

A Network Ecosystem for Innovation: The MOF Case

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Abstract: This paper highlights the impact that school networks have on the experimentation and implementation of new organizational models. It presents an experience of innovation and change achieved through inter-institutional support. This has enabled the nationwide dissemination of the Finnish Organizational Model (MOF), characterized by compact time-tables and the tripartite lesson structure. Through distributed leadership, schools became active as nodes within a broad and participatory network that operated as a collective system, enhancing specific skills and professional agency. Starting from an experimental initiative at a local school, it was possible to observe how the network facilitated the consolidation of teaching practices and the transformation of the school's role from a network beneficiary to an active supporting member for other schools. The network has evolved over time, providing experiential knowledge and opportunities for informal exchange that have extended beyond the classroom to build a vibrant community of practice open to new ideas to be developed together through dedicated campus initiatives.

Keywords: School network; innovation; teacher training;

1. Network-based Training and Pedagogical Innovation

We live in a complex contemporary era marked by sudden and multifaceted changes affecting the social, political, economic, and especially educational spheres. The new scenarios that have emerged require a rethinking of human existence starting from educational paradigms, necessitating the reorganization and innovation of schools. Attention is focused in particular on a new teaching professionalism (Panciroli et al., 2018) and on the organization of “school networks” (Lambicchi & Pastori, 2025; Magione et al., 2020). Since the 2019-2020 school year, the Comprehensive School Institute “Lorenzo Lotto” in the small town of Jesi has undertaken a gradual but profound transformation of its teaching and organizational practices, adhering to the experimentation of alternative models such as the MOF (Finnish Organizational Model), whose effectiveness is already recognized. This educational model places dialogue, responsibility, and reciprocity at its core, starting from a series of apparent paradoxes:

- ‘Teach less, learn more;



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¹ Paragraph 1 is by M. De Santis, paragraph 2 by E. Renzi, and paragraph 3 by S. Valentini. The conclusions drawn are the result of a shared reflection.

- Fewer tests, more learning;
- Greater equity is achieved through increased diversity (Braghero, 2023a).

Adopting the Finnish model served as a strategic response to the school's socio-culturally diverse landscape, necessitating more inclusive and adaptable pedagogical frameworks. This shift prioritizes student achievement and the cultivation of individual potential, reflecting the principle that «Finland has chosen to focus on the individual and their reference community, grounding teaching in the curiosity and needs of each student within that specific community open to the world» (Braghero, 2022).

The innovation process has become structured over time. Starting from the 2020-2021 school year, thanks to high parental engagement, the secondary school saw the activation of four experimental MOF classes, reaching 26 classes across four orders by 2024-2025. Four key quality elements characterize the model:

- competency-based design, in which theory emerges from effective practice;
- young and well-prepared teachers;
- a relationship of dialogue and trust between school leaders and teachers who, in addition to their foundational preparation, are selected on the basis of broader competencies beyond disciplinary expertise and on their motivation;
- a relaxed school climate allowing more time to be devoted to teaching and relationships with students (Braghero, 2023b).

To ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of innovation, the school has invested in teacher professional development (Bonaiuti et al., 2024) through both internal and external training courses, later strengthened through funding from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR).

In Finland, teachers are generally very young, «their average age is under 50, with a large number of teachers under 30. This ensures a significant reduction in the generational gap between students and teaching staff. Furthermore, the knowledge, skills, and methodologies used are more up-to-date than those adopted by older colleagues, thanks also to high-quality continuing education courses» (Braghero, 2023a, p. 10). Consequently, training (Scapillato, 2025) for MOF teachers has focused on: active methodologies such as cooperative learning and laboratory-based teaching; STEM disciplines to develop skills for science labs and robotics (computational thinking); the development of expressive and bodily languages; and educational technologies (digital boards, AI).

The new approach has led to a comprehensive reorganization of school life, beginning with the redefinition of time, the restructuring of spaces, and a new approach to assessment. The core of the experimentation is represented by:

- Horizontal and vertical block scheduling;
- An interdisciplinary approach based on a bottom-up principle of curricular design;
- Innovation in teaching through the tripartite lesson structure;
- Cooperative learning;
- Laboratory-based teaching (Fondazione per la Scuola, 2023).

Subsequently, a new form of teacher professionalism (Amatori, Buccolo, & Travaglini, 2025) has emerged, placing students at the center of the teaching-learning process (Felisatti & Serbati, 2014). Teachers are expected to rethink their instructional

methods and to replace exclusively lecture-based teaching with cooperative activities involving both students and colleagues. This has entailed a different approach and workload for teachers and school leaders, as well as a cultural redefinition of their professional roles.

One of the most significant changes was the reorganization of school time through a radical redistribution of hours in accordance with the Guidelines for implementing the “Compacting the School Calendar” model developed by the INDIRE movement “Avanguardie Educative” (Mosa, Orlandini, & Picoka, 2024), aimed at supporting Italian schools engaged in processes of innovation and transformation. In light of this, while maintaining the 30 weekly hours, instructional activities were shifted from six to five school days, extending the school day until 2:00 p.m. This weekly redistribution of instructional time enabled more effective use of classroom time and facilitated the adoption of the tripartite lesson, structured into three phases: direct instruction, knowledge construction and discussion, and formative feedback. This approach replaced the rigid 60-minute structure of the traditional lesson with an alternation of theoretical explanations, practical activities, individual reflection, and collective discussion. With the compacted timetable, the two-hour weekly subjects were combined into a single two-hour lesson, while the other subjects were spread across multiple days of the week. The central dimensions of innovation were methodology and homework management. Through laboratory, cooperative learning, and small-group work, students assumed an active and central role in their educational journey through the negotiation of meanings. This contributed to the development of socio-emotional, metacognitive, and reflective competencies. The use of these methodologies (Fedeli, 2022) was made possible by redesigning the learning environment into flexible and multifunctional spaces, creating interdisciplinary experiential pathways and contextualized activities that reduced homework while ensuring equal learning opportunities for all students.

2. The Network as a Condition of Possibility for School Innovation

Innovative processes require a reevaluation of established practices and the stability that has been achieved. However, the importance of critically reflecting on one’s work is not secondary to a good work-life balance for professionals within schools, a factor now recognized by well-established scientific literature. Balancing private life with the demands of the workplace is essential to ensure both teachers’ well-being and the quality of instructional time and classroom management. In the face of the growing prevalence of stress and burnout in the teaching profession (Agyapong et al., 2022), excessive workloads and the fear of being left unsupported may discourage schools from undertaking innovation processes. Within this complexity, which affects schools as much as society (Dominici, 2023), the support of a network can become an indispensable driver for envisioning and embracing the renewal of teaching practices.

The concept of horizontal support introduces the dual function of the network principle, which can be understood as a tool constituted by a set of social and professional relationships (GDLI, 2026). In both its active and passive dimensions, the network evokes two intrinsic functions of the term itself. On the one hand, it performs an active function through which something is drawn toward itself; on the other, the network serves as a source of protection and security.

School networks emerge from shared interests, a common vision, and a didactic and relational idea that finds in the school - as the «central organ of democracy»

(Calamandrei, 1950, p. 2) - a project for the polis of the present and the future (Valastro, 2024). Within this framework, networking for innovation becomes an essential means of sharing experiences, intelligence, and challenges, so that they can serve as the basis for professional learning. The possibility and awareness of being part of a network are central to innovation processes, in which a sense of security and belonging proves crucial for developing systemic processes of support and social recognition (Cannella & Belardinelli, 2020).

Alongside the social value of being part of a network lies another, often more readily acknowledged, benefit: professional peer support. This dimension is undoubtedly fundamental, as it encompasses both visible and hidden aspects, each of which is essential for joining and continuing to participate in a network for teaching innovation. In its visible dimension, teachers and schools can access documentary resources, good practices, models, and narratives of previous experiences. In its less visible dimension, one finds trust and the capacity to reflect on practices implemented in geographically distant contexts, transforming the network into a set of flexible and central nodes for the educational community (Orlando & Pacucci, 2005). This enhancement of professional agency is the most important resource for the actors involved, both for those who make themselves available to the network and for those who request its support.

The literature highlights that teachers and school leaders are the most valuable resource within educational systems, and that their positive impact on students can be strengthened and sustained through networking practices and knowledge sharing (OECD, 2019). In this sense, educational networks are not merely organizational devices; rather, they represent a formative ecosystem in which competencies are exercised, tested, and brought into dialogue in the pursuit of greater equity and educational quality. Professional learning is no longer confined to institutional structures; in the knowledge society (Llano, 2007), it circulates through diverse forms of communication and learning. This is particularly true in inter-institutional school networks, which function as genuine learning organizations. Within these networks, leadership becomes systemic and distributed (OECD, 2019), with more experienced school leaders able, as discussed in the following section, to extend their work to support the improvement of the entire network and the society in which it operates. This assumption underpins a fertile generative mechanism whose activation influences both the present and the future of an educational community that, through mutual support, builds widespread social capital to address the challenges of educational complexity.

3. Teaching and Organizational Innovation through the MOF Network: The Case of the “Lorenzo Lotto” Comprehensive School Institute

The implementation of the Finnish Organizational Model (MOF) represents a compelling example of how school networks can act as a support structure for the systemic transformation of educational institutions.

The case of the “Lorenzo Lotto” Comprehensive School Institute in Jesi highlights key factors that enabled teaching innovation to evolve from an experimental initiative into a consolidated organizational model. This process began in the 2019-2020 school year, when Antonella Accili, principal of the lead Institute All-through School “Della Rovere” (formerly principal of the Comprehensive School Institute of Piandimeleto), addressed the joint Faculty Board and presented the epistemological and methodological foundations of the MOF experimentation. This

meeting was crucial in clarifying the model's potential in terms of educational effectiveness and in documenting the positive outcomes achieved in similar contexts. Hearing directly from a school leader who described a successful experience grounded in established practices strongly encouraged the teachers and motivated them to undertake this path. On this basis, the Teachers' Council approved the launch of the experimentation in first-year classes of both primary and lower secondary school, marking a conscious and deliberate commitment to change.

Following the resolutions of the Faculty Board and the Teachers' Council, the lead school organized an in-service training program for teachers from all three educational levels (preschool, primary, and lower secondary education). The program was offered free of charge and delivered by teachers belonging to the MOF network, according to a peer-to-peer learning approach.

The support provided by the network proved decisive in the launch of the experimentation during the 2020-2021 school year. This was particularly evident in organizational terms, as the network assisted in the design and implementation of block scheduling (Accili, 2024), which required a substantial reconfiguration of school timetables and learning units. This operational scaffolding, delivered through structured examples and consultancy, reduced decisional uncertainty and enabled the designated teachers to develop advanced design skills. Indeed, the interaction among the nodes of the network supports not only teaching practices but also school middle management, facilitating the governance of complex organizational processes such as block scheduling and the integration of innovative cross-curricular curricula.

This support has confirmed for the school the value of the network as a driver of continuous professional development and the dissemination of good practices. The leadership exercised through the network - and extended to schools newly approaching the model - does not emerge as a hierarchical function, but rather as a form of distributed leadership that underscores the shared responsibility of professionals to circulate knowledge among the various stakeholders.

The reciprocity that characterizes the support nodes of an effective network became evident in subsequent years, when the "Lorenzo Lotto" Institute itself assumed an active role in supporting other schools. This mentoring function took shape in the design of cross-curricular learning units and in timetable reorganization, particularly through support provided to a school in Turin. During the summer of 2025, synchronous online meetings involving key staff members facilitated this collaboration. This bidirectional exchange confirms how inter-institutional networks can evolve into collaborative ecosystems capable of generating shared professional capital.

At the same time, the MOF network promoted initiatives for both students and teachers, including the annual summer campuses organized by the lead school (MOF Network, 2026), with the aim of extending the educational experience beyond the formal school context. Under the pedagogical supervision of Principal Accili, these events function as intensive and interdisciplinary learning environments attended by interested students from several schools belonging to the MOF Network. The activities, which are accompanied by a methodological update on MOF teaching, allow, through their articulation, a variety of learning opportunities (performing arts, expressive workshops, historical-cultural experiences, and moments of exploration of the territory), enhancing individual talents.

The residential dimension and the joint participation of teachers and students further foster the development of meaningful relationships and the emergence of micro learning communities characteristic of the network. These inter-institutional alliances are what support and make possible the daily pursuit of innovation. Cross-fertilization (Bailey, 1998) among professionals and communities of practice (Barab, 2003) thus becomes both an outcome and a starting point. This is a necessary step for sharing experiences and circulating knowledge, enabling situated and collaborative reflection that highlights both the possibility and the benefits of working in networks.

4. Concluding Remarks

The scientific literature has long highlighted the benefits that school networks bring to educational systems in terms of change and professional development. At the heart of the MOF network model's success lies a collaborative and systemic approach (Lambicchi & Pastori, 2025), which has fostered the circulation of experiences, reflections, and ongoing updates, supporting the transition from a traditional model of dissemination to one based on the shared construction of the innovation process. The aim of the network is to mobilize tacit knowledge and to stimulate interaction and shared experiential learning. In this context, the network functions as a form of mentoring whose value lies «not only in the exchange of teaching practices but above all in the support provided» (Magione et al., 2020, p. 59) through reflection.

In the case of the MOF, the shift toward reflective, flexible, inclusive, and active teaching practices - along with the overall reorganization of school life - was made possible by the strong capacity of the teachers involved to question themselves and transform long-established beliefs. Furthermore, the shared and democratic vision of innovation, along with the sense of belonging fostered by the network, facilitated the development of a new form of teacher professionalism, the renewal of methodological approaches, and, above all, the placing of students at the center of the teaching-learning process.

It can therefore be argued that the success of the experimentation stems primarily from the collaborative, shared, and participatory processes that the network was able to generate through a bottom-up approach.

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