

# The Role of Key Actors in School Governance: An Italian Evidence\*

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The greater awareness of the role of key actors in the school governance processes and the need to expect a “new leader” in the increasing school complexity are essential conditions to reform the schools from within, so as to provide them with skills related to globalisation, improvement to the educational quality, strengthening of positive relationship with the territory, and development of effective learning community. This study aims to checking the quality of Italian school governance and the changes necessary to achieve a school governance oriented towards the continuous improvement of performances for the benefit of stakeholders and for building a learning community. By means of an analysis based on the technique of the focus groups, the empirical evidence on the role of relevant actors in the school governance processes in Italy and the emerging needs for a more participatory school (in accordance with Europe 2020 strategy) will be presented. The research is supported by EACEA (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency of European Commission) and this article represents a work in progress on the project “School Governance to Build a Learning Community” (Oct. 2010–Oct. 2012) approved by European Union. SGoLC<sup>1</sup> partners are: University of Brescia, Consorzio degli Istituti Professionali, P. A. Group Srl (Italy); University of Thessaly, Regional Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education in the North Aegean (Greece); ROC Midden Nederland (The Netherlands); The Colegiul Tehnic “Mihai Viteazul” (Romania); and University of Stockholm (Sweden).

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## Introduction

The ability to respond to the need for quality and sustainability of education systems is increasingly becoming a fundamental element in the value of economic development and the social growth of local, national, and international communities.

The continual increase of schooling and the need to optimize the use of public resources have outlined a new context, which requires complex actions, firstly, aiming at: (1) a more mature governance approach, which

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emphasizes the role of network relations with stakeholders; (2) the increase in value of variety in educational needs expressed by the local community; and (3) the realignment of organizations and the introduction/redesigning of effective measurement and performance assessment systems.

Nowadays, the school is called on to improve the quality of services in order to respond to the educational needs of the community. This process goes with the statement of a governance oriented towards economic viability (effectiveness and efficiency), the correct use of the limited resources available, and constructive comparison among different actors of the educational system.

The ways to satisfy training expectations depend on the characteristics of the strategic-organisational complexity of the school, which in turn are regulated by the rules and requirements necessary for the development of an effective and quality system of management.

The governance of organizational complexity requires careful analysis of roles, responsibilities assigned, and behaviors implemented in terms of decisions and actions, for the beginning of continuous improvement processes characterized by economic viability, administrative independence, and operational and informative transparency. In this context, the principal plays a leading role, in particular, in this transitional phase, since: (1) He defines the guidelines for the development of culture and knowledge and the methods to achieve output and outcome; (2) He promotes and facilitates the resolution of some significant problems of civil society (dropping out, bullying, individualism, inadequate abilities for the labor market, etc.); and (3) He deals with regular measurement and assessment processes of the performances.

The coherency and sharing of objectives and relationships also bring out the importance of the governance of strategic complexity, defined by the number of services offered according to the needs expressed by the pupils, civil society, and all external stakeholders. The characteristics of relations with stakeholders correlate themselves with this condition.

The school is integrated with the local community to the point that it seeks to create a real “learning community”, that is,

A group of people who share a common purpose and who collaborate to draw on individual strengths, respect a variety of perspectives, and actively promote learning opportunities. The outcomes are the creation of a vibrant, synergistic environment, enhanced potential for all members, and the possibility that new knowledge will be created. (Kilpatrick, Barrett, & Jones, 2005)

The existence of an effective and efficient learning community implies the adoption of a governance model where every relevant actor (parents, students, principal, teachers, public administration, enterprises, non-profit organizations, etc.) plays a key role in the community and contributes, in relation to the type of interaction carried out, to the evolution of cultural development, responsible citizenship, and social and economic welfare.

Therefore, the school needs a governance which is conscious of emerging problems and able to create a shared vision of development, influence the social strengths of a community, and manage a network that can modernize the supply of educational services, favoring social integration and the economic development of the region.

This article, in connection with an international study carried out by the European Union (with the involvement of universities and schools of Italy, Greece, Romania, Sweden, and the Netherlands), proposes a theoretical framework and an empirical analysis which involve the main stakeholders of a group of Italian

schools.

The empirical analysis, developed by focus groups technique, looks at:

(1) The participation of individual actors in the school's decision-making processes (from when decisions are taken until they are realized) and the potential evolution of each key actor's role for a more dynamic and participatory school;

(2) The integration between school and local community and the actions for improving this relationship;

(3) The skills needed by the principal for the optimization of the positive contribution to the school life in general, and in particular, for the improvement of the learning and education processes.

This study aims to checking the quality of Italian school governance and the changes necessary to achieve a school governance oriented towards the continuous improvement of performances for the benefit of stakeholders and for building a learning community.

### **Literature Review**

The analysis of contributions to managerial and leadership models and development conditions of schools refers to two main research fields in education: school effectiveness (Mortimore, 1998; Sammons, 1998; Scheerens & Bosker, 1997; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000) and school improvement (Joyce, Calhoun, & Hopkins, 1999).

The school effectiveness model is characterized by a priority over outputs and assessment methods in order to measure the learning quality. This area of research has defined and tested the results of school effectiveness variables with the aim of understanding if the ways the school is managed and organized affect (and in what measure) students' learning. So, it is an approach strongly focusing on students' results, without considering the processes needed to change.

On the contrary, the school improvement model focuses on what is necessary to improve the quality of learning (organization, conditions of educational work, training of teaching staff, etc.). In short, school effectiveness tries to determine what has been changed in schools, while school improvement aims at understanding the way schools could change to be better.

Considering the strong and weak points of both approaches, in the last decade, more integration between them seems appropriate (Hopkins, 1995; Macbeath & Mortimore, 2001). Recently, a new paradigm, called "school governance" has been characterized international education systems under the spur of the public governance approach.

The concept of public governance was born in the mid-1990s, in reply to a crisis in the public sector, because of: (1) increasing lack of confidence of public opinion in public administration; (2) episodes of corruption; and (3) unethical behaviours. The "governance model" aims at getting consent on specific choices, instead of taking formal obligations. This model flanks or takes over from the "governance model" (the literature is contrasting) which legitimizes higher-level powers to make decisions with formal tools and compulsory consequences.

The concept of public governance was extensively discussed in the last decade; both national (Borgonovi, 2002; Franzoni, 2004; Meneguzzo, 1995; Rebori, 1999; Salvioni, 2003) and international literature are ample, in particular: Anglo-Saxon literature (Bovaird & Löffler, 2002; Kettl, 2002; Osborne, 1998, 2010; Rhodes, 1992, 2000; Stoker, 1998); Dutch literature (Kickert, 2003; Kooiman & Van Vliet, 1993); German literature (Mayntz, 2003; Reichard, 2001; Schedler, 2003); and Scandinavian literature (Bjork & Johansson, 1999;

Edlund, 2001). So, it is not possible to give an unambiguous definition.

The literature analysis enables us to distinguish some differences regarding the role of public administration within the public governance (Cepiku, 2005): According to Anglo-Saxon and Dutch literature, there are clear borders between the public administration and other stakeholders; according to German literature, the public administration and civil society form a single whole; and Scandinavian literature reconciles both for a decentralized and active public administration.

In general, governance is the way through which organisations interact with their stakeholders; it derives from the choices at top levels and it is based on a set of processes and internal control tools aimed at assuring that these choices are put into effect within the management (Salvioni, 2009).

The public governance concerns the role of public administration in networks and it is often identified with their management.

The literature shows two points of view: According to the first one, any party in the network can lead the strategic coordination of the network itself (Dunsire, 1996; Kettl, 2002; Kooiman, 1993; Rhodes, 1996; Stoker, 1998), so the public party is in a position of equality in relation to the other parties. According to the second one, the public party coordinates the network but there are doubts about its managerial capacity, difficulties, and failures (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001; Jessop, 1998; Peters & Pierre, 1998).

Doubtlessly, consolidation of paradigms—represented first by the new public management (Hood, 1991) and later by the public governance (Osborne, 2010; Stoker, 1998), linked to processes of institutional modernisation and strategic and organisational changes, was crucial for the birth and development of the network.

Networks, built not only by public actors, but also by non-profit organizations, enterprises, and other organizations of civil society (consumers' associations and/or citizens), are important places for comparison, dialogue, and negotiation among stakeholders in order to favor project development and policies.

In 2010, during the “Ministerial Meeting on Innovative and Open Government”, it was recognized the importance of experience and creativity of citizens and civil society for an ever more efficient, effective, and innovative public sector, which distributes the best public services without increasing costs (OECD, 2011).

Public services, according to the public governance paradigm, work better if they are conceived and achieved in partnership with citizens in order to attract their approval, energies, experiences, and ambitions.

Co-production means the direct involvement of service users and civil society in planning and distribution of public services. This term refers to a significant number of concepts: co-planning, co-distribution, co-management, co-decision, co-assessment, and co-revision, and reflects the different steps of citizens' involvement (Pollit, Bouckaert, & Löffler, 2006).

Co-production transforms the relationship between service users and providers, enabling the user to take more control and ownership. It contributes to aligning results with citizens' aspirations and needs (Alford, 2009; Pestoff & Brandsen, 2008). As a result, co-production can lead to better outcomes in terms of reducing production costs, increasing satisfaction, and creating the capacity to face complex societal problems. Working together with citizens and civil society organizations in service delivery is about sharing benefits, costs, risks, and responsibilities to achieve better outcomes.

Countries are at different stages of engaging citizens and users, and what could be considered as innovative in one context may be part of mainstream practice in another.

The OECD defines co-production as follows:

A way of planning, designing, delivering, and evaluating public services which draws on direct input from citizens, service users, and civil society organisations. Partnerships with civil society organisations for service delivery can involve contractual or semi-contractual agreements; for example partnerships between public authorities and local community associations for educational services or training. (OECD, 2011)

Finally, co-production can strengthen communities and build social capital. Co-production strengthens social capital through community involvement and civic participation. It also enhances trust and shared values, which are the basis for active citizenship. Civic involvement can lead to improvement in the quality of communities, for example, when local residents and civil society organisations take over local amenities, such as parks and libraries that are under threat and reorganise them as multifunctional spaces for care, capacity building and training, and local cultural events.

Again, during the meeting “Governance in Education: Transparency, Accountability and Effectiveness” organised by UNESCO in 2008, a “Framework for Action on Education Governance” was proposed and the concept of “partnership building” was described in this way:

In local-level planning and management, formulating goals and strategies at national and local levels, and monitoring and reviewing progress, genuine partnerships have to be built for the government authorities and the non-governmental bodies to work together. Initiatives are needed on both sides to change mind-set, perceptions and attitudes in order to foster the spirit of genuine partnership for working towards the common goals in education. (UNESCO, 2008)

### **Theoretical Framework**

How can the school seek connections and synergies necessary for the development of a learning community?

The adoption of a network as a school governance model appears to be the most suitable way to safeguard the educational needs of a learning community: the development of based knowledge, the education in responsible behaviours (the supporting role of the school for the family), the creation of new competencies for the job market, drug abuse prevention, health care, environmental protection, and in general, the acquisition of active citizenship values by students.

It is nevertheless necessary to explain conditions, fundamental elements, and professional skills in order to make this model work effectively.

The conditions for development and governance of educational services co-production among schools and families, local authorities, non-profit organisations, enterprises, and civil society are:

- (1) Awareness of role and assumption of responsibility by the various players who make up the network;
- (2) Effectiveness of governance processes and measuring tools of outputs, with reference to: effectiveness of actions (as regards both single individuals and whole network); efficiency in the resources used; and economic viability;
- (3) Direction to transparency, that is: equal opportunity to access information; high level of respect of rules (networks do not work well if members follow the rules only in form and not in substance, and, by doing so, damage the others); significant coherence among situations, behaviours, and expectations.

This means:

- (1) Identifying the relevant players who make up the network and who are involved in co-production services;

(2) Specifying the roles, functions, and responsibilities of each player with regard to agreed upon objectives (to avoid overlaps or gaps);

(3) Defining the procedures of operation and conditions for involvement;

(4) Adopting tools which favour communication and diffusion of behaviours characterized by the culture of transparency;

(5) Identifying the educational needs of the community;

(6) Defining and adopting management control that allows measurement of the level of achievement of objectives and evaluates the overall effectiveness of the system.

The fundamental elements characterising the configuration of the network are the following (Franzoni & Gandini, 2010):

(1) The “nodes” of the network, namely the players (school with students, parents, teachers, principal, administrative staff, and representative bodies; local authorities; enterprises; hospitals; non-profit organisations; etc.) that make up the network and permit it to “live” independently and communicate with other systems to exchange values and information. The student represents the node “par excellence”, the fulcrum around which the system is articulated: He is the “first” and “last” player of the network, the processes, and actions that are generated;

(2) The “connections”, namely the two-by-two ties that permit transmission and diffusion within the network of the elements (information, guidelines, conduct codes, etc.) developed by each node. The points of connection identified must be represented, for example, by real or virtual desks (online desks or social networks) that operate to guarantee the information’s origins and immediacy based on the basis of a homogeneous model of communication. In order to maintain the system of connections, it is necessary to develop a constant flow of communication between the nodes of the network. This is indispensable for the dissemination of homogeneous and shared information and to permit the realisation of effective integration between the nodes of the system, in respect of governance of the network. This system of connections is realised through appropriate telematic supports and effective decision-making processes;

(3) The decision-making processes through which the functioning of the network is defined. This concerns both the cultural and behavioural dimension (language, codes, values, etc.) and the operational procedures that guide behavior. In fact, a common language makes it possible to codify the knowledge of each node and spread it through the network’s connections. In addition, it is of vital importance that the nodes of the network share the strategic and operational processes, and planning and control to define objectives, values, and interaction rules. This makes it possible to establish and develop effective processes of educational services co-production among the players who make up the network (families, civil society, enterprises, the third sector, etc.).

In addition to specific managerial, organizational, and pedagogical skills, the players working within the network system must possess high relational capabilities (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). To govern and manage networks, the following abilities are required:

(1) The ability to listen and interpret stimuli for change opportunely collected by the players who make up the network;

(2) The ability to anticipate and program future scenarios to succeed in spreading knowledge and common expectations throughout the network, reduce uncertainties and fears, and encourage all the players towards a global optimum network;

(3) The ability to analyze the level of homogeneity of the interests of the players belonging to the

network and the level of compatibility with the fundamental values and objectives of the players. If the level of compatibility is low, the players will not respect common procedures and the attempt to build and manage the network will not be productive and will be merely representative of the model of governance formally conceived.

### **The Italian Context**

The Italian public administration has been a highly centralised organisation for a long time. Law No. 59 of March 15, 1997, granted regions, provinces, and municipalities all the roles and administrative tasks currently performed by the state bodies, apart from those linked to matters expressly reserved to the State.

The consequent delegated provisions have granted schools from the school year 2000–2001 a wide autonomy for teaching methods, organization, and research. Autonomy of schools is exercised within a general framework set by the MIUR (Ministro dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca (Ministry of Education, University and Research)) to guarantee the coherence of the education system.

In addition, the constitutional reform of 2001 (reform of Title V) redefined relations between the various central and local institutional levels (state, regional, and local public institutions—provinces and municipalities) including schools: The state should produce general guidelines and evaluate the homogeneity of the system; while all other competencies should be distributed at a regional level, through interaction between regions, provinces, municipalities, and schools, on an equal footing, and no longer through relationships of hierarchical dependency.

The roles of the actors mentioned are described as follows.

#### **Central Administration's Role (National and Local Level)**

The central administration at national level is entrusted to MIUR. As regards school education, the ministry carries out its own functions in the following areas: the general organization of school education; school organization and timetabling; the legal status of the staff; the definition of the criteria and parameters for the organization of the school network; the determination of the financial resources to be borne by the state budget and school staffing; the assessment of the school system; the identification of the training objectives and standards in the field of higher education, etc..

The organisation of the MIUR provides for a “peripheral” organization made up of the USR (Ufficio Scolastico Regionale (Regional School Offices)). These are autonomous centers of administrative responsibility exercising residual state functions, not transferred to the regions and schools, as well as the functions involved in relationships with the regions and local authorities, universities, and training agencies. Finally, UST (Ufficio Scolastico Territoriale (Territorial School Offices)) are an internal specification of USR, and do not have their own operational autonomy.

#### **Regional Administration's Role**

The regions decide upon the system of educational services they wish to adopt; they plan the services independently and promulgate regional laws to allow implementation of the entire process. The decisions made must correspond to the needs expressed by the territory, in order to constitute an effective response to these particular needs. This gives rise to substantial differences between the various confederate parts, in line with the objectives of autonomy, which make the most important goal, rather than the uniformity of services throughout the national territory, the continuous improvement (that must be realised with a view to systemic and negotiated

planning of intervention) of services rendered at a regional and local level.

The regions are called on for activating subsidiary processes and planning services at territorial level with new capacities of co-ordination.

### **Local Administration's Role**

Provinces (for high secondary schools) and municipalities (for secondary and primary schools) decide about: organization's plan for school networks; aggregation, merger, or establishment of schools; maintenance of school assets; management of services related to the "plan for the right to study": transportation services, canteen services, pre-school and post-school assistance, assistance for the disabled, etc..

The relationship with local authorities has become significant for schools functioning considering that it often finances not only support services, but also schools' training projects. So, co-planning and co-operation between schools and local authorities are critical factors with influence on the effectiveness of educational system.

### **School Actors' Role**

In each school, the management and administration functions are vested in the "consiglio di circolo" (district council—for pre-school establishments and primary schools) or in the "consiglio di istituto" (school council—for secondary schools), and in the "dirigente scolastico" (principal).

The district council and the school council are responsible for decisions relating to the balance sheet and the organisation and planning of school activities. Every school draws up the "piano dell'offerta formativa" (POF—training offer plan), which is the main document that defines the school's cultural identity and plans for the future. This document is drawn up by the "collegio dei docenti" (teachers' committee) according to guidelines defined by district council or school council considering the proposals coming from parents' associations and students (the last only in high secondary schools). The POF is approved by the district council or the school council.

Teachers' committee, in addition to educational planning (by means of elaboration of POF), periodically reviews the overall teaching activity to ensure that it conforms to the planned objectives, proposing improvements when necessary.

The "consiglio di intersezione" (Board of Intersection—for pre-primary schools), the "consiglio di interclasse" (Board of Interclass—for primary schools), and the "consiglio di classe" (Board of Class—for secondary schools) formulate educational and teaching plans for the class, assess class teaching and discipline, organise innovation remedial and support initiatives, and carry out the periodic and final assessment of pupils.

The principal (*dirigente scolastico*) is the legal representative, and he is responsible for the management of the school's financial and material resources and the results of the school. The principal has independent powers of management, coordination, and use of the resources, and he promotes actions aiming at guaranteeing the quality of the training processes. Principals are at the center of strategies about vertical and horizontal subsidiarity. On the one hand, they hold the higher degree in the school hierarchy, and on the other, they should be a reference for local development policies in accordance with which the school is an autonomous entity between state and civil society. In fact, also the regulation on school autonomy (DPR 275/99) conceives the school as a fundamental node within a network of stable relationships among external actors (ministries, local authorities, associations, enterprises, and other educational organizations which are on the territory) and internal ones (families, teachers, principals, students, etc.). To achieve DPR 275/99 principles, regulations



under the Decree 88/2010 require that the schools,

can adopt a scientific committee, with advisory functions, composed of professors and experts from the labour market, professions, the scientific and technological research, universities and art, music and dance high-level institutions. (Art. 5, c. 3d, DPR 88/10)

Doubtless the POF is:

The fundamental constitutional document of cultural identity of the schools and it is implemented through the planning of curricular, extracurricular, educational and organisational activities. (Art. 3, c.1, DPR 275/99)

So, it is one of the most important tools for governance and regulation of relationships with stakeholders.

POF identifies the strategic priorities and the allocation of financial resources, concentrating on the main topics of school's cultural identity in which the outputs must be checked and assessed. It should be developed with the participation of all the components of the scholastic community and must be the result of strong involvement of external stakeholders. Unfortunately, in Italy, the potential of this instrument is not currently exploited; it should suffice to consider that the teachers' committee autonomously develops, evaluates, and approves the training offer plan, while the district council (or by the school council) approves it as a formal act (in this way, the shared planning and active participation of all external and internal actors fail). Additionally, the plan is presented as a list of services offered and does not include the school's objectives and performance and the most important areas of action.

### **Method and Research Design**

The survey is based on focus groups method (Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 1997). Focus groups are a powerful means of collecting opinions; basically, they are interviews, but involve several people interacting with the interviewer and one another. In particular, the project has five focus groups of about 10 persons each (in all, 50 persons) belonging to different secondary schools (lyceums, technical, and vocational institutes) of Genoa Province (Region Liguria) representative of five stakeholders categories of the school: 11 principals, 10 teachers, 12 students, nine parents, and eight other stakeholders who have relations to the school (heads of educational services in the public administration, orienteering operators and youth counsellors, sport associations managers, enterprise managers, and trade union representatives).

Each focus group, lasting about 120–140 minutes, was led by two persons: a facilitator in charge of putting questions and guiding the discussion and an assistant in charge of recording the answers on the computer and preparing the report. As the computer was connected to a video-projector, all the answers were made visible to everybody in real time. This kind of visual interaction helps the development of the discussion and emphasizes the participants that each opinion counts and is not misunderstood. The facilitator raised one question at a time and began the discussion according to the round-table approach, giving the maximum one minute for each participant's reply.

The steps which allowed focus groups to be realized were:

- (1) The composition of the group;
- (2) The choice of the most appropriate tool to invite participants;
- (3) The definition of the period of the focus groups;
- (4) The choice of the location;
- (5) The way to conduct the groups;

(6) The rules to share with participants and the start of focus groups;

(7) The conclusion of meetings.

The following questions were addressed to all stakeholders categories:

(1) How does each actor take part in decision-making processes (from when decisions are taken until they are realized)? What should be the role of each actor in a more dynamic and participative school?

(2) Is there integration between school and local community? Is there anything that can improve the relationship between school and local community?

(3) Which abilities should a principal have in order to give a positive contribution to the school life in general, and in particular to the improvement of the learning and educational processes?

### Discussion of Findings

Questions proposed to people taking part in the focus groups reflect three areas:

(1) School governance: the role of relevant actors;

(2) Relations between school and local community: co-production of educational services;

(3) Principal's skills to develop school governance fit for building a learning community.

For the first two questions, you have the answers of different stakeholders, while for the last one, you have a cumulative answer at first and then a comparative analysis.

#### School Governance Area: The Role of Relevant Actors

Q1: Describe the role of your own category within the school life (from when decisions are taken until they are realized);

Q2: How do you see the role and activities of your own category within a more lively and participative school?

**Principals.** A1: Principals are aware that their roles are critical in school decision-making processes but they suffer from a lack of substantial school autonomy;

A2: Principals think that clear actors' roles and responsibilities are necessary first to develop a democratic participation in school life and then to avoid an excessive centralization of functions in the principal. Interviewees imagine a principal able to:

(1) make other actors aware of their responsibilities, giving value to their role and strengthening their sense of belonging to the school (also by means of delegation of powers in accordance with rules and specific school autonomy);

(2) give an effective and new role to the councils to recover their function as representative bodies;

(3) favor cooperation with and among teachers with the aim to overcome individualistic tendencies for a participative community. The principal (who has been a teacher too) should be *primus inter parts* instead of *primus super parts*;

(4) train students to have the values of representative democracy;

(5) involve families and make them more responsible for their children's future.

**Teachers.** A1: As regards effective participation in decision-making processes, teachers have expressed, in general, negative opinions on the basis of the existence of formal school governance which has difficulty in being tangible and real. This is due to the passive attitude of teachers, caused by current recruitment policies and lack of monitoring and evaluating tools;

A2: As regards teachers' role in a more participative school, they notice that:

- (1) Team working is very important to favor the sense of belonging to the school and overcome "teacher loneliness" (teachers work alone in their class without opportunities of comparison with other teachers);
- (2) Revising the working methods of governing bodies in order to promote constructive discussions;
- (3) Also young and "precarious/temporary" teachers should be personally motivated by the awareness of their institutional and social role;
- (3) Time and working tools should be changed for a greater involvement of teachers and students.

**Students.** A1: Students complain about a scarce participation in decision-making processes, first because of a general indifference by students themselves, and second, because of little information and scarce knowledge. Students' initiatives are often listened to but only in a formal way;

A2: For students, a better school governance could be gained with:

- (1) More information about what happens inside and outside the school;
- (2) A listening attitude by school governance bodies;
- (3) Frequent meeting opportunities (among students and with teachers) and learning of relational skills.

**Parents.** A1: Parents are involved in discussions but generally they have no decision-making power (except for unusual situations thanks to the tenacity of their delegates);

A2: In their opinion better school governance could be created by means of:

- (1) Frequent meetings between students and parents;
- (2) Better organization of meetings in which parents participate, with the aim of reconciling work and family time with school commitments;
- (3) Wider information;
- (4) Dissemination of existing good practices in a local context.

**Other stakeholders.** Other stakeholders are not involved in questions about school governance because of their heterogeneity and limited participation in single school decision-making processes.

In short, we can affirm that all actors interviewed agree on the existence of school autonomy formally guaranteed by rules but not achieved in decentralized decision-making processes. In fact, rules decree actors' participation in decision-making processes, but this is not sufficient for a school governance really based on shared choices (see Table 1).

Table 1

*The Role of Relevant Actors in School Decision-Making Processes*

	Awareness of role but lack of actual decision-making power	Passive attitude towards opportunities of involvement
Principals		
Teachers		
Students		
Parents		

*Note.* In shadow, the more frequent answers are classified by stakeholders' groups.

Table 2 shows the main proposals of different actors for better school governance.

**Relationships Between the School and Local Community Area: Co-production of Educational Services**

Q1: In your opinion, to what extent is your school well integrated into the local community?

Q2: Is there anything that can be done in order to improve the relationship between school and local community?

Table 2

*Main Proposals for a More Dynamic and Participative School*

	All more actors should be aware of their own roles	Collective bodies should be more representative	Much more frequent relations with other actors	Stronger sense of belonging to school	More information
Principals					
Teachers					
Students					
Parents					

*Note.* In shadow, the more frequent answers are classified by stakeholders' groups.

**Principals.** A1: Principals agree on the fact that schools are differently integrated into the local community. In particular, there is a strong integration among school and labor market (enterprises and their associations), cultural and social associations, foundations, universities, and public health organisations. All these stakeholders, according to principals, recognize the social role of the school and its capacity to cope with social problems. Instead, integration is difficult with local authorities (provinces and municipalities) and based on personal relationship with members belonging to institutions (and this situation does not guarantee stability in relations);

A2: According to principals, the school should become a catalyst of trust and support, a permanent body for planning, experimentation, and dissemination adopting a proactive attitude, as the starting point for good relationships with stakeholders. The existing networks should be reinforced and enlarged to facilitate the various passages in educational system and the finding of additional resources (sponsorship). It would be a good idea to engage local institutions sharing common actions (for example, contact with foreign countries in order to improve students' mobility and language learning). In any case, relationships should be lasting, for example, setting up a permanent committee with contributions from school delegates and stakeholders.

**Teachers.** A1: The participants, starting from the experience in their school, paint varying and sometimes contradictory pictures. For some of them, the school is well integrated into the local community, while for others, there is only formal and superficial integration because: The territory is too large and fragmented; there is no culture of change; school leadership changes too often; and there is a high percentage of foreign students;

A2: According to teachers, it is necessary:

(1) To make parents aware that the school is a public service paid for with their taxes and to favor the knowledge of initiatives and activities promoted by the school;

(2) To make services and places available to the local community (libraries, gyms, etc.) through an idea of opening school at any hour of any day;

(3) To enhance co-operation with higher educational institutions and the labour market (using, for example, the future technical-scientific committee), also for fund-raising;

(4) To choose one person to take care of relations with the local community.

**Students.** A1: Students express contradictory opinions about integration between school and local community, with a predominance of negative ones. The relationships are based more on personal commitment than on a real school policy;

A2: Students suggest a more stable relationship between school and community (in particular, labour market and universities) with teachers as mediators. Moreover, they demand an inductive approach starting from practical experiences to arrive at theoretical knowledge.

**Parents.** A1: Parents notice, in general, a good level of integration between school and local community.

A2: The situation could be improved by means of: civic education and new social and cultural initiatives as stimuli for student openness.

**Other stakeholders.** A1: Answers to the first question are divided among types of interviewees. Representatives of the labour market notice a good (sometimes excellent) integration with schools thanks to some principals' commitment (therefore, with guarantees of lasting stability). Representatives of local authorities emphasize the necessity to reconcile local community interests with ministerial guidelines (to avoid situations of school subordination to community). Furthermore, they notice that the school rarely understands the role of local authorities as mediators and network builders. All stakeholders agree on schools' inability to communicate to the local community their processes of change and improvement.

A2: Proposals from other stakeholders regard:

(1) The real and substantial adoption of national reform, to reinforce the autonomy of regions and to put into practice networks of schools, local authorities, associations, etc.;

(2) The change of mentality to share purposes, to unify efforts, and to optimize resources;

(3) The establishment of regional associations of schools that defend school autonomy from national interference and carry on dialogue with citizens.

In short, we can affirm that the level of integration between school and local community is differently perceived depending on the type of actor interviewed and type of actor to whom relation is referred (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Relationship Between School and Local Community*

	High integration with labour market and non-profit organizations	Difficult integration with local authorities	Different (and contradictory) opinions	Integration based on personal commitment
Principals				
Teachers				
Students				
Parents				
Others				

*Note.* In shadow, the more frequent answers are classified by stakeholders' groups.

Table 4 shows the main proposals to improve the relationship between school and local community.

**Principal's Skills to Develop School Governance Fit for Building a Learning Community**

Q1: Which abilities should a principal have in order to give a positive contribution to school life in general, and in particular, to the improvement of the teaching and learning processes?

Interviewees gave various answers from which identical or very similar ones were later removed. Among those remaining the actors voted for the most important (in their opinion) five skills. Subsequently, the interviewers indexed abilities (answers from top rated) in three macro areas about leadership and managerial and pedagogical skills.

Tables 5 and 6 show the predominance of managerial skills, followed by leadership ones and finally (with significant detachment) by pedagogical competencies.

Table 4

*Main Proposals to Improve the Relationship Between School and Local Community*

	School should be proactive and not only reactive	Community representatives should be involved in school decision-making processes	Tools to create stable relationships should be used	Spirit of belonging to community should be reinforced (civic education)	Existing tools should be used better	It is important to contribute to common objectives
Principals						
Teachers						
Students						
Parents						
Others						

*Note.* In shadow, the more frequent answers are classified by stakeholders' groups.

Table 5

*Principal's Skills/Abilities (Areas)*

Area of expertise	Skill/Ability	Choice
Leadership	Relational skills	27
	Listening skills	4
	Learning by doing skills	4
	Flexibility	3
	Sensitivity	2
	Presence	2
	Communicative skills	2
	Team building skills	1
Managerial	HR management skills	10
	Decision-making ability	8
	Ability to delegate	7
	Problem-solving skills	7
	Managerial experience	7
	Vision	5
	Project management skills	5
	Ability to work together	4
	Ability to deal with conflicts	4
	Ability to check, monitor and assess	3
	Ability to stimulate people in view of a final purpose	3
	Ability to read the local community and its needs	2
	Ability to innovate	2
	Juridical skills	2
Marketing skills	2	
Organisational skills	2	
Negotiation skills	2	
Pedagogical	Pedagogical skills	6

Table 6

*Areas of Expertise and Choices of Different Actors*

	Leadership	Managerial	Pedagogical
Principals	5	30	0
Teachers	10	14	2
Students	13	11	1
Parents	10	9	3
Others	7	11	0
Total	45	75	6

So, interviewees picture a figure of principal with firstly managerial expertise (in terms of ability to lead the organization towards shared goals, to use resources in an effective and efficient way, to assess outputs and outcomes), and secondly, the capacity to relate to all actors involved it (see Figure 1).

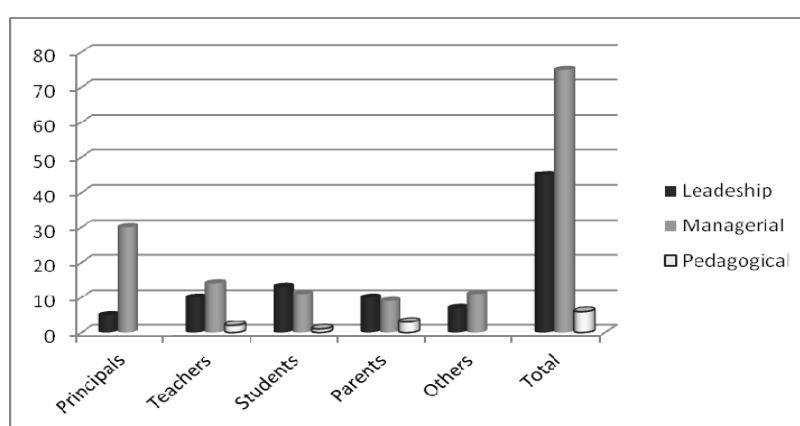


Figure 1. Areas of expertise and choices of different actors.

## Conclusions

The empirical analysis confirms the belief that the school is responsible, on the one hand, for management through a logic of coordination and integration (where the ability to create consensus, sharing and convergence of interests on the solutions proposed is essential and critical); on the other hand, for the development of a network system of intervention, which can respond to educational needs.

The first results highlight that the proposed “network model” fosters the meeting among different subjects (which are the nodes of the system) and makes integration and coordination easier, controlling the connections two-by-two (which identify and monitor the circulation of information in the network).

The principal’s managerial and leadership skills (highlighted in the research), together with relational ones among actors taking part in the school governance, can lead to the setting-up of a network able to:

- (1) facilitate co-production of services. Answers collected show a difficult and unstable integration among different actors and the lack of useful tools for stabilizing relations;
- (2) improve the opinion about the lack of an effective decision-making power by relevant actors;
- (3) make every actor aware of his/her own role, set up more frequent relations and spread more information.

Satisfying an educational need is in fact the result of joint action by a network of specialised and interdependent players, each of whom contributes to satisfying the need within their particular competence.

Thus, the school's activity (with the principal as the director) is carried out through the governance of complex networks which are able to involve all the actors belonging to the network and to create a real learning community.

Starting from the analysis of scientific literature and from the focus groups carried on in all fine partner countries at the same time, the course of work will lead us to develop a European curriculum for principals capable of governing their school in order to establish an effective learning community. See the work in progress of the research on the Website: <http://www.sgolc.eu>.

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