THE CENTRALITY OF DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP OF MIDDLE LEADERS FOR FULL INCLUSION

LA CENTRALITÀ DELLA LEADERSHIP DISTRIBUITA DELLE FIGURE DI SISTEMA PER UNA PIENA INCLUSIONE

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ABSTRACT

In schools as complex systems, middle leaders are key to managing organizational and teaching aspects. As mediators, they promote inclusive teaching aligned with Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Their distributed leadership fosters equity and accessibility. This study presents initial results from schools in Campania, exploring teachers' perceptions of the inclusive leadership enacted by these professionals and its impact on student learning outcomes.

Nelle scuole, intese come sistemi complessi, i *middle leader* svolgono un ruolo chiave nella gestione degli aspetti organizzativi e didattici. In quanto mediatori, promuovono pratiche didattiche inclusive in linea con i principi dell'UDL. La loro leadership distribuita favorisce equità e accessibilità. Questo studio presenta i primi risultati rilevati in scuole della Campania, esplorando la percezione dei docenti sulla leadership inclusiva di queste figure e sul suo impatto sugli apprendimenti.

Introduction

The literature offers multiple definitions of the school as an organization. One of the most widely recognized characteristics of school organization is the relational dynamic among its various stakeholders. A foundational classification in this regard was proposed by Karl Weick, who described the school as a type of organization marked by complexity. In his model, Weick highlights that the different actors within the school organization are connected through a form of *loose coupling* (1976), meaning weak or flexible ties.

According to Weick, the members of the organization maintain their autonomy, freedom of thought, and independent action, while being bound together by shared values, meanings, and continuous dialogue aimed at addressing unpredictability and external challenges. This form of connection fosters a common interpretative framework and shared cultural values, which can then be translated into planning strategies oriented toward change.

Within this perspective of the school as a network of relationships and communication, those who work in it are viewed as *knowledge workers*, in line with Drucker's (1994) definition.

In this regard, given the importance of organizational culture and knowledge within schools, themes such as negotiation, meaning-making, and learning become central. Educational research and studies on organizational learning seek to clarify the relationship between theory and practice, drawing on concepts such as transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). From these reflections emerges a vision of the school as a *learning organization*—an open system based on networks of relationships and knowledge exchange among individuals who are free to think and act, and who are predisposed to change and continuous improvement (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Senge, 1997).

Adopting a systemic perspective, Michael Fullan (2015) emphasizes that each component of the school collaborates in building a learning community, nurtured by the sharing of experiences. In this model, the school is understood as a *community of practice*, in which knowledge and skills are developed and strengthened through shared experiences (Loiodice, 2017). Thus, the school is conceived as a dynamic and interconnected system composed of people, resources, and methods that interact with one another. The element that holds this system together is, precisely, the shared organizational culture and the network of relationships among all stakeholders involved (Kools & Stoll, 2016; Senge, 1997).

Accordingly, within this model, the school becomes a *design-based community*, characterized by a common organizational culture (Schein, 1992) in which "the

connection of knowledge is not only the result of a method for accessing knowledge, but also a cognitive stance—that is, a mental disposition to render the learning process networked, acting upon knowledge just as one does when called upon to use familiar objects in new ways, adopting an adaptive and intentionally creative model of action" (Sibilio, 2023, p. 55).

From this perspective, it is also coherent to consider the school as a *complex adaptive system* (Sibilio, 2014; Aiello, Pace, & Sibilio, 2023). This implies viewing the school as an open organizational system where interaction among its parts and with the external context occurs through an exchange of information—neither too abundant nor too scarce—to maintain systemic balance. In the educational context, this means understanding school learning as a form of adaptation between internal system elements and external inputs (Sibilio, 2023). In this way, the school operates adaptively, seeking to appropriately address and respond to the multifaceted and variable situations it encounters. Therefore, schools, understood as places of and for change through the circular exchange of practical knowledge and theoretical insights, should foster a collaborative climate among the various actors within the organization aimed at promoting values such as inclusion and the fight against inequalities and injustices (Aiello, 2024). The model of inclusion, in fact, must be regarded as an indispensable value aimed at guaranteeing the right of all individuals to quality education, against any form of discrimination and marginalization (EADSNE, 2009; 2012; 2014), through didactic and organizational actions focused on designing educational offerings oriented toward developing the potential of every student (Sharma et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2021).

In this scenario, the competency profile, foremost that of leadership, of system figures who act as mediators between the Principal, colleagues, families, and the community in the organizational and managerial processes of the school gains central importance (Pirola, 2015; Paletta & Bezzina, 2016; Bufalino, 2017; Agrati, 2018). These professionals, by adopting a distributed leadership model oriented toward the values of equity and accessibility, could promote the dissemination and implementation of effective and inclusive teaching methodologies, fully aligned with the principles of Universal Design for Learning-UDL (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014).

Indeed, as highlighted in the literature, there is a close relationship between distributed and inclusive leadership of middle leaders and the improvement of learning outcomes for all students. Building on these reflections, the present contribution, after a theoretical overview of the distributed leadership model oriented toward inclusion and the role of system figures within the school as an organization, aims to illustrate the preliminary results of research conducted in

several schools in the Campania region, exploring teachers' perceptions of the degree of inclusive leadership exercised by system figures.

1. The model of distributed and inclusive leadership in schools

Interest in leadership within organizational studies encompasses a wide range of definitions and interpretations. Indeed, clarifying what is meant by leadership is challenging, given its complex and multidimensional nature (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). In this regard, Peter Drucker (1996) highlights the distinction between managers and leaders: managers focus on doing things right, whereas leaders focus on doing the right things. For this reason, it can be argued that leaders are more oriented toward relational and communicative dynamics to foster consensus and engagement among their collaborators. Specifically, every organization requires a leader equipped with a set of competencies to serve its needs. Leadership is not limited to the ability to guide a group but encompasses a range of transversal skills (soft skills), such as decision-making, motivation, communication, conflict management, and negotiation, which are essential for managing sharing and dialogue among the various members of the organization. These competencies include a propensity and capacity for active listening, a disposition to communicate clearly and unambiguously, and being decisive and collaboration-oriented.Therefore, leadership should be understood as a social and collective process based on interaction and mutual influence between leaders and organizational members, rather than as mere hierarchical authority. It is thus closely linked to organizational culture, conceived as a shared set of ideas and values: "For Schein, leadership and culture are two aspects of the same reality; studying the leadership of an organization is equivalent to studying its culture and vice versa" (Schein, 1990; Bonazzi, 2002, p. 163). A leadership model aligned with the principles just outlined and increasingly established in recent years within educational leadership studies is the distributed leadership model, which involves all staff members in the organizational mechanisms of the school. Distributed leadership is often referred to in the literature also as "shared leadership," "collaborative leadership," "delegated leadership," and "dispersed leadership" (Leithwood, Mascall, & Strauss, 2008), although other authors, including Spillane, Gronn, and more recently Young (2012, 2014), identify specific characteristics unique to distributed leadership (Bufalino, 2017). Studies on distributed leadership among teachers, which developed in North America in the 1990s and gained prominence in England during the 2000s (Harris, 2004), emphasize the active and

decisive role of the entire teaching staff both at the didactic and organizational levels: "Bennet et al. (2003, p. 2) suggested that distributed leadership might be conceived as 'a way of thinking about leadership,' rather than merely another technique or practice" (Bufalino, 2005, p. 29). Distributed leadership involves the active engagement of all personnel in decision-making and collaborative problem-solving within the organization. In this context, the concept of teacher leadership also emerges, recognizing teachers as central actors in core teaching and learning processes (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Numerous studies have highlighted a positive connection between distributed leadership, organizational improvement, and student outcomes (Leithwood, Mascall, & Strauss, 2008; Bufalino, 2017).

From this perspective, leadership influences how teachers work, student outcomes, and the effectiveness of leaders (Hallinger & Heck, 2010), Based on these considerations, the concept of inclusive leadership is gaining traction in the literature (Bowers, 2018). Indeed, the role of inclusive leadership refers to the participation and representation of all teachers, families, and students in the didactic and organizational processes of the school system. Inclusive leadership, through distributed leadership, focuses on improving the learning conditions for all students and promotes the values of inclusion (Harris, 2008).

Inclusive leadership is, in fact, a collegial and participatory approach grounded in openness, a shared vision, professional development, and effective coordination of educational processes (León, Romero & Navarro, 2015; OECD, 2020). Distributed leadership, in promoting inclusive processes, proves particularly effective when middle leaders foster an open, collaborative culture oriented toward continuous professional growth. From this viewpoint, the more leadership is extended from middle leaders to the wider teaching staff, the greater the improvement in student outcomes (Dinham, 2005).

For these reasons, within this scenario, it is important to clarify the relationship between distributed and inclusive leadership and the role of middle leaders, who play a key function in promoting shared values such as inclusion and academic success for all.

2.   I middle leaders in school

The idea of leadership not solely as the responsibility of the school principal but also shared with intermediate figures within the school has developed in Italy alongside the introduction of administrative decentralization and school autonomy.

This change, aligned with European policies such as the Maastricht Treaty of 1993, led to a new organization of the school system (Law 59/1997; DPR 275/1999) and required a revision of the teachers' roles. In this direction, various laws (DPR 80/2013; Law 107/2015) have promoted a more collaborative school management by introducing the so-called "system figures." These figures represent a form of intermediate leadership (middle management), supporting the principal and colleagues, and acting as a bridge to the external environment.

Their role is crucial in fostering organizational learning, adapting strategies to context, and promoting change. They contribute to building a shared culture within the school, with particular attention to inclusion. They exercise a leadership oriented toward change and are considered a strategic lever for school improvement, especially in ensuring equity and inclusion (Harris & Jones, 2019; De Nobile, 2018; Pagliuca, 2022).

The concept of middle management originated in 1980s England and refers to professional figures who assist the principal in processes of management, coordination, monitoring, and optimization of resources (Agrati, 2018). Within the school context, these figures act as a link between the principal and the teaching staff, facilitating collaboration through managerial and collegial skills. Their role is also fundamental in promoting a shared and inclusive vision of educational planning and supporting training paths that respond to teachers' professional and personal needs, in harmony with the school context.

For these reasons, interest in middle management has grown significantly, as highlighted by numerous international studies (Bennett et al., 2007; Fleming, 2013; Fullan, 2015; Harris & Jones, 2017; Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015). In an increasingly complex school environment, where multiple actors interact based on human relationships and share common approaches to contemporary educational challenges (Brundrett, Burton & Smith, 2003; Capodanno & Aiello, 2024), the role of middle leaders becomes central.

Within this framework, and in line with the concept of distributed leadership, middle management can be considered a key and active promoter of this model. According to several studies (Paletta, 2020), middle leaders:

- They usually operate in small groups with similar professional practices and cultures;

- They focus on well-defined areas in which they possess consolidated expertise;

- They assume the role of *primus inter pares*, leading the group by example and fostering a strong sense of belonging.

In attempting to delineate the connection between distributed leadership and middle management, Paletta (2020) notes that distributed leadership originates from multiple sources: not only from school principals or senior figures but also from teachers in formal intermediate roles or from individuals without official positions yet possessing strong influence.

Therefore, distributed leadership can be truly effective only if middle management members promote a collaborative culture open to professional exchange and oriented toward continuous learning. Furthermore, there is a direct correlation between extending leadership to the entire teaching staff and improvements in student learning outcomes (Dinham, 2005).

However, it is important to remember that although middle management is an integral part of distributed leadership, the latter is a broader concept that can also manifest without formal roles or rigid organizational structures (Paletta, 2020, p. 22).

In conclusion, the relationship between distributed leadership and middle management is fundamental within schools, understood as complex and adaptive organizational systems (Weick, 1976; Bertalanffy, 1983; Gell-Mann, 2002). The school institution, endowed with a culturally and educationally well-defined identity (Selznick, 1976; Schein, 1984) and founded on weak but resilient ties (Sergiovanni, 2002), can be seen as a genuine professional community of practice (Wenger, 2006, 2007) based on collaboration, sharing, and inclusion.

All school actors should feel they are protagonists of change, aware that they can contribute to improving individual and collective learning through active and inclusive participation in school processes. From this perspective, it is the responsibility of the principal, together with middle leaders, to engage the entire teaching staff so that the school, both didactically and organizationally, can respond effectively and purposefully to the contextual needs and promote authentically inclusive educational practices (Capodanno & Aiello, 2024).

This approach aligns with the Italian Constitution, which protects the right to quality education for all. System figures, therefore, are valuable resources to realize the school's mission and vision. For this reason, Italian policy (Law 107/2015; SAFI and MIM guidelines, 2023) has emphasized the importance of investing in the training of these figures so that they can foster professional development among school staff, educational co-responsibility, and shared leadership.

Training is also central in the National Training Plan (PNF) 2016–2019, which aims to unite the personal and professional development of teachers (Darling-Hammond, Hyler & Gardner, 2017; Agrati, 2018; Capodanno, 2023). Finally, Legislative Decree 165/2001 (art. 25, paragraph 5) establishes that the principal can rely on teachers with specific roles for organizational and administrative activities. Law 107/2015 underlines that these figures must: improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the educational system, also collaborating with local stakeholders; promote teamwork and counteract self-referential behaviors; strengthen collaboration between the school and the external community; support internal monitoring and evaluation, also through benchmarking with other schools and strategic reorganization techniques (e.g., business process reengineering). These concepts are also reflected in the recent SAFI Guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education and Merit (2023), which highlight the importance of voluntary and incentivized continuous training (FOVI). Introduced by Article 16-ter of Legislative Decree 59/2017, this training is intended both for tenured teachers and system figures. It serves as a valuable tool to continuously improve collaboration among different roles within the school, better coordinate educational interventions, and enhance collective work effectiveness through greater clarity of roles and responsibilities.

FOVI requires teachers to assume clear responsibility: to voluntarily commit to enhancing their professional skills, with positive effects on students, the school as a complex organization, relationships with families, and society as a whole (SAFI-MIM, 2023, p. 19). The 2023 SAFI Directive specifically defines training objectives for both teachers and system figures. For teachers, the emphasis is placed on knowledge, skills, and competencies that foster teamwork and collaboration with colleagues, school staff, and families, aiming to improve student well-being and outcomes (SAFI-MIM, 2023, p. 8).

For system figures, competencies related to school governance and educational leadership are required. The goal is to create a culture of teamwork where each professional feels valued in their role, thereby increasing motivation and contributing to a shared and conscious management of change.

This collaborative approach aligns with international documents such as UNESCO's *Reimagining Our Futures Together* (2021), which promotes a new "social contract" to ensure quality education for all across the lifespan and in diverse contexts. In this document, the teacher is portrayed as a figure capable of transforming educational and social settings by acting with responsibility and an inclusive vision.

To achieve this goal, it is essential to design teacher training pathways centered on equity and inclusion. One of the four key principles identified in the document is teamwork, understood as teachers' ability to collaborate and share strategies to address the complexity of the school reality and meet the needs of all students.

This approach is also echoed in the *Profile for Inclusive Professional Development of Teachers* (2022) by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, updated from the 2012 document. It emphasizes that inclusion is built through a systemic vision where schools and stakeholders work together, sharing goals, values, and competencies.

Therefore, it is crucial to clarify which competencies are necessary for all teachers, particularly for system figures, to promote genuinely inclusive practices.

3.   The research

Starting from these reflections, this study aims to present the preliminary results of research conducted in several schools in the Campania region, exploring teachers' perceptions of the degree of inclusive leadership exercised by system figures within school organizational dynamics, particularly regarding the promotion of improved student learning outcomes. The underlying research intention is to reflect on how these professionals are perceived within the school organizational context, with the purpose of examining how they enact leadership oriented toward the values of inclusion, understood as the foundation of a truly shared organizational culture. This research is positioned as a continuation of a qualitative investigation through semi-structured interviews with 10 inclusion coordinators in Campania, focusing on how they exercise leadership within school organizational and inclusive dynamics. Distributed leadership model aimed at promoting the spread of an organizational culture oriented towards inclusive values Collaborative climate among the principal, the principal's staff, and teachers.

Sample

The sample consists of teachers from comprehensive schools in the Campania region, selected through a purposive non-probabilistic sampling procedure (Patton, 2014). The sampling began with schools where the instrumental functions involved in the interviews operate and was progressively expanded to reach a substantial number of teachers. To date, the sample includes 112 participants.

Instrument

The instrument used includes a qualitative section with open-ended questions aimed at eliciting deeper opinions and reflections regarding the organizational processes enacted from an inclusive perspective by the system figures. This qualitative part is preceded by a quantitative section, consisting of the "Inclusive Leadership in Schools" (LEI-Q) questionnaire (Crisol Moya, Molonia & Caurcel Cara, 2020). This questionnaire, developed by a group of Spanish researchers, was translated, adapted, and validated for the Italian context, resulting in the LEI-Q-IP Questionnaire (Italian version for teachers and managerial staff).

The LEI-Q questionnaire employs a four-point Likert scale, with the following response options: 1 – Not implemented, 2 – Partially implemented, 3 – Substantially implemented, and 4 – Fully implemented. consists of forty items, organized into two main dimensions.

The first dimension, *"The School as an Inclusive Community"* (items 1–12), assesses the leadership team's efforts to promote openness towards the broader educational community and environment, encourage active participation, support diversity, implement improvement strategies, and ensure equal opportunities by removing barriers to the success of all students.

The second dimension, *"Management of Teaching and Learning Processes and Professional Development"* (items 13–40), focuses on the extent to which school leadership creates favorable conditions for inclusive teaching practices and fosters a professional learning community grounded in shared values and a commitment to student diversity.

Data Analysis

With regard to the first section related to background data, the following results emerged.
Out of 112 participants, 97 identify as female and 15 as male. Seventy-five are tenured teachers, while 37 hold fixed-term contracts. Twelve work in preschool, 25 in primary school, and 75 in lower secondary school. Eighty-two are general education teachers, while 30 work in special education. Forty-two participants hold a specialization in special education, and 13 are currently attending a specialization course. Of the remaining participants, 54 do not have a specialization, while three are considering enrolling in the course. Eighteen participants have never attended any training related to inclusive education, while the remaining participants have.

Sixty-nine have never held any role beyond teaching, whereas 43 have held roles within school middle management.

The following section presents data referring specifically to selected items from the second dimension, "Management of Teaching and Learning Processes and Professional Development" (items 13–40). These items are more specifically focused and are aimed at linking the quality of leadership exercised by system figures to teaching and learning processes. As such, they are particularly relevant to the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework.

Lo staff dirigenziale propone attività e progetta strategie (seminari, corsi, conferenze, etc.) per trattare le percezioni, gli stereotipi del corpo doce...rsità della scolaresca e l'uguaglianza di opportunità
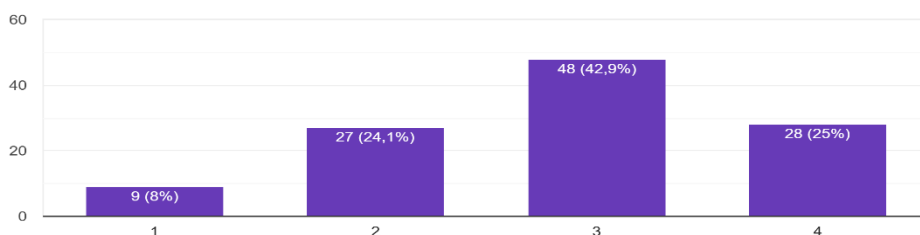112 risposte

Figure 1. Item-17. Proposes activities and designs strategies (seminars, courses, conferences, etc.) to address teachers' perceptions, stereotypes, etc. in order to guarantee respect for students' diversity and equal opportunities

Lo staff dirigenziale incoraggia la collaborazione tra il corpo docente, per migliorare l'insegnamento facilitando tempi e spazi
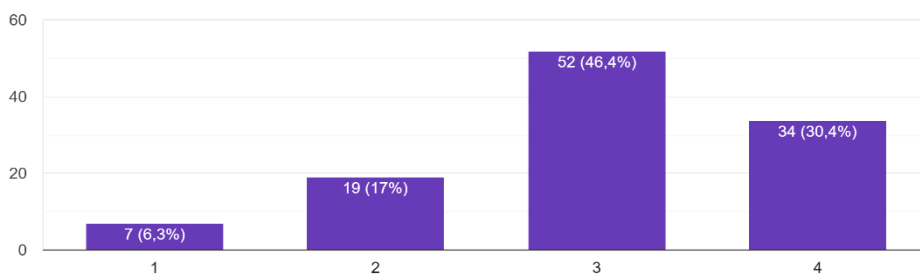112 risposte

Figure 2. Item-26. Promotes collaboration among teachers to improve teaching by facilitating time and space to them

Lo staff dirigenziale si preoccupa di conoscere la posizione del corpo docente in relazione alla diversità della scolaresca
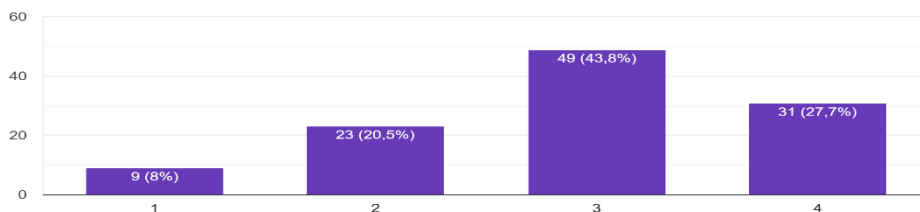112 risposte

Figure 3. Item-27 Be interested in knowing teachers' position on student diversity

Lo staff dirigenziale organizza azioni al fine di promuovere la riflessione degli insegnanti sulla loro pratica educativa e di valutare il possibile impatto del loro insegnamento sull'insuccesso scolastico
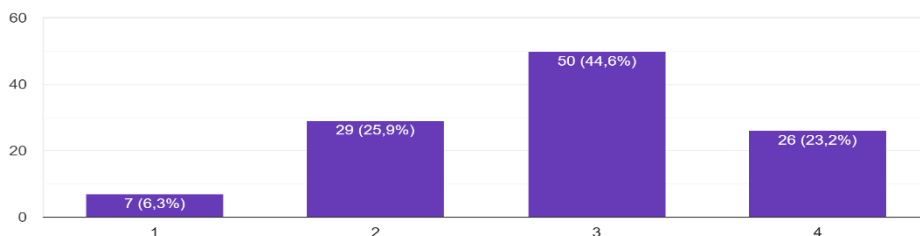112 risposte

Figure 4. Item-30 Organizes actions that enable the sta_ to reflect on their practice and and evalute the possible influence of their teaching on student failure

Lo staff dirigenziale sensibilizza il corpo docente affinché abbia alte aspettative verso tutta la scolaresca
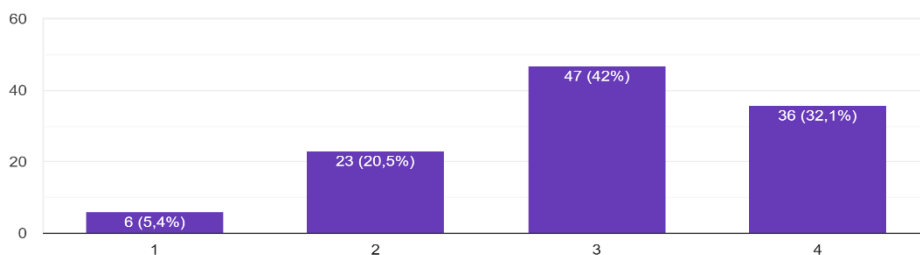112 risposte

Figure 5. Item 31. Sensitizes teachers to have high expectations of all students

Lo staff dirigenziale si interessa perché tutta la scolaresca si veda rappresentata nei contenuti che si insegnano
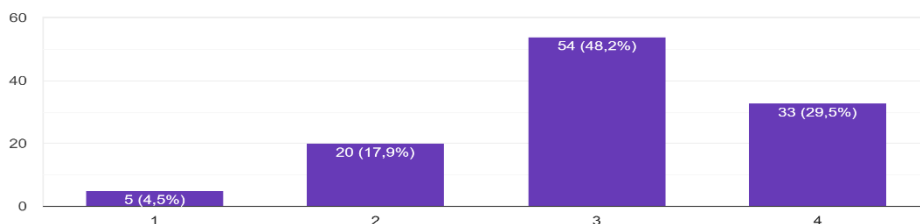112 risposte

Figure 6. Item -36. Promotes the continuous development of activities that enhance solidarity, empathy and assertiveness among students in the classroom.

Discussion of results

The items presented in Figures 1 through 6 highlight leadership practices enacted by system-level figures (e.g., school principals, pedagogical coordinators, middle leaders) that have a direct influence on the quality of teaching and learning processes. These practices align closely with the conceptual framework of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), emphasizing inclusive, reflective, and collaborative approaches within the school environment.

Items such as Item 17 (designing professional development activities to address teachers' biases) and Item 26 (facilitating time and space for teacher collaboration) illustrate a form of leadership that fosters a culture of inclusivity and shared professional growth. These actions correspond with UDL's principle of engagement, promoting a safe and culturally responsive learning environment that values teacher reflection and continuous improvement.

Furthermore, Item 30, which refers to organizing structured opportunities for teachers to reflect on the impact of their practices on student failure, supports the UDL principle of self-regulation and ongoing assessment. Such reflective practices enhance pedagogical awareness and accountability.

Items like Item 27 (understanding teachers' positions on diversity) and Item 31 (promoting high expectations for all students) reveal a leadership model that encourages high academic standards and equity-driven mindsets, moving beyond deficit-based approaches. Similarly, Item 36, which promotes activities that cultivate solidarity, empathy, and assertiveness among students, reflects the commitment to building inclusive classroom climates that foster both cognitive and socio-emotional development.

In conclusion, the leadership behaviors identified across these items contribute to a systemic vision of inclusion, grounded in ethical coherence and pedagogical intentionality. They demonstrate that strong, reflective, and participatory leadership is a critical enabler of UDL-based instructional design, supporting the development of equitable and responsive educational environments where all learners have the opportunity to succeed.

Conclusions

The findings highlight the pivotal role of system-level figures in fostering inclusive school environments. By promoting initiatives centered on accessibility and the appreciation of individual differences, these actors support the development of reflective and self-assessment practices among teaching staff. These practices are aligned with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), as they aim to meet the diverse needs of all learners.

To deepen and broaden these insights, future research could take several directions. First, it is recommended to triangulate the questionnaire results with qualitative interview data, enriching the analysis with in-depth perspectives. Second, the study could be extended to include families, using the family version of the LEI-Q questionnaire (LEI-Q-IF) to gain a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive leadership from multiple viewpoints. Lastly, expanding the sample to additional regions of Italy would allow for a more representative picture of how system-level leadership for inclusion is exercised across diverse educational contexts. These avenues will contribute to refining inclusive leadership models and guiding future educational policies and practices.

Author contributions

The article is the result of the scientific collaboration of the authors. However, the attribution of scientific responsibility is as follows: Flavia Capodanno is the author of all the paragraphs in this paper; Paola Aiello is the scientific responsible for the work.

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