

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND WORK-RELATED STRESS: AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION ON SCHOOL MANAGER

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Abstract

Contemporary studies highlight how chronic stress influences a person's state of health and psycho-physical well-being. A high allostatic load, resulting from chronic hyperactivation of the stress system, contributes to several negative consequences for individual health status in the long term.

The study showed that the stressful and problematic situations of managerial work are numerous and that they radically influence individual psychophysical well-being both in the professional context and in private life. Greater attention to the evaluative dimension of managers' discomfort is useful and functional, in order to promote improvement actions that concretely constitute an opportunity to reflect on the "managerial practices" adopted that can create workplace discomfort.

This study has led to the need to promote good practices for the prevention of mental health and the activation of coping strategies and protection systems.

Keywords: *educational leadership, school management, school manager, work-related stress*

Introduction

The profound changes that have affected the process of autonomy of Italian school institutions and the optimization of a training offer that is more responsive to contemporary emergencies, have led to a redefinition of the figure of the school manager. In the perspective of a digital and inclusive school networked with families and institutions, the SM (School manager) takes on a complex function as an expert and multi-purpose coordinator (Le Rose, Riccardi, 2015). The workload and new skills have questioned traditional leadership models and highlighted the levels of stress related to managerial roles in public administration.

The SM has the task of managing the budget, ensuring continuous training and professional development of staff, and coordinating training. Secondly, the SM has responsibility for both seeking funding and effectively managing human and financial resources. Finally, he promotes interventions aimed at guaranteeing the educational success of students and takes care of the implementation of the Educational Offer Plans and the pursuit of educational objectives (Ferrante, 2015).

Considering the complexity of this professional figure, it becomes important to understand how stress levels impact individual well-being and, consequently, the effectiveness and efficiency

of the different levels of the training system. Faced with the numerous tasks and responsibilities envisaged, the SM is subjected to bureaucratic and regulatory constraints which severely limit his decision-making autonomy. In addition to the difficult personnel selection and incentive system, the output of the training processes and the outcome of the provision of services must be subjected to cyclical monitoring, evaluation and publication processes for the transparency logic of the public administration.

Although there is extensive literature that highlights the connection between leadership quality, managerial organization, and good training practices (Bloom et al., 2015), the mental health and psychophysical well-being of SM are still poorly researched topics.

This work explored the work-related stress phenomenon of SM through a quantitative survey aimed at outlining the perceptions and representations of educational leadership. With a view to the well-being perceived in one's professional context, the survey aimed to identify any emerging stressors through the exploration of the perception of school managers regarding organizational and management practice, through the identification of strengths and possible criticality of the management processes, the verification of the source of any discomfort and the understanding of the dynamics of origin. In relation to the objectives of the survey, a questionnaire was constructed aimed at investigating the participants' perception of their management and leadership role.

The study showed that the stressful and problematic situations of managerial work are numerous and that they radically influence individual psychophysical well-being both in the professional context and in private life. The recognition of the levels of stress expressed by managers allows us to identify risky situations for the health of the individual and the organization and leads to the need to promote good practices for the prevention of mental health and the activation of coping strategies and protection systems.

Research Methodology

General Background

According to the report *Principali dati della scuola – Avvio Anno Scolastico 2023/2024* published by the General Directorate for Information Systems and statistics of the Ministry of Education in September 2023, regions with the highest number of educational institutions are Lombardy, Campania and Sicily and, specifically, Campania holds the sad record of undersized educational institutions. Furthermore, for the 2023/2024 school year, in Campania, there are 124 regencies, i.e. schools that do not have an SM are entrusted “in regency” to a head of another school institution, resulting in considerable leadership and coordination difficulties “at a distance”. This happens in the most fragile and peripheral areas of the region, where the professional figure of the SM clashes with socio-cultural problems and the scarcity of available resources in the face of an overnumber of classes, alternating his presence between multiple structures amidst coordination difficulties and leadership.

According to the report *Alla ricerca del tempo perduto – Un'analisi delle disuguaglianze nell'offerta di tempi e spazi educativi nella scuola italiana*, published by Save the Children in September 2022, in Campania, Calabria and Sicily, more than 60% of students do not reach the basic level of Italian language skills. Furthermore, in the southern regions, a higher percentage of school dropouts than the national average, with a peak of 19.8% in Campania. In the provinces of Campania, approximately half of the schools do not have a certificate of viability or services dedicated to canteens, full-time courses, and sports.

A third survey useful for understanding the context of the research is the Survey on the levels of stress and well-being of Italian school managers published by the National Association of Public Managers and the National Observatory of Teachers' Health and Wellbeing in 2018 which shows a condition at high risk of psychophysical discomfort, relating above all to two dimensions: the perceived demands and the relationship with the Administration.

Definition of Stress, From Individual Stress to Work-related Discomfort

In such a diversified framework, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by stress and work-related stress, with particular reference to the professional figure of the school manager. The word stress identifies both the cause and the effect of exposure to elements of discomfort that can give rise to a more or less serious psychophysical imbalance. The tension of the individual emotional load can overload the psychophysical structure of the individual, leading him to give in. In these cases, the resources available constitute a safety and protection device useful for reacting and building a new life path oriented towards resilience (Acquarini, 2022). The meaning that each individual attributes to stressful events reveals the sensitivity of tolerance to stress unconsciously built based on one's life history, activated conflicts, survival strategies, attempted solutions, and the disposition of one's social group.

Individual stress can take on its own peculiarities based also on the different contexts of activation; for this reason, it is limiting to talk about burn-out, but it is more correct to identify symptoms that can be placed on a broader spectrum in order to understand the variability of the psychophysiological response. From this perspective, even a failure to understand the discomfort already represents in itself a dangerous risk factor that could amplify individual vulnerability and amplify its impact (Acquarini, 2022).

The type of impact that stressful events produce on the organism depends on the psychophysical conditions of the individual. The state of stress leads to poor adequacy in managing events, both in the sense of not being able to resolve the difficulties that arise and in poor prevention in order to avoid the onset of the phenomenon. Different people, in the presence of the same critical input, can give different answers as they depend on risk factors that involve the individual in his biological, psychological, and psychosocial components and in the degree of belonging to a specific socio-cultural and educational context of reference. Events perceived as stressful originate from heterogeneous situations and concern the individual's relationship with their life context. In this regard, it is important to specify that stressful experiences can become traumatic but a direct link between stress and trauma is not always discernible (Vaccarelli, 2016).

Specifically, "work-related stress is a condition of subjective response to environmental demands and pressures that are incongruent [...] with one's skills, abilities and/or work role. The subject is exposed to a series of environmental demands and pressures experienced as excessive given the capacity for adaptive response" (Acquarini, 2022). When the accumulation of stress becomes so overwhelming as to limit coping responses, an acute phase can arise, which in the most serious cases leads to stress/trauma-related syndromes.

Finally, for SM, research on distress and burnout has identified how the source of stress for school leaders is the boundary-spanning stress type - linked, that is, to an overload of tasks, deadlines, and expectations.

The Role of School Manager and Complexity Leadership

First of all, the SM must have the skills of a manager regarding the management of the available financial, human and instrumental resources and must also be able to motivate and coordinate the multiple actors of the training trajectories. School management represents a complex system, made up of multiple heterogeneous and interdependent dimensions: the educational dimension, the organizational dimension, the relational dimension, and the administrative dimension (Carlini, 2012).

Secondly, the SM is an educational leader who carries out a management function of coordination and optimization of educational resources and a relational function in the various nodes of the network, which see the school at the centre of a complex communication process between families and institutions on formal, non-formal and informal levels. Finally, the manager takes on public functions and must report the outcome of his administrative, organizational, and public actions in terms of quality and transparency (Barzanò, 2011).

Within the school as a complex organization, various components come into relation which constitute the well-being of the school manager both from an individual point of view and from the point of view of his collective management and leadership skills.

Research Objectives

The exploratory research, taking into account the premises presented so far, had as its main objective the verifying type of perception that school managers have on the subject of well-being at work and also evaluating whether work-related unwellness depends more on the administrative-accounting load or from the organization of teaching processes.

In particular, the analysis focused on the constructions of sense and meaning with which SM represent their condition as managers and leaders, from the point of view of well-being or discomfort at work, to arrive at the most extreme forms of work stress.

The research investigated the real working situations of SM also with the aim of identifying obstacles of a technical-organizational nature that can promote forms of work-related stress, to explore the essential aspects that characterize the professional life and expectations of the school manager, and in particular whether and to what extent administrative-accounting management causes conditions of discomfort, also taking into account how it influences leadership motivation, relational dynamics and the behaviours that the school manager implements in his professional practice and on his personal life project.

In line with the theoretical framework of reference, the research overall set the following objectives:

- Explore school leaders' perceptions of organizational and management practice;
- Identify the strengths and any critical points of the organizational and management processes;
- Verify the source of any psychophysical discomfort.

Sample Selection

The research analyses what actually happens in the schools of the province of Salerno in the Campania Region (Italy) and, in particular, to school managers in terms of well-being or discomfort. The reference population is made up of all the secondary school managers of the province of Salerno, in which there are 209 educational institutions. All managers in the province of Salerno were contacted but only 97 filled out the questionnaire.

Out of a sample of 97 school managers, 37.1% are male, 62.9% are female. There is a prevalence of women in the world of schools who carry out the work of managers. As regards chronological age, 23.5% of the participants stated that they were aged between 41 and 50, 47.1% stated that they were aged between 51 and 60, and 29.4% said they were over 60 years old.

Instrument and Procedures

In relation to the objectives of the research, a questionnaire was constructed aimed at investigating the participants' perception of their management and leadership role.

The questionnaire made it possible to measure the nature and intensity of opinions and attitudes. It is characterized by pre-coded and predisposed answers, avoiding the risk of considering all the other possible answer alternatives, taking into account the fact that the answers do not have the same meaning for everyone.

The preparation of the questionnaire was very delicate. The construction of a questionnaire from scratch must be approached with caution, its preparation is an onerous activity which must be foreseen only when there is a real absence of alternative information sources or when it is considered that the additional information, the in-depth analysis, the originality of the data obtainable, really justify its use. It proceeded with the aim of preparing an instrument that fully responded to the required comprehensibility principles, based on a Likert-type survey scale (Cox et al., 2003).

Before proceeding with the definitive construction, the problem and the aim to be achieved were identified, then translated into the construction of the various items, taking care to avoid biased questions, which suggest a double answer and questions.

In constructing the items, no specialist terminology deriving from specific documents was used. This was to prevent the managers from responding (due to the effect of suggestion) in a non-spontaneous manner to the questions asked but based on the implicit answers already contained in the documents.

Subsequently, the relevant items were formulated and grouped in the same area by theme, in order to facilitate the respondent's concentration on a single topic at a time, and then continue with the next step. In formulating the items, the idea was considered that each question should be focused on a single topic, be short (since a long question is less focused than a shorter one) and clear, with language understandable to each interviewee.

Once the final text of the questionnaire had been drawn up, the halving test was carried out: the questions in the questionnaire were grouped two by two; thus, two parallel questionnaires were obtained. The responses were recorded by separating those relating to half of the questionnaire from those relating to the other half. In the end, it was found that no significant differences emerged between the two questionnaires. Nevertheless, it was deemed necessary to proceed with the administration of the questionnaire through pretesting.

In order to test and validate the questionnaire, a pilot study was then carried out with a group of 25 people represented by school managers. The study was able to count on participants who were highly motivated and interested in the research topic and who revealed a high availability during all the different phases of the research. Testing of the instrument highlighted that the order of items in the questionnaire, presented according to an established sequence of paradigms, does not influence the choice of subjects' preferences (Pitrone, 2009).

The questionnaire is divided into three sections:

1. Information section, which includes socio-demographic data, including gender, age group, tenure in the role of manager, any vicarial functions previously held, school degree;
2. Motivations section, which includes the choice to become a manager, the correlation between initial expectations and the actual job, the presence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in the workplace;
3. Evaluation section, which includes the working life of the school manager and the possible correlation with psychophysical discomfort.

To maintain anonymity, the questionnaire did not require the compilation of personal data (name and surname); it was sent to all schools in the province of Salerno online.

The tool was a valid screening support for recording the psychosocial workload that affects the working life of the school principal. It is marked by a structured set of items and related response categories defined in advance; the interviewee is asked to identify among the responses presented the one that comes closest to his own position.

All sections, except the information section, provide, for each of the items, a response format consisting of a Likert scale where participants must indicate the degree of agreement or disagreement with each of a series of statements regarding the object of the measurement, ticking off just one statement between a lot, somewhat, a little, not at all.

Data Analysis

The quantitative investigation was carried out according to the theoretical perspective of descriptive research which aims to describe a phenomenon and interpolate it starting from the data that are collected (Lucisano, Salerni, 2002), not stopping at the simple collection of data but providing for their specification processing and interpretation, also taking into account the relationships between the variables being surveyed.

The choice of questions and their construction follow the preliminary study of the context and the historical-social background, in order to identify more precisely the elements characterizing the situation under examination. The construction of the questionnaire followed precise methodological

criteria, in order to identify questions aimed at verifying the research hypotheses. Each question was structured to provide a unique answer, functional to the investigation objectives.

The questionnaire data were subjected to an exploratory factor analysis (principal component analysis with Varimax rotation and Kaiser normalization) using the SPSS 19.0 statistical analysis software. Factor analysis is a multivariate analysis technique that allows you to control and highlight the nature of the relationships between multiple explicit variables and the latent factors dependent on these relationships.

The analysis of the data made it possible to identify that among the various transversal-organizational risk factors, administrative accounting management is the etiological variable. It takes on ever greater importance in organizational contexts such as schools, characterized by continuous innovations of an economic-financial nature which require coping strategies and cognitive-emotional empowerment useful for dealing with the stress phenomenon.

Research Results

Section 1

Information section, which includes socio-demographic data, tenure in the role of manager, any vicarial functions previously held, and school degree.

Table 1

Breakdown by Age of the Sample Under Study

From 41 to 50	From 51 to 60	> 60
23.5%	47.1%	29.4%

As regards the years of service, 52.9% of the participants declare that they have been carrying out this job for less than 5 years, 29.4% declare that they have worked as a manager for 6 to 10 years, while 5.9% claim to have been doing this activity for 11 to 15 years. Only 11.8% say they work for more than 15 years. From the point of view of the managerial profile, there are very young managers in the province of Salerno (52.9 have less than 5 years of active management).

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Table 2

Breakdown by Years of SM Role

Less than 5 anni	From 6 to 10	From 11 to 15	> 15
52.9%	29.4%	5.9%	11.8%

The previous performance of vicarious functions was also verified: 36.5% of the participants declared that they had never carried out vicarious function 28.2% declared that they had carried out the functions of vicar for less than 3 years, 24.7 % claimed to have carried out the functions of vicar for a period ranging from 4 to 7 years. Only 10.6% declared having held the role of vicar from 8 to 12 years.

Table 3

Breakdown by Years of Carrying Out Vicarial Functions

No	Less than 3 years	From 4 to 7	From 8 to 12
36.5%	28.2%	24.7%	10.6%

The managers who completed the questionnaire were divided into four school levels. 11.8% work in educational circles, 5.9% work in lower secondary schools, 52.9% work in comprehensive institutes and 29.4% work in upper secondary schools.

Table 4

Educational Institutions Where They Perform the Role of SM

Educational circles (EC)	I grade	Comprehensive Institutes (CI)	II grade
11.8%	5.9%	52.9%	29.4%

As regards the motivation that pushed the current SM to become one, 56.3% declared that they did it to fulfill themselves professionally. 26.4% expressed the desire to improve society through school and only 17.3% became managers to take care of the cultural and human education of the new generations.

Section 2

Motivations section, which includes the choice to become a manager, the correlation between initial expectations and the actual job, the presence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in the workplace.

Table 5

Reasons for Choosing to Become a SM

Professional achievement	Improving society through school	Taking care of the cultural and human education of the new generations	Practical order
56.3%	26.4%	17.3%	---

Having probed their expectations compared to the initial expectations through a specific question, 32.4% responded that they expected the opportunity to participate in significant processes of change, 29.4% an exciting job on a scientific and human level, 23.5% an intense ethical and social commitment, 14.7% a fulfilling and decently paid job.

Table 6

Expectations Compared to Initial Expectations

Participate in significant processes of change	An exciting job on a scientific and human level	An intense ethical and social commitment	A fulfilling and decently paid job
32.4%	29.4%	23.5%	14.7%

Speaking about the evolution of the managerial career, 35.3% of the participants declare that they see an improvement, 17.6% affirm that the managerial profession has evolved for the worse (we do not know in what terms), and 47.1% state that the school leadership has remained unchanged.

Table 7

Your Management Profession Evolved from the Beginning of Career to Today

For better	For worse	Unchanged
35.3%	17.6%	47.1%

To the question “Currently would you make the same choice again?”, 64.7% say they want to make the same choice again, while 20.6% say they don’t know whether to make the same career choice again, and 14.7% say they don’t know if they want to make the same choice.

Table 8

Repeated Professional Choice

Yes	I don’t know	No
64.7%	20.6%	14.7%

“How much, in your opinion, is your professionalism valued?” According to the reading of the data, only 2.9% of the participants state that the management profession is highly valued, 52.9% state that the management profession is quite valued, and 44.2% maintain that management professionalism is little appreciated.

Table 9

Perception and Enhancement of One’s Professionalism

A lot	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
2.9%	52.9%	44.2%	---

Section 3

The evaluation section characterizes the working life of the school manager and the possible correlation with psychophysical discomfort.

The mental commitment, given the specific tasks of the DS, is evident. The interviewees, when asked, “Does your job mentally strain you?” responded a lot (88.2%) and quite a lot (11.8%).

Table 10

Your Job Strains Mentally

A lot	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
88.2%	11.8%	---	---

When asked to make an assessment of the management activity in the school, 64.7% considered themselves quite satisfied, 8.8% satisfied, and 26.5% considered themselves not very satisfied with the activity carried out.

Table 11

Perception of Work as an MS Today

Dissatisfied	Not very satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Satisfied
---	26.5%	64.7%	8.8%

Exploring the reasons for dissatisfaction or low satisfaction, it emerges how much changes are the cause: 34.2% responded that dissatisfaction can be attributed to disappointment with expectations of change, 32.4% to the difficulty of adapting to continuous changes, 12.5% to the loss of the sense of doing school, 11.6% to disappointment with respect to one's initial expectations, 9.3% to difficulties in inter-institutional communication.

Table 12
Reasons for Dissatisfaction or Low Satisfaction

Reasons	%
Disappointment compared to expectations for change	34.2
Disappointment compared to one's initial expectations	11.6
Difficulty in adapting to continuous changes	32.4
Difficulty communicating with colleagues	---
Difficulty in interinstitutional communication	9.3
Poor social recognition	---
Loss of the sense of doing school	12.5

“What is your feeling about the activity you carry out?” To this question, 58.8% of those interviewed responded that they were able to exercise satisfactory control, while 41.2% stated that they were not able to control it as much as they would like.

Table 13
Feeling about the Activity to Carry Out

Feeling	%
I can exercise satisfactory control over it	58.8
I can't control it as I would like	41.2
I feel confused	---
Other	---

The results obtained are commensurate with the effort and energy expended for 26.5%, while for 73.5% only partially.

Table 14
The Relationship between Efforts and Energy Expended

Yes	Only partially	No
26.5%	73.5%	---

We then wanted to analyse how much working life affects family life. It emerged that this actually happens: a lot for 64.7%, enough for 23.5%, and little for 11.8%.

Table 15*Daily Impact on Family Life*

A lot	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
64.7%	23.5%	11.8%	---

Specifically, this influence is indicated, for the majority, with the generation of non-positive sensations that tend to dominate family life. Reading the results to the question “If you answered a lot or enough to the previous question: the manifestations you noticed refer to...”, it was found that these manifestations refer to nervousness in family relationships for 46.6%, reduction of desire to communicate for 20.1%, communication difficulties for 3.2%, reduction of the desire to communicate for 20.1% and communication difficulties for 3.2%. 4.3% showed an increase in psychological detachment and 5.1% wanted to escape.

Among the positive sensations, 11.3% declared having serenity and balance in family relationships and 9.4% increased the desire to communicate.

Table 16*Psychological and Sociological Manifestations in Family Life*

Manifestations	%
Nervousness in family relationships	46.6
Serenity and balance in family relationships	11.3
Reduction in the desire to communicate	20.1
Increased desire to communicate	9.4
Increased aggression/reduced aggression	---
Willingness to participate/reduction of the sense of isolation	---
Desire to escape	5.1
Increase in psychological detachment	4.3
Communication difficulty	3.2
Ease of communication	---
Other	---

To analyse the sense of extraneousness with respect to the assignment received, the following question was formulated: “Have you ever, while working at school, asked yourself “what am I doing here?” or in any case feel a sense of strangeness?” to which 44.1% responded never, 50% sometimes and only 5.9% several times.

Table 17*Perceived Sense of Strangeness*

Several times	Sometimes	Never
5.9%	50.0%	44.1%

Speaking of symptoms related to professional stress, 64.7% declared that they had sometimes felt such symptoms, 20.6% for periods of less than two weeks, 14.7% of those interviewed declared that they had never felt them.

Table 18

Perception of Symptoms Related to Professional Stress

Sometimes	Periods less than two weeks	Never
64.7%	20.6%	14.7%

They were also asked to indicate which of the signs of distress (among those listed) they had recently noticed. 44.1% of those interviewed declared that they had never experienced any of the symptoms listed.

Table 19

Signs of Distress in Recent Behaviour at Work

Signs of distress	%
Intolerance towards Staff	8.8
Intolerance towards work	---
Feeling of monotony at work	5.9
Worsening of communication in the private sphere	24.7
More frequent time checking	11.8
Increase in the frequency of colds and flu	2.9
Frequent headaches and gastrointestinal disorders	11.8
I have never experienced any of the symptoms listed above	34.1
Other	---

In the relationship between years of service and the idea of the managerial profession from the beginning of the career, it emerges that length of service makes one perceive the evolution of the profession for the worse.

Table 20

How the idea of a management profession has evolved from the beginning of your career to today

	DS from less than 5 years	From 6 to 10 years	From 11 to 15 years	Over 15 years
For better	22.7%	22.8%		
Worse				37.2%
Unchanged			17.3%	

From reading the data, a less than optimistic vision emerges regarding leadership action in the work organization. Only 26.5% say that the results achieved are directly proportional to the efforts made. Table 24 makes us reflect on the 73.5% of participants who do not consider themselves sufficiently gratified in terms of the results obtained. It seems clear that many times the work of managers is underestimated both from an organizational and socio-economic point of view. This could be a “sentinel” factor to take into consideration.

Table 21

Relationship between Results and Professional Commitment

Yes	Only partially
26.5%	73.5%

64.7% of school managers say they have experienced symptoms attributable to work-related stress, while 20.6% say they have experienced these symptoms for periods of less than two weeks. Only 14.7% declare that they have never experienced symptoms attributable to work stress.

Table 22

Relationship between short period of time (over two weeks) and symptoms attributable to work-related stress

Sometimes	Periods less than two weeks	Never
64.7%	20.6%	14.7%

As regards the administrative accounting burden, 11% say they do not feel worried at all, 19% say they feel a little worried, 17% say they feel quite worried, and 53% say they feel very worried about administrative accounting management.

Table 23

Administrative-accounting Management

A lot	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
53%	17%	19%	11%

Regarding the organization of teaching processes, it is found that 55% do not worry at all, 16% worry a little, 11% worry quite a bit, and only 18% worry a lot.

Table 24

Organization of Teaching Processes

A lot	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
18%	11%	16%	55%

The results relating to the teaching load or administrative load questionnaire demonstrate that the majority of managers who participated in the research declared themselves much more stressed by the administrative load than by the teaching load. The managers most concerned about the administrative burden are aged between 41 and 60 and have been managers for a few years.

Table 25

Managerial Group Most Concerned about the Administrative Load

From 30 to 40 years	From 41 to 50	From 51 to	Over 60
---	42.3%	37.5%	20.2%

It emerges that tolerance for administrative accounting management is different in males and females. Males declare themselves much more inclined to deal with accounting and financial administration issues, while females show very strong difficulties in terms of administrative load.

61.8% of women say they are very worried about financial management and, therefore, about the administrative load, and only 38.2% of males say they are worried about issues related to accounting, the financial year and everything that falls within the administrative-accounting management. The determining factors regarding tolerance to this management, therefore, are also to be found in the gender difference.

Discussion

The international debate defines stress as pressures deriving from the amount of work (Sutherland, Cooper, 1988), or as the person's capacity for resources and adaptation (Lazarus, 1966) and even the influence of the social climate (Lewin et al., 1939) as one of the factors triggering work-related discomfort.

Much research shows that chronic stress produces multiple disease conditions. A high allostatic load could result from chronic overactivation of the stress system, contributing to a series of negative long-term health consequences, such as diabetes, hypertension, cancer, and cardiovascular disorders (McEwen, 1998), alterations of this balance which can determine a dysregulation of the stress response system and increase vulnerability to disorders related to it (Kloet, 2005).

The emotional overload, therefore, affects the spheres of personality, life history, expectations and relationships, profoundly influencing not only well-being in the work context, but the entire individual, family and socio-relational psychophysical structure.

It is, therefore, necessary to try to understand how individual and contextual factors intersect with well-being and/or discomfort at work.

The results of national and international research achieved so far show us how important it is to continue research in order to identify the actions to be taken to face work-related stress.

New models and resolution strategies are necessary to improve a dysfunctional work situation in other spheres of life. The actions to be undertaken for the research and its practical implications are still far from the objective of making the working context and its dynamics optimal for the complete well-being of educational leaders.

Conclusions and Implications

Workplace discomfort is a well-known problem among public administration managers. The school, as a complex organization, presents a series of factors responsible for transversal risks, including work-related stress.

The study shows that there are numerous situations that expose school managers to a high risk of work-related discomfort. This is due to the peculiarity of the administrative-accounting work that involves the life of school managers, and which must be addressed taking into account the rapid changes in sector regulations, "financial emergency" situations, environmental conditions, the lack of human and instrumental resources, factors that can create tension and instability at work leading to extreme forms of work-related stress. Recognition of the stress levels expressed by school managers will allow us to identify in subsequent research work, those changes, such as useful behaviour, coping strategies and good practices for the prevention of mental health, necessary to improve individual style of life and consequently professional one.

Another problematic element that emerges from this investigation, and which deserves further investigation, is the role of relationships at school: some participants report, in fact, having experienced more or less serious unpleasant and unwanted relationships.

Over 90% of managers declare that they find themselves in work situations that generate emotional distress, 86% of the sample declare that they do an emotionally demanding job and 65.8% of managers declare that they have suffered conflicts or quarrels at school.

The data collected represents an important wake-up call for understanding the levels of stress related to violent and threatening acts linked to the role of school manager. On the other hand,

some important protective factors emerge, including the meaning attributed to one's profession and the degree of job satisfaction which could contribute to lowering the risk of professional discomfort. In this context, systemic work on risk protection and prevention factors for the physical and psychological health of managers appears necessary both for the well-being of the individual and for the overall health of the organization.

From these considerations emerges the awareness of being able to transform the school into an educational and growth centre only through an investment in human resources, in their training and above all, in their psychophysical well-being.

The complexity of analysing the phenomenon, therefore, refers to its double value as a factor and, at the same time, triggering situation, also defined as a stressor, and emotional and psychophysical response to situations and events perceived as critical and problematic.

The study demonstrates the importance of analysing dimensions of well-being and discomfort linked to the type of workload. Starting from the results, it is possible to develop, in the future, an improvement plan with those who work in the field in order to encourage health promotion, a necessary prerequisite to the modification of dysfunctional behaviours. Eventually, the evaluative dimension of managers' discomfort is useful and functional in order to promote improvement actions that concretely constitute an opportunity to review the "managerial practices" connected with desirable professional well-being.

Note

The present study was conducted in full collaboration with the authors. However, M. Annarumma wrote *Introduction, Conclusions and Implication*; M.A Formisano wrote *Research results, Research methodology: Research Objectives, Sample Selection, Instrument and Procedures, Data analysis*; I. Tedesco wrote, *Discussion, Research methodology: General Background, Definition of stress, from individual stress to work-relate discomfort, The role of School Manager and complexity leadership*.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no competing interest.

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