomy, responsibility and a renewed critical consciousness can flourish (Don Milani, 1967). The concept of dialogue as a means to overcome the subaltern condition occupies a central role in the educational and pedagogical work of Danilo Dolci (1988). Indeed, for Dolci, dialogue is not just an exchange of words, but a transformative process that enables individuals to become aware of their condition, develop critical thinking and acquire the tools to claim their own autonomy and dignity (Benelli, 2015). Dialogue makes the educational relationship an experience of reciprocity; every subject is called upon to actively take part in building shared meanings and creating a know-how that promotes individual and collective emancipation. This vision of dialogue as a practice of freedom does not stop at the educational environment, it also reaches the social and political level, since it aims to put the concept of democracy into effect (Cambi et al, 1991). Dolci considers dialogue a tool to topple inequalities, foster participation and build a society in which all individuals have the possibility of making their voice heard and contributing to change.

This set of methodologies create a learning environment that goes beyond mere knowledge transmission to promote development of the skills and aptitudes needed to tackle contemporary challenges. These practices, accompanied by a distributed educational leadership perspective, can clearly help transform schools into educational communities where every actor – teacher, student, family and local associations – has an active role to play in building know-how. Together, distributed leadership, school-locality-family interaction and innovative methodologies can lay the bases for a school that prepares young people not only to tackle the present, but also to actively contribute to the future of society.

3. Methods

Based on a critical review of the scientific literature on the topic, the data and case study analysis aims to explore the efficacy of the innovative pedagogical methodologies and role of distributed educational leadership in the school context. The research was carried out by consulting academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar. Empirical and theoretical studies published in the last 20 years were selected to guarantee a solid perspective and analysis based on significant contributions over time. In order to be included in the sample, the studies had to highlight the impact of approaches such as project-based learning (PBL), service learning and dialogic practices; they also had to actively involve teachers, students and educational communities in collaborative learning processes. The analysis followed a qualitative-interpretive approach to identify recurrent models and best practices in the pedagogical literature. The selected case studies described the concrete application of these methodologies in school contexts and paid particular attention to the outcome on students' learning and development of transversal skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration and active citizenship. A further focus was the integration of aspects of distributed educational leadership, namely, the teachers' capability to create school-family-locality collaboration networks supporting authentic and inclusive learning.

4. Discussion of the results emerging from the data and case study analysis

The results emerging from the literature were organized into themed categories. These include boosting student engagement and motivation; developing reflective and social skills through dialogue and co-building know-how; and the positive impact of school-community collaboration on social and cultural inclusion. This methodological outline enabled me to coherently sum up the evidence and put forward practical guidelines for applying innovative approaches in educational practice.

First of all, with regard to boosting student engagement and motivation, a key aspect was pupils' involvement in authentic learning activities (Chen & Yang, 2019). In this respect, PBL was confirmed a methodology capable of transforming learning from a passive process to an active and significant experience. According to Krajcik and Blumenfeld (2005), structuring projects around a genuine starter question – rooted in real problems – prompted students' deep engagement as they perceived the practical utility of the knowledge they had acquired. A longitudinal study carried out on university students by Hmelo-Silver et al. (2007) showed a 34% increase in the levels of active participation compared to traditional methods, with even higher peaks (+48%) when the projects included collaborative digital technologies. The investigation on history students in the United States by Hernández-Ramos and De La Paz (2009) highlighted how PBL generated a positive attitude towards learning in 78% of cases, against 42% recorded in the control groups. This piece of data was explained by the capability of PBL to combine academic rigour and decision-making autonomy: students chose which routes of investigation to follow, selected tools and set times, making them feel in the driver's seat of their educational processes. The case study documented by Su (2023) specifically analysed the application of PBL in English teaching in secondary schools, focusing on activities promoting the acquired knowledge's transfer and innovation. PBL is described as a student-centred teaching approach which facilitated active knowledge-building thanks to real problem-solving and creating tangible products. A key aspect highlighted was the importance of planning activities that went beyond simple comprehension, encouraging students to transfer the skills learnt to new contexts and to develop innovative solutions. This process not only strengthened the students' mastery of the language, but also stimulated their motivation, with an effect on their critical and creative thinking skills. The article also underlined the teachers' need for suitable training so they could effectively implement PBL and guide students in the transfer and innovation activities. When well structured, PBL can lead to deeper and more significant learning, preparing students to successfully deal with real-world challenges. Another study by Mergendoller, Maxwell and Bellisimo (2006) analysed the effect of PBL on high school students of Economics. In this case, those involved in projects based on real problems showed a better understanding of the economic concepts than those who followed a traditional approach. The study by dos Santos et al. (2018) analysed the application of PBL in teaching Technical Drawing, integrating the use of CAD software to modernize learning. The students worked on projects right from coming up with the idea to completion, applying theoretical concepts to practical situations. In this case too, PBL proved effective in improving understanding, boosting transversal skills such as collaboration and problem-solving, and increasing motivation and interest in the discipline.

Another study still showed the positive effect of this methodology in creating a school environment where the students felt valued and an active part of the learning community (Hattie, 2009). This sense of belonging and self-efficacy, documented by Hattie, was essential to encourage students' conscious participation, above all in contexts where the presence of a support network – consisting of teachers, families and members of the local community – can make the difference. The distributed leadership that emerged from this model became a medium for integrating values and knowledge rooted in the surrounding reality, fostering not only greater inclusion, but also the development of essential social and civil skills among the young people.

A study by Condliffe et al. (2017) instead analysed the efficacy of PBL, showing promising but not conclusive results in improving students achievement. The research demonstrated that, even though some studies showed PBL's positive effects in subjects such as Science and Social Studies, the evidence in the field of Mathematics was more limited. Furthermore – as we have seen – in order to effectively implement PBL, teachers require suitable professional training as this methodology entails a change in the teacher's role, from learning manager to facilitator. Instead, as far as the development of reflective and social skills through dialogue and co-building know-how is concerned, the study by Alexander (2020) explored the use of dialogic practices in the classroom, highlighting the potential of classroom dialogue as a tool to promote critical thinking. In a multicultural context, students used dialogue to explore complex topics and express critical opinions in a respectful and constructive way. The study demonstrated how open comparison on matters linked to cultural diversity allowed students to reflect on their opinions and acquire greater awareness of other people's perspectives, a skill which is crucial to live together in mutual respect and peace. In this case, the figure of teacher took on the role of mediator stimulating the co-building of know-how, transforming the class into a learning community (Ucan, Kılıç Özmen & Taşkın Serbest, 2023).

The Education Endowment Foundation's Dialogic Teaching Evaluation Report (2017) also analysed the efficacy of dialogical teaching in 38 primary schools in the United Kingdom, involving over 2,400 pupils. The aim was to improve the pupils' engagement and performance in English, Mathematics and Science, through a dialogue-based method and co-building know-how. The trial was carried out after an intensive teacher training course and mentoring. Audio and video recording tools were used to monitor the quality of the interaction in the classroom. The teachers received

constant support to adopt strategies to encourage discussion, critical reasoning and argumentation among the pupils. The analysis compared the schools taking part with a control group made up of 38 other schools. The results clearly showed how the students in the schools that adopted the dialogic teaching method made better progress than the control group: they were two months ahead in English and Science, and a month ahead in Maths. Furthermore, disadvantaged students made similar improvements. Hence, it might be hypothesized that dialogic teaching can also help reduce educational inequalities. Numerous other pedagogical experiences have confirmed the importance of dialogue and words, not only as learning tools but also as ways of social emancipation. Despite operating in different contexts, figures such as Don Lorenzo Milani, Paulo Freire, Danilo Dolci and Martin Buber all highlighted the crucial role of a relational conception of learning and access to culture. It is not about transferring readymade packages of knowledge but putting young people in a dialogic relationship with know-how. For example, in the reciprocal maieutics workshops conducted by Danilo Dolci in Sicily, collective discussion took on a central role, becoming a powerful tool to analyse and understand how to improve the conditions of both individual and community life. These workshops offered a space where everyone – through dialogue and exchanging opinions – could make a contribution, using their own experiences, ideas and skills, to the search for shared solutions. It was an environment where democracy was not only an abstract ideal but a practice lived every day, relationships were on equal terms and every participant felt valued and respected. In this context, teachers lost the traditional role of authorities to obey and transformed into allies and guides accompanying the participants in the know-how-building process and, more in general, in their own personal growth pathway. The goal was not only to learn concepts or notions, but to promote the overall formation of the person, making them capable of critical reflection, conscious action and contributing to improving society. The aim of this educational model, founded on equality and mutual respect, was to emancipate the participants, making them active players in their lives and in the community, and boosting their sense of belonging and collective responsibility. In this perspective, dialogue was not only an educational methodology, but a political act, a means to redefine the power relations and build a fairer and more just society. The positive impact of school-community collaboration on social and cultural inclusion and the efficacy of distributed leadership is instead highlighted by the service learning experience described by Dienhart et al. (2016), in which the students took part in a volunteering initiative to support elderly people in the local community. The experience had a positive impact not only on the development of relational skills, but also on the students' personal growth, as they learnt to deal with the challenges and needs of the community. It also created a closer bond between the school and the locality, transforming education into a concrete experience of active citizenship. This approach to learning, combining theory and practice, allows students to perceive school as part of a wider, interconnected system, helping to strengthen social bonds and form aware and responsible citizens (Fiorin, 2016).

In the same way, other studies have highlighted how the distributed leadership model can promote a school climate in which differences are recognized and exploited as learning resources. For example, a case study conducted by Harris (2012; 2013) analysed the implementation of distributed leadership in a multicultural school in the United Kingdom. Interdisciplinary work groups were created, made up of teachers, students and local community representatives, to plan teaching activities that could respond to the specific needs of a heterogenous student population. The results showed an increase in student participation and an improvement in intercultural relations, thanks to sharing experiences and different perspectives. Another significant example comes from a study by Spillane and Diamond (2007), which examined the impact of distributed leadership on schools in the United States with great ethnic and linguistic diversity. The involvement of parents and community leaders in the school's decisions led to greater inclusion of the local traditions and cultures in the curriculum, soldering the students' sense of belonging and improving their academic achievement. In Italy, studies such as that of Stillo (2020) have explored how intercultural education can respond to the complexity of society and Italian schools. The author highlighted the importance of distributed leadership involving teachers, students and local communities in mentoring and intercultural tutoring practices. These practices are seen as key tools to support the integration and educational achievement of students from a migratory background. In this case, the teachers took on the role of mediators and facilitators, coordinating initiatives that allowed students to share their stories and build bridges of understanding with their classmates. These examples confirm that distributed leadership not only fosters a more inclusive school environment, but also helps create an expanded educational network capable of responding in a dynamic and participatory manner to the challenges of cultural diversity. In other words, collaboration between school, families and locality can build learning spaces that reflect the values of acceptance, respect and pluralism.

The results of the above-mentioned case studies and the theoretical review have highlighted how this type of leadership, as well as the adoption of collaborative approaches involving the locality in learning programmes, can have a transformative impact on teenagers' formative experiences. School-family-

locality dialogue within the educational process creates a support network and enables the co-building of know-how that responds to the needs of a rapidly changing society. The concept of educational community, in which every actor has a significant role, makes it possible to go beyond the traditional dichotomy between school and real life. Learning becomes a more significant and contextualized experience which strengthens the sense of belonging and fosters the exchange of ideas and skills, positively impacting student motivation and involvement. Lastly, in order to introduce these new approaches and redefine the role of teacher, it is necessary to promote teachers' continuing training, crucial to gain the tools and up-to-date skills to implement collaborative and dialogic methodologies. The training should not only include pedagogical skills, but also mediation and communication skills that facilitate dialogue with families and local actors.

5. Conclusion

Teachers' continuing training therefore proves crucial, especially in a rapidly evolving educational context, offering numerous benefits that can positively influence not only their professional career, but the whole educational environment. A skills update is one of the main advantages provided by continuing training. Teachers need to keep informed of the latest teaching methodologies and emerging technologies. Indeed, it is crucial for teachers to boost the efficacy of their teaching so they can manage to involve as many students as possible. In so doing, some of the attitudes presented at the start of this article are key. This includes reflectivity: teachers have to be disposed to do research and call things into question, as it is fundamental to be able to adapt to the new educational requirements of today's teenagers and understand each boy and girl's different way of learning and every person's specific needs. Furthermore, continuing training contributes not only to teachers' professional growth but also their personal improvement: teachers who feel competent in their capabilities are also more confident in class management and tackling the various educational challenges. In turn, this can help offer them new career opportunities, for example, in the field of training within the educational system itself.

There is a further aspect of continuing training that is worth emphasizing and that is the possibility it gives to network and collaborate with colleagues. Taking part in training courses gives teachers the opportunity to connect with other professionals in the sector and so it fosters the exchange of ideas, resources, teaching materials and above all particularly effective best practices. This creates learning communities in which teachers support each other in their development. In the same way, peer-to-peer mentoring is an effective method to facilitate the adoption of new educational practices. This relationship of support can provide opportunities for mentors to share their experiences and teaching strategies, and give those with less expertise direct access to practical knowledge. Teachers can improve their pedagogical skills through mutual observation and feedback in a collaborative environment. All of this helps create a culture of continuing learning in schools, where teachers feel supported in their professional development. It is clear how all of this can promote innovation in teaching. Exploring and adopting new techniques and interactive approaches can encourage active, collaborative and workshop-type learning methods. Knowledge of the latest technology allows teachers to integrate digital tools into their teaching, improving student engagement. This certainly has a positive impact on the young people. Creating a more stimulating and inclusive atmosphere in class could also improve their educational achievement. In short, continuing training is essential to guarantee that teachers are equipped to tackle the modern challenges of education; it helps to develop a more effective educational system that is more reactive to the needs of contemporary society. Promoting and exploiting school-family-locality integration creates the conditions for an educational community and distributed leadership-based model of education, both of which are indispensable to create the conditions for authentic and participatory learning. Alongside this, however, timely interventions are needed on the part of the institutions. They need to take up and give an effective response to the main educational challenges of today's school system. In addition to the dearth of continuing training for teachers, the main challenges to tackle include: staff shortages, inadequate digitalization and poor technological skills, great inequalities between the north and south of Italy, low levels of social inclusion of students from foreign backgrounds, scarce attention to non-cognitive skills, continuing weak organization of the school-work relationship, schools' limited autonomy, delays in adopting innovative teaching methodologies and, above all, the lack of effective educational guidance. This makes it impossible to listen to and deal with the spectrum of exigencies of students who need not so much to be taught the different subjects, but to be offered an integrated syllabus and more inclusive and flexible educational practices.

To fill these gaps, the government, educational institutions and local communities need to work together to rethink the Italian school system. It is only by investing in infrastructure, training, innovative methodologies and inclusion that schools can be transformed into a place capable of effectively responding to the challenges of the here and now and the future. The idea of teacher that we should be promoting today is a multidimensional figure who combines pedagogical, digital, social and cultural skills and can hence create an education that is inclusive,

innovative and transformative. The core of teachers' professionalism in the twenty-first century lies in the capability to adapt to changes and inspire students to develop their potential.

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