Governance, School Networks and Democratic Discourse. Issues of Equity and Diversity.

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Abstract: Since 1997 the Italian educational system has seen the creation of new policies and significant changes in the design of actors' roles, within the framework of a weakly implemented decentralisation. This scenario is investigated through an analysis of conflicting discourses (bureaucratism, professionalism, managerialism and the democratic-critical) that are shaping the "trans-formation" of these actors. Discourses are, in fact, used as heuristic devices in order to examine real people and institutions acting out their renewed roles.

The aim of the paper is to outline the struggle between the four discourses in educational policy in Italy. The paper deals with a case study regarding the implementation of policies of governance fostering the institutionalization of school networks in rich- and poor-partnership areas (and then creating diversity) in Italy. Our findings show how difficult is learning practices and contexts inspired by the democratic-critical discourse as well as to make diversity consistent with equity.

Key-words: Governance, Headteachers, School Networks

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The reflections presented in the article are the outcome of the joint collaboration of both the authors. However, in order to ascribe responsibility, Roberto Serpieri wrote the § "Education Reform in Italy" and "The design of the new head teachers", while Emiliano Grimaldi is the author of the § "Practising the democratic discourse: the case studies". The remaining paragraphs are co-authored.

Introduction

In the late '90s the Italian education system has been significantly reformed by a centre-left government. The reform process was promoted through a step-by-step strategy, progressively collecting the «tesserae» of the wider «mosaic» (Berlinguer, 2001). The main features of the reforming trajectory were school autonomy; decentralisation; localism; emphasis on the roles of partnerships and local authorities in the governing of education; the renewal of the role of school heads. The education reform could thus be interpreted as part of the political response to the crisis of the Welfare State and is inscribed in the composite move away from the welfarist state towards a post-welfarist one (Jessop, 2002).

The first aim of this paper is to outline the «formation» of the new school heads (Gronn, 2003; Serpieri, 2007; 2008a; 2008b) in the Italian educational system. After a brief outline of the main features of the school reform trajectory, in the first section we will describe the «cultural and value changes» in the understanding and practice of school headship. (Gewirtz, Ball, 2000). Following Ball (2007: 6) the whole Italian reform trajectory and the process of the «formation» of the 'new heads' not as «a single, conscious, explicit project», but as «a set of trends which involve searches, discoveries, borrowing, and struggles […] which are […] mediated through new discourses» but also «path dependent» (*ibidem*) are interpreted here.

Then we will highlight practices, values and ethics promoted by the new managerial discourse and its challenge to «bureau professionalism» (Clarke, Newman, 1992). The acting of the latter in terms of cultural path dependencies will also be focussed on. At the same time, we will try to show the remaining spaces for the democratic discourse, the renewal of which could be interpreted as a reaction against its managerial counterpart, but also as the re-emergence of the needs of democratic participation in the schools, betrayed since the reform of internal school governance in the '70.

In the second section the paper will deal with a case study regarding the implementation of policies of educational governance promoted by a local authority in the South of Italy and inspired by the democratic discourse. The aim of those policies was to foster the institutionalization of school networks and promote the democratic participation of school heads in the educational planning in nine contiguous Education Zones, that could be

positioned along a continuum from rich-partnership to poor-partnership areas (Sterling, 2005). After the enactment of the Education Zones, school heads become potentially leading actors of processes of collaboration and/or competition. On the one hand, these practices could result in a further diversification of the educational provision in the different zones (and consequently in a further stratification between "good" and "bad" schools). On the other, they could have egalitarian outcomes, enacting processes of collective empowerment and reflexivity. Exploring data gathered through observations, in-depth interviews and documents analysis, the paper shows how difficult learning practices inspired by the democratic-critical discourse are and how they make diversity consistent with equity.

Education reform in Italy

During the '90s, the Italian public administration was widely restructured. As stated above, the education system was strongly interested by those changes. Partially following the neoliberal recipe (Olssen *et al.*, 2004), the restructuring of the education system was carried on the basis of a peculiar mix of relative autonomy, devolution and localism.

One of the aims of the reformers was to establish a new institutional structure granting autonomy to each school (Law No. 59/1997), within the framework of a soft decentralisation (Benadusi, Serpieri, 2000; Serpieri, 2008; Grimaldi, Serpieri, 2008). The school autonomy reform has loosened the hierarchical relationship between the Ministry of Education and schools. The former keeps hold of the general governance of the system, outlining general principles of education and establishing threshold performance levels besides defining the national curricula and managing financial and professional resources through its regional administrative offices. The latter are no longer seen as mere providers of a service, following central guidelines on administrative and curricular issues. On the contrary, new spaces of autonomy have been opened up for schools. Firstly, they are entitled to outline the annual educational school plan (POF), within which they can plan individual/distinctive school projects, define local curricular priorities and outline at least in part their internal organisation. Secondly, schools are strongly encouraged to build

partnerships with other public and private actors, in order to pursue their educational mission. Partnerships are explicitly identified as a potential channel through which to gain public or private extra-resources and enrich the educational provision.

School autonomy and the transformation of the role played by centralised education bureaucracies («from rowing to steering», borrowing the famous Osborne and Gabler (1992) expression) has been coupled with a strong emphasis on localism (Newman, 2001), that is, on the need to involve local authorities and communities in the governance of education at the local level. Regions and Local Governments have therefore become responsible for local educational planning and school buildings, and their competence in educational matters and professional training improved (1998-2001). In this perspective, the "School Autonomy Regulations" (Legislative Decree No. 275/99) strongly stress the possibility for schools to constitute networks with other schools and public or private actors in order to pursue their educational aims.

The reading of the Italian case is not easy and reveals a messy scenario. On the one hand, it could be said that those changes have implied the increase of the complexity and diversity (Kooiman, 2000) of the education system. On the other hand, the distinguishing feature of the Italian case is the presence of several counteracting trends and forces that opposed, often in contradictory ways, the reform project based on autonomy and devolution (Grimaldi, Landri, 2006).

Ten years after the introduction of the reform, many experts and practitioners (Armone, Visocchi, 2005; Ribolzi, 2006; Fisher et al., 2002) highlight how it has had only limited effects. Many expectations created by the new framework were not met and change was less relevant than foreseen. Comparative analyses in the EU area show how the Italian form of autonomy is weak (Eurydice, 2007) and how perhaps head teachers' roles and responsibilities have been the area of major impact.

The design of the «new head teachers»

The renewal of the head teachers' role has been a central step in the «formation» of the new autonomous schools. The award of autonomous status for each school occurred simultaneously with the higher civil servant

ranking given to their head teachers (they were previously ranked in the middle management category). The new ranking was granted in relation to the participation in training activities that involved some 10000 in-service head teachers in 2000 (Serpieri, 2008). Before outlining the main characteristics of the «new head teacher», we would like to highlight the historical tradition of the Italian education system and the related path dependencies. This should show both how the reformers aimed to introduce radical changes and also explain the contradictory picture that emerged from the reform's implementation.

Since the Republic was founded in 1948, educational staff has been selected through open competitions, in as far as they were regarded as part of the civil service. Head teachers, in particular, had to be previous and qualified teachers winning a selective competition held in Rome (now in the regional offices). In the welfarist and centralized Italian system, schools were regarded as State bodies and head teachers were the terminals of a hierarchical chain connecting each school to the central Ministry of Education. In this context the head teachers' role was forged by two different discourses. On the one hand, head teachers were socialised to practices, values and ethics of bureaucracies, in as far as they were required to follow rules and procedures defined centrally (mainly through ministerial guidelines) and were subject to forms of bureaucratic accountability. On the other, head teachers were previous teachers and were required to coordinate the educational staff working in their schools, using a professional logic. In this respect, some of the most important professional groups promoted an interpretation of the head teacher as a «*primus inter pares*» among teachers. The professional dimension was emphasized even further after the enacting of the 1974 regulations that changed the model of governance in the schools (promoted by a centre-left government). In the case of internal forms of school governance, the principles of a democratic and professional participation were introduced and two collegial bodies were created: the School Board made up of the head teacher and the representatives of both staff and parents/students and the Teachers Assembly, composed of the whole teaching staff and chaired by the head teacher.

To sum up, we could say that in the pre-autonomy system, therefore, political and administrative groups promoted understandings and practising of headship mainly inspired by a bureaucratic discourse. At the same time,

on the other hand the bureaucratic structure of the school system «provided the organisational context in which head teachers could exercise their professional judgement» (Newman, 1998; see also Mintzberg, 1983).

Within this context, the policies promoted after 1997 strongly renewed the role of head teachers by defining new practices and procedures associated with the role-taking and promotion of values and ethics mainly inspired by the New Public Management.

The ruling of schools by an external bureaucratic hierarchy and the headship practices associated with it were identified as one of the main problems affecting Italian schools. As Luigi Berlinguer, Ministry of education, stated:

«*The centralistic structure had overburdened head teachers with bureaucratic tasks and duties, while the autonomous school needs head teachers who are able to assume responsibilities, plan and implement new projects and activities, organise and stimulate teachers' work, listen to pupils, involve families, manage resources and interact with external actors*» (Berlinguer, 2001: 111-112).

It is worth noticing here how, at the discursive level, practices, values and ethics associated with bureaucratism have been identified as constraining and ineffective. The main traits of the «new head teacher» were redefined in the regulations on the basis of the New Public Management recipe: emphasis on the managerial aspects of headship; responsibility for the results obtained; efficiency and effectiveness in the management of resources (whether financial or human); entrepreneurship. Professional issues were simply elicited.

It could be useful for the development of our argument to distinguish here between the internal and external tasks of the new heads.

In relation to the internal governance of the autonomous schools, head teachers are depicted by the regulations and the official documents as managers whose main functions relate to guidance, coordination and improvement of financial and human resources, on the one hand, while on the other, these functions concern responsibility for the results gained by their schools (1998). As part of a new moral environment, responsibility, efficiency and effectiveness are clearly identified as the main values that should guide head teachers' practices in order to improve the «quality of the education provision». As already occurred in other countries, the design of the new heads was part of a wider process of devolution of responsibility

for schools' improvement towards the schools themselves (Evans *et al.*, 2005). A more efficient and effective management was identified as one of the internal factors that could influence schools' performances.

Entrepreneurship was, instead, the main value inspiring the design of the external duties and tasks of the new head teachers. As far as devolution and localism were central traits of the autonomy reform, head teachers were identified as key actors of the new devolved arenas. Following formal regulations, on the one hand they should attend to the «required relations» with local authorities and peripheral bureaucracies. On the other, head teachers should be the main promoters of partnerships and collaboration with «institutional, cultural, social and economic groups existing in the school area» (1999). This aspect becomes relevant for our argument in the light of three further considerations. Firstly, local authorities charged with local educational planning had the possibility of closing schools with less than 500 students. Secondly, dezoning policies were associated with the school autonomy reform. Thirdly, local authorities had the possibility of distributing considerable extra-funds (mainly EU) to autonomous schools. In most cases, local authorities decided to allocate these funds by calling for bids and introducing the constitution of partnerships involving "non-educationalist actors" (firms, companies, associations, experts and so on) (Gunter, 2008) as a precondition to participating in the calls. In this environment, the new head teacher potentially becomes an «entrepreneur» with several imperatives. In order to maintain a sufficient number of pupils he/she has to make his/her school attractive for students, but mainly for their parents. The loss of students means fewer teachers and the risk of loosing the autonomous status. To avoid these risks, the head teacher should seek to enrich the educational provision of the school, by getting additional funding for extra-curricular activities. As a consequence, he/she should dedicate a considerable amount of time to promoting external relations with local authorities and other public and private actors. In such context, the development of entrepreneurial skills becomes a necessity, while competition and customer-oriented ethos turn out to be new hidden values (Whitty, 2002). This could also be an initial step of a "privatisation" process (Ball, 2007) within the Italian school system.

As in the case of the triad «autonomy, devolution and localism», managerialism encountered strong opposition and was at centre of what has been called a «war of discourses» (Serpieri, 2007). Bureaucratic path

dependencies and the hostility of the main professional unions and groups, as well as the relative weakness of the managerial discourse, resulted in a messy scenario where contrasting evidences lead to the enactment of changes in different directions. The messiness was considerably amplified by Italy's political instability. After the 2001 election, the new centre-right government changed the agenda on education drastically and focused on the reform of the national curriculum. At the same time, it showed scarce interest in the issues of autonomy, devolution and localism and left a significant space to bureaucracies in governing the change enacted by the previous government. Some elements working against the shift towards managerialism need to be highlighted, however.

First, central and peripheral bureaucracies still exert a strong influence on the internal governance of the schools. It is true that head teachers do not depend on the peripheral hierarchy of the Ministry anymore. Nonetheless, schools' financial autonomy is still strongly constrained by central regulations. The issue of human resources management is even more complex. Head teachers cannot recruit or hire either teachers or other personnel, who are assigned to the school by the Ministry's regional offices. They only have power over the general rules of behaviour within the school, the teaching activities being under the direct responsibility of the teachers. Further, head teachers are responsible for the independent negotiation of the school with the Unions about aspects such as professional development and school organisation.

Second, head teachers exercise their powers in a framework of internal governance that, as far as democratic and professional involvement is concerned, has been left almost untouched, the structure of internal decision-making not having been changed (Serpieri, 2008).

Third, the same resistances are recognisable as far as the external tasks of the new «entrepreneur-like» head teacher are concerned. As stated above, the combined effects of different policies pushed head teachers towards an ethic of competition and fund-raising, thereby partially changing their practices. Nonetheless, the resilience of routines, bureaucratic constraints and ideological opposition played an important role in this respect as well.

As is easy to foresee, the examination of real head teachers acting out their renewed roles (Gewirtz, Ball, 2000) interpreting these struggling discourses reveals a complex and contradictory picture. The shift towards

managerial practices, values and ethics in headship is at the centre of the debate on educational leadership in Italy. In the second part of this paper we will try to contribute to this debate by focusing on a case study regarding the implementation of policies of educational governance promoted by a local authority in the South of Italy and inspired by the democratic discourse.

Practising the democratic discourse: the case studies

Within the wider scenario of the devolution trajectory, in 2003 a Local Government in the South of Italy (hereafter the Province) chose to divide its territory into 9 different Education Zones and established a collegial board (hereafter the Conference) for each zone involving the head teachers of the secondary schools, the mayors of the municipalities and other private and public actors. The aim of those policies was to foster the institutionalization of school networks and promote the democratic participation of school heads in policy making. In particular, the conferences (and the head teachers within them) were called on to make decisions regarding educational planning within each zone. In doing so, the participants were asked to tackle such issues as: a) the collective care for educational provision in each zone; b) the creation of equality of opportunity for every student, by ensuring a richer educational provision in each zone; c) the drop-out and low achiever problems; d) the transfer of best practices and the enactment of processes of mutual learning among schools. Generally speaking, then, the main objective of the establishment of the Education Zones was to deal with problems of equity and diversity, reducing the differentiation among schools and guaranteeing a higher degree of equality of opportunity for each student. The key practice to cope with these problems was identified in collaborative and democratic decision-making regarding policies implementation and resources allocation. Head teachers were identified as leading actors of the whole process. Policy makers asked them to play a significant role in the process of enactment of the collaborative practices. The establishment of the Education Zones could then be considered as the acting out of a process of democratic leadership, in as far as it aims to create an environment where actors (head teachers in our case) could search for the common good

(*ethical rationality*), practice ethical rationality through dialogue (*discursive rationality*) and be active contributors to the creation of the institutions, culture and relationships they inhabit (*decisional rationality*) (Woods, 2005: xvi).

It is worth highlighting here how the call for collaborative practices and ethos stood out sharply against the entrepreneurial imperatives described above. Significant room for manoeuvre opened up for school heads with the establishment of the conferences. At the same time head teachers faced contrasting pressures and were required to choose between collaboration and/or competition.

As we will show below, the enactment of such policies has had alternative outcomes. On the one hand it has produced a further diversification of the educational provision in the zone (and consequently a further stratification between "good" and "bad" schools). On the other, it has had egalitarian outcomes, enacting processes of collective empowerment and reflexivity.

Here we want to focus on the cases of two Education Zones, selected through a *theoretical sampling* (Silverman, 2005). Taking into consideration some proxy variables such as the territorial distribution of educational provision and the existence of previous experiences of collaboration, we chose a rich-partnership (hereafter VIVID) and a poor-partnership area (hereafter PALE) (Sterling, 2005).

VIVID comprises 9 municipalities and 15 secondary schools. In 2003, the 15 schools offered a complete educational provision to the students of the Education Zone, since all the national curricula were represented (lyceums, technical, professional and vocational training). None of the 15 schools could be considered a 'weak institution'. The average number of students attending each school was 765 (the allowed range is 500-900) and none of them was undersubscribed. The quality of school buildings was generally good (sufficient number of classrooms, well-equipped laboratories and gyms, and so on). Moreover, 15 experiences of school collaborations were currently occurring in the zone. All of them also involved local authorities. Furthermore, the Province promoted an action research in the zone in 2003, involving universities and schools in order to support and promote the enactment of schools networks. VIVID could be therefore be defined as a rich-partnership area in as far as networking practices were reasonably institutionalised, a texture of trustful

relationships was recognisable, no pronounced divide existed between "good" and "bad" schools and head teachers seemed to have partially developed a collaborative ethos.

On the contrary, in 2003 PALE displayed opposing features. Only 1/3 of the national curriculum courses were provided by the 10 secondary schools of the zone. Demographic trends revealed the need for the opening of more schools in the zone. Four of the 10 schools buildings in 2003 were not structurally appropriate to satisfy educational needs and needed to be relevantly restructured. Nonetheless, the most critical aspect was the one regarding students' distribution among the schools. The average of students attending each school was 1460. This means that none of the schools was undersubscribed. On the contrary, the number of students exceeded the legal limits (900) and the possibilities offered by the structures in many cases. More than half of the 10 schools of the zone could be regarded as weak institutions, therefore, due to structural inadequacies or over-sizing. Moreover in 2003, only 5 experiences of collaboration involving four out of ten schools were found to exist in the zone. PALE could be therefore be regarded as a poor-partnership area, where networking practices involving the minority of the schools in the zone, prefiguring competition and a progressive split between good and bad schools, rather than collaborative relationships among head teachers concerned with problems regarding structures and over-sizing, seemed to emerge.

However, high drop-out and low achievement levels characterized both VIVID and PALE. The average number of students abandoning school during the year was 5,62% and 3,49%, respectively. Furthermore, thirteen per cent of the students attending the schools in both education zones did not achieve sufficiently high grades at the end of the year in order to continue with their scholastic career. The equity issue was potentially quite relevant in both the zones taken into consideration.

The VIVID case

In the VIVID Education Zone the experience of the Conferences started in 2004. The head teachers and other actors of the Zone have been discussing the planning of the zone's educational provision and related issues during several meetings. Two phases could be identified in the establishment and development of the Conference as instrument of participatory governance.

Immediately after their establishment, the nature of conferences as new context of practice became the main issue at stake. Struggles between opposing interpretations characterized the interactions within the new discursive arena. Ambiguities and uncertainties regarded the aims of the new governance instrument, the role of the different actors involved and the real «room for manoeuvre» the conferences had as decisional boards. The debate also focused on constraints and forms of interdependence with other decisional boards and contexts. The prevailing of a bureaucratic understanding of the conferences role in the governance system made clear how path dependencies and the resilience of institutionalised practices and routines influenced significantly the enactment of the new governance instruments. In the beginning, head teachers were inclined to interact with the other actors by identifying those in charge of specific responsibilities and presenting them with their individual problems:

> ***Mr D. – Head teacher****: "I want to complain […] about the slowness of the Province's intervention, despite my frequent requests. […] I have written so many letters and I have never had an answer […].I do not want to go into details […] it is my intention here to remind our Councillor that, as far as I know, my case has not been considered in the annual schools building plan. Now, I need nine classrooms, I do not have a gym, my school lacks a suitable room for meetings. I do not have infrastructures to work with disabled pupils. I think that solving this kind of problem constitutes a precondition for any further discussion […] I have been waiting for a solution for several years now. I intend to continue submitting formal written requests to your offices […] I hope you will organise an ad hoc meeting. Thanks"* (Conference Proceedings, September, 10th, 2004).

The example showed highlights the script that characterized most of the interactions involving head teachers within the conferences in the early meetings: 1) the highlighting of a problem; 2) the request of an immediate solution and 3) the endeavour to make an individual appointment within the local authority offices to discuss the problem.

The emergence of competitive relationships became a further distinctive trait of the conferences' experience. Partially refusing the adoption of a collective logic or an ethical rationality, head teachers seemed to approach the decision-making processes regarding the educational provision with a self-interest ethic. This was particularly evident in the struggles for the

opening of new courses in schools, considered as a means of enriching the single school's educational provision and attracting more students. Scarce attention was given to issues such as dropping-out, low achievement and equity.

Given this scenario, it must be recognized that the dispositional knowledge of some actors played a significant role in the development of dialogic practices within the conferences. Despite bureaucratic path dependencies and competitive pressures, on the basis of the enactment of previous processes of reflexivity, many of them were aware of: a) the need to focus on educational problems and to tackle them through collective action; b) the existence of several structural constraints impeding the adoption of immediate solutions; c) the need for coping with troubles through collaboration. In recent times, previous collaborative experiences were informally carried on, even if on a narrow scale.

On the basis of this dispositional knowledge, since the early meetings, head teachers recalled these previous experiences, and suggested their enhancement in order to answer to the problems identified. Their speeches opened the way to beginning of the second phase of the conferences' implementation processes. The starting point was represented by the discussion on a problem collectively identified as particularly serious: the ongoing diversification among suffering and well-performing schools due to instability in student enlisting trends. One head teacher (**Mrs Bird**), particularly sympathetic with the democratic and collaborative values embodied in the new policies of governance, expressed the need for the enactment of collaborative practices and a further devolution of decision-making in order to cope with it and find solutions:

> *«I believe that we need to think like a district and think about a policy for the district. We have to seek solutions that match the needs of our public with the resources available […]. I invite all my colleagues to participate as much as they can in informal meetings where we can organize discussion about our needs and identify possible solutions!»* (Conference Proceeding, March, 24th, 2005).

What she asked for was these informal meetings to become the first step in building further stabilized forms of horizontal networks between schools. After a brief discussion, many head teachers seemed to approve Mrs Bird's proposal and constituted an "informal committee" of the zone.

In late 2005, after Mrs Bird's election as coordinator of the education zone, the informal committee started its activity. The most part of the zone's head teachers played a significant role within it, discussing problems regarding guidance, educational provision and schools' life.

In 2005 and 2006, the board met four times each year. The main activity of the board was collecting data on the educational trends in the zone. Among other things, the data collected regarded the numbers of pupils leaving primary school that year, in the whole district and disaggregated per each school; the number of applications each high school could receive disaggregated by type of courses, also in relation to the building structures. Matching those data, for example, the head teachers tried to anticipate critical situations and imagine possible solutions mainly in terms of guidance activities to be implemented in the primary schools themselves or revisions of the educational provision at the zone's level.

The enactment of the informal committee represented a break-point in the development of the conferences as instrument of governance. The informal committee's activities became the major issue of discussion. The enactment of forms of collaboration and the constitution of horizontal networks among schools were regarded as the main objectives to be pursued within the official meetings. Shared meanings regarding the scope of the conferences, the identities of the participants and the relations among them emerged. A shift towards democratic practices and values, as opposed to a still persistent hierarchy-oriented way of thought was recognisable. The self-interest attitude shown in the beginning in head teachers' speeches began to fade. Given the contextual constraints, head teachers agreed that the 'best way to act' was to work developing cooperative practices and a '*networking culture*'. Mrs Bird, who coordinated the governing board and played a central role in taking care of the relationships among the heads, was identified as a leading actor in promoting this process.

These developments have had relevant implications in as far as policies oriented towards equity-related issues seemed to emerge. A shared objective of collaborative activities within and without the conferences came into existence to avoid cases of suffering schools, through the implementation of effective practices of vocational guidance and by enriching the educational provision of the poorer schools. These policies could be interpreted as a first step towards the establishment of stable practices of collaboration among schools and the institutionalisation of a

collective logic based on the fundamental assumption that problems afflicting each school are the whole zone's problems. As such, the whole zone has a duty to deal with them.

The PALE case

The conferences' experience in the PALE Education Zone started earlier in 2003. In the case of PALE three different phases of the enactment process are recognisable. The first phase does not differ from the one described in the case of VIVID. During the initial meetings, the actors involved expressed contrasting interpretations of the aims of the new governance instrument, the respective responsibilities and the effective decisional powers with which the conferences were charged.

Furthermore, bureaucratic path dependencies and competitive pressures seemed to play a significant role in the development of debates and interactions within and without the conferences also in the PALE case.

Nonetheless, some differences emerged. In particular, the distinctive trait of the PALE experience is that collaborative practices were scarcely institutionalised in the zone. As a consequence, the actors involved in the conference (and the head teachers among them) were faced with a context of practice that was completely new for them and whose potentialities were unexplored. They were thus called on to play their role within this new context without a dispositional stock of knowledge that allowed them to read off its democratic potentialities:

> ***Mr S. – Head Teacher***: *«[…] If I understand correctly, you are asking me […] proposals about the development of our schools, on the future of our territory […], but I think that this a question to be addressed to politicians and administrators, because the Head Teacher's role is to manage the school with the available resources. Of course, the Head Teacher could give some advice on critical situations. […] Nonetheless, he is not responsible for decisions regarding educational planning, the Head Teacher only has to present some considerations on organisational problems regarding schools management […]»* (Conference Proceeding, November, 8th, 2005).

The same bureaucratic scripts recognised in the case of the VIVID Education Zone were enacted (see above). Ninety per cent of the head teachers' speeches were directed to the Province and had the aim of

complaining about problems regarding funding and building scarcity, asking for an immediate solution.

Despite this similarity, the second phase of the conferences enactment was characterized by a distinctive trait. The most frequent request made by head teachers was for the opening of new courses and the enrichment of the educational provision. Two types of veiled purposes were at stake here. On the one hand, the heads of the most undersubscribed schools were afraid of the progressive fall of new students in their schools while on the other, the heads of the oversubscribed schools tried to increase over and over the number of pupils enlisted in order to get more teachers from the central Ministry, obtain more funds and enhance their schools' status. As happens in a market-like environment, the heads identified the opening of new courses as a scarce commodity to compete for and the meetings as further contexts where those struggles had to take place. As a result, the opening of a potentially democratic space of collaboration had a paradoxical effect. Many head teachers looked at it as a conflictual arena and competitive dynamics emerged among the participants.

As a matter of fact, the conferences became dialogic arenas difficult to govern and control, while reaching any shared decision turned out to be harder. Reciprocal accusations, especially between under- and oversubscribed schools characterized the discussion, while head teachers enacted competitive practices and interpreted self-interest oriented values.

Within this scenario, in 2006 a third phase started. The further development of the conferences was influenced by the interaction between the increased degree of conflict and the growing awareness of the structural constraints limiting the conference in its role as a decisional body. Suddenly, the meetings ceased to be places where competitive practices were enacted, in as far as the head teachers seemed to recognise the scarce effectiveness of their requests and complaints:

> ***Mr C. – Head Teacher***: *«[…] I want to be clear: without resources, and I mean financial resources, experiences like this have a short life. During the Conferences we have discussed and planned […] and in the end? In the end they have said, sorry we do not have resources to hire more teachers and open new courses […]. Now I would like to understand […] what are we doing? Conferences would have sense if they had any effective decisional power. But they have not! […] Again, in my view it is a trial to delegate to schools the solution of their problems»* (Interview

hold on February, 12th, 2007).

At the same time observations conducted within the provincial offices gave us the possibility of identifying the persistence and maybe the increasing frequency of the following *script*:

- firstly, a head teacher comes into the office affirming that he/she had had a previous meeting with the councillor and her staff about a problem; she/he reports the problem and what the councillor said about the possibility of finding a solution; she/he proposes her/his solution;
- secondly, the bureaucrat discusses the case with the head teacher, analysing data from databases and considering the possible solutions;
- thirdly, the encounter always finished with the commitment by the bureaucrats to bring the different realistic solutions they were able to identify to the attention of the councillor. In the event of the problem concerning a school building, the bureaucrat and the head could agree about the advisability of making a survey before defining any possible solutions.

The conference ceased to be a place where actors tried to carry on any kind of decision-making, and its democratic potentialities were unexplored. The allocation of resources and the planning of the educational provision continued to follow the previous bureaucratic script. Further, a consequence of the development of conflictual dynamics within the conference was the hybridization of this bureaucratic script with competitive values and practices. Head teachers holding relational resources and/or advantage positions continued to use them in order to increase the leading status of their schools, while the undersubscribed schools were not supported by any kind of collaborative networks in order to tackle their problems and weaknesses. Even if the data gathered do not allow us to provide further consideration in this sense, it is easy to foresee that these developments will result in an increase of differences between under- and oversubscribed schools, in terms of funding, quality of teaching, educational provision and, as a consequence, students' achievements.

Conclusion

Our research highlights how a "relational" approach (Seddon, 1994) to the study of education policies and their contexts is required in order to grasp the complexity of structural interdependencies, the boundaries of the spaces for actions for leaders and the intricacy of the relational and institutional arrangements.

Policy trajectories, their outcomes as well as the unintended consequences of their implementation, are strongly influenced by "path dependencies" of the educational contexts (Meyer and Rowan, 2006) and by the emergence of forms of distributed leadership (Woods, 2005). This evidence stands in sharp contrast with the implications of those *heroic* visions of leaders, such as the proposal to create "system leaders" (Hopkins, 2007) in education, that recently came back at the centre of the debate in a new, network-suited framework. We could consider our case studies as examples of the introduction of new institutional forms. Further, the networks emerging could be interpreted as new arenas where different discourses confront each other. We should therefore recognize that our research represents only an initial step in the analysis of «how complex interests interact and mediation operates in the 'gaps and spaces for action and response' which policy opens and re-opens (Ball, 2006: 17)» (quoted in Woods *et al.,* 2007: 240).

The new form of governance promoted by the Province appears as a mix of horizontal and hierarchical relations. The space opened for the democratic discourse, the practices of collaboration and the adoption of an equity-oriented logic are always at risk, therefore, due to the continuing overlapping of these two kinds of relations. In actual fact, the two case studies analysed are distinguished by the "durability" of the democratic discourse. In the VIVID case, the durability of the democratic discourse is rooted in the habit the schools have developed in the recent past to act adopting cooperative logics and sharing objectives.

VIVID seems to work as a «dynamic network» (Hatcher, 2008), that has enhanced and empowered the existing legacy of distributed leadership thanks to the institutionalisation of the Conference and the horizontal relations within it. Nonetheless evidence from the field show how two risks are at stake. On the one hand, competitive practices and values (managerial discourse) could emerge within the complex interactions between structural

interdependencies and the gaps and spaces for action. On the other it is still the risk that hierarchical relations actually return to prevail (bureaucratic discourse). The necessity emerges to explore the indispensable forms of institutional support that those democratic spaces and spontaneous practices of distributed leadership need in order to be institutionalised. Further this support implies giving up any temptation to adopt forms of network management and control, as occurs in the "system leader" approach.

On the contrary, in the PALE case, the new institutional form has not implied the development of collaborative practices and values, since path dependencies of the context have greatly deviated from the logic of the democratic discourse. The emerging network has remained within the limits of a «hierarchical model» (Hatcher 2008). On the one hand, the prevailing hidden bureaucratic negotiations bolster the development of competitive dynamics among the actors. Educational leaders compete with each other, adopting logics of action proper to the managerial discourse. The outcome is the spread of diversity. At the same time, they re-enable hierarchical relations, on the other. Due to path dependencies related to the resilience of the bureaucratic discourse, the local government comes back as the apex of the negotiations among the competing schools. The risk emerges of the adoption of managerial and control solutions leading towards the creation of system leaders appointed by local governments.

In this respect, the two cases indicate how practices and values of the school heads embody a substantial tension inherent in the wider reform trajectory of the Italian education system. This tension emerges as the result of the struggles between policies inspired by diverging discourses. First, the neoliberal discourse, fostering the principles of competition and New Public Management. Second, policies that revitalize and reinforce practices and values of the «bureau-professionalism». Third, initiatives inspired by democratic logics promoting forms of collaborative partnerships (Newman, 2001; Sterling, 2005; Gewirtz, 2002), especially at the local level. Nonetheless, the examination of the educational leaders acting out their renewed role highlights how the competitive pressures are progressively undermining the possibility of exploration of democratic potentials inherent in the instrument of partnership. Path dependencies and the spontaneous practices of distributed leadership, i.e. head teachers acting out competences of leadership in order to create common meanings, share

resources and pursue the common good, could work against this trend. Nevertheless, the risks of competitive evolutions and the resilience of bureaucratic practices and values highlight how policies counteract the competitive pressures. Further, sustaining these democratic spaces involves enabling head teachers to adopt the three forms of rationality defined above (ethical, discursive and decisional) (Woods, 2005).

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