Teachers still reflect

Titti Romano [1]

Abstract: This article offers an exploratory study so that the analysis of individual reflexivity, according to Archer's approach – internal conversation – (2000, 2003, 2007), may throw greater light on the relationship between teachers and the educational system in Italy and on the processes of enactment. The interaction between actor and structure is, in fact, analysed according to the perspective of critical realism which allows one to avoid falling into conflated perspectives. More specifically, this article presents the professional history of a meta-reflexive teacher, that is, a teacher who is value-oriented, who continually faces a situation of constant incongruity between his values (equity, quality, solidarity, emancipation, etc.) and the educational context. Because of this "contextual incongruity" this teacher mediates the status quo to change the context, but the cultural and structural conditioning prevents him from giving full meaning to his role and from fully investing his own identity in it.

Key-words: Teachers, Internal Conversations, Reflexivity

Introduction

This article aims to propose an analytical key to understanding how value-oriented teachers in Italy, who wish to exemplify their own professional values working in accordance with ethical values and not just didactic techniques, experience and deal with the long crisis both of the educational system and of their categorisation in a contradictory and

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[1] Department of Sociology, University of Naples 'Federico II'. Vico Monte della pietà 1 - 80138 Napoli – Italia, e-mail: tittiromani@gmail.com

ambiguous institutional framework. More specifically, in Italy in 1997 the School Autonomy system was launched which conceded financial, management and didactic autonomy to schools, headteachers and teachers. The education policies gave an incentive to individual *enactment* but at the same time also cut funds and resources and promoted, according to the logic of the New Public Management, accountability standards and procedures which limit professional freedom and imitate the English way without the development of a discourse which is more autonomous and critical . The government rhetoric did not take on board such contradictions and aimed, from an individualistic perspective, at making teachers and headteachers responsible for the results of the system. This article, in accordance with the construct of "internal conversation" (Archer, 2003, 2007), instead proposes that the relationship between teachers and their working environment be dealt with by analysing the powers of both sides of the coin, agency and structure, highlighting the role of reflexivity in the processes of *enactment*.

The article is organised in this way. After briefly outlining the conditions of teachers in Italy, the theoretical frame of reference and the questions raised by this study are laid out. The article goes on to present the "analytical history" of a teacher: a detailed narrative which aims to interpret and explain how two distinct powers interacted, those of theachers and those of the school system, beginning from the reflexivity exercised by the teacher in question. In particular the concept of "meta-reflexive conversation" will be utilised to illustrate the case of a "value-oriented teacher" driven by the desire to change the *status quo* in order to render the school more efficient and fair , above all with regard to disadvantaged students who are too quickly condemned to the role of drop-outs.

Teachers and the processes of reform

From recent international findings (Pisa Ocse, 2007), the performance of the Italian school system has been found to be of a very low standard and the press and public opinion have not hesitated to identify teachers as one of the principal causes. Teachers are accused of being poorly prepared, disinterested and de-motivated. But the factors which contribute to the long national and international crisis in educational systems and thus in the teaching ranks, are numerous and complex and cannot be easily summed

up adopting a reductionist perspective. It should first of all be underlined that, in the last few decades in Italy, the teaching profession did not feature in the political agenda apart from performing the role of absorbing a surplus of labour. The system attracted "graduates who have little professional/work expectations or who have not found anything better in the labour market" (Cavalli, 2000) and made a tacit pact with them: one would be guaranteed a secure job with a low wage without the provision of adequate professional training or career prospectives. In exchange, a low level of performance would be accepted. The policies regarding the management of teaching personnel have deeply affected the teaching profession, the average age of which in Italy is currently about 49.1 years (MPI, 2006; Eurydice, 2004). The profession is drawn from a low social class and its numbers are becoming progressively dominated of women. For some time, moreover, teachers have been sensing a progressive and unarrestable loss of status and social esteem which is also connected to the lack of a defined and recognised professional identity (Fischer, 2000). The motives for dissatisfaction do not seem to be generated by the work in itself but by numerous external factors, which have rendered their relationship with their working environment progressively more difficult (Romano, 2008). The low-quality equipment, the crumbling buildings, the absence of support for didactic innovation, the lack of training and the difficulty in relating to students and parents generate in teachers a sense of inadequacy and frustration.

Recently, appeals have come from the European Union for the relevance of learning to be recognised (see Lisbon 2002) and, in fact, the themes of *long life learning* are among the priority objectives and a huge emphasis is being placed on schools and teachers (Fischer, 2009). In reality, we appear to be witnessing a very paradoxical situation: on the one hand, in the "society of knowledge" the work of teachers is becoming ever more strategic and relevant, while on the other hand the same teachers continue to be abandoned to a system in serious difficulty – the crisis of the school sector, juvenile deviance, the de-motivation of students etc.

How are the various governments aiming to resolve the problem? How are they trying to restore social relevance to the work of teachers? What routes must be taken to make teachers more professional? In all European countries reforms have been developed which are moving towards the homogenisation of the various educational systems (Ozga, Liangard, 2007), putting systems of *governance* in place which, on the one hand, offer

greater autonomy to schools, headtechers and teachers, and on the other hand, by introducing the principles of the *New Public Management* (Serpieri, 2008, 2009; Ball, 2007) establish more rigid national standards mainly assigning to the State the role of evaluator? (Benadusi, Consoli, 2004).

The launch of a clear reform trend notwithstanding, among the countries there remain significant differences. It was England, for example, with the *Education Reform Act* in 1988, which launched the era of New Public Management and developed massive training programmes, certification and assessment of teachers' skills (Van Der schaaf, Stokking, Verloop, 2003; 2005; Bubb, 2005). Some researches have shown how in the last few years the professional autonomy of teachers has been progressively and heavily reduced by an array of pressures, which bureaucratise and standardise their work (Helsby, 1999; Willmott, 2002; Whitty, 2008) In France a wide-ranging debate was launched on the role of education and the decline of the school with respect to its emancipatory function (Dubet, 1999; 2009). But in this case too the function of teachers remains ambiguous and the policies seem to be orientated more towards the construction of a technical rather than a professional role. In Italy teachers have always been much closer to the class of civil servants and thus have been far from being truly professional. Even when, after years of dragging its feet (Ribolzi, 1997), Italy was blown by the winds of the Autonomy reform (Law 59/97) – cfr. other articles in this issue - teachers ended up without being the beneficiaries of any change of note. Autonomy would seem to espouse the rhetoric of change from below providing school workers greater degrees of freedom to follow the *enactment* based on the particular needs which each individual educational and territorial context manifests, but in reality this potential is restricted to the headteachers (Serperi, 2008) and is moreover heavily impeded by the standard dictates of the policies of the *New Public Management* (Law 180/2008). Governments, imposing new and stringent procedures of *accountability* (Barzanò, 2009), imitate above all the English model without allowing a more autonomous and critical discourse to develop (Serpieri, 2009) which is capable of making schools really autonomous and of restoring professional dignity to teachers. From the researches it emerges there have been small innovations such as the creation of new additional roles - "funzioni obiettivo/strumentali –, which assigns to teachers management and organisational roles in different spheres (cfr. Esposito, Romano,

Serpieri, 2000). These roles, based on the growing burden of responsibility, however did not put new career paths into place since the administration and the unions tacitly and prematurely set about minimising the importance of these new roles (Fischer, 2006).

The conservative position of the unions should not be underestimated since this is anyhow representative of a general resistance to change on the part of the Italian teaching body (Berlinguer, 2001; cfr. Romano, 2008; Serpieri, 2008). Despite the appeals for the need for autonomy, change and for higher professional standards (cfr. Viteritti, 2004; Ribolzi, 2002; Colombo; 2005; Durrant, Holden, 2006; Hargreaves, 2003, 2007; Scanagatta, 2004), and without taking into account the still controversial affair of the Interuniversity Schools for teaching specialisation which were enabled almost ten years after the law which instituted them (Law 341/90), teachers remain immersed in a contradictory position and are powerless onlookers in the war between opposing cultures/ideas[2] (Archer, 1995; Ball, 2007; Willmott, 2002; Serpieri, 2008).

Human reflexivity and internal conversation

This paragraph is dedicated to the theoretical system adopted by this work. The case, which is made, in fact, is done so by means of the construct of "internal conversation" (Archer; 2000, 2002, 2003, 2007), the power of mediation possessed by individuals and exercised in their relationship with the social system (Thrupp, 2005). The relationship between agency and structure, and thus between the teachers and the educational and social context is conceived as a process of interaction between irreducible elements, those of the society (structural and cultural systems) and those of the individuals, in which the «internal conversations» of the latter have an important mediating role. If the journey of each individual in the world is the story of the relationship between two powers, those of the person and of reality, one must ask: how do such powers interact? «*The subjective powers of reflexivity mediate the role that objective structural or cultural powers play in influencing social action*

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[2] This trend is confirmed, for example, by the second version of the "Aprea" Bill (2008, 2009) which further deprives the role of teachers of authority, also eliminating their collegial body (the staff meeting) and with it its decisional and consultative powers (www.camera.it).

and are thus indispensable to explaining social outcomes» (Archer, 2007: 5). Archer (2003: 14) warns, «human reflexive deliberations play a crucial role in mediating». In fact, society supply constraints and enablements, «but it is agents who have to find them good, which means better than any other course of action that they may have been inclined to adopt» (2003: 136). The internal conversations (Archer, 2003: 245-6) consist of a continuous "question and answer" reflexive dialogue through which the individual *monitors* him/herself and the surrounding reality. He/she assigns value to his/her interests to fulfil commitments which are relatively constant contemporaneously in all spheres of life, and which for many also include the sphere of work. Rather than speak of monitoring one should speak of a full-on *evaluative process* developed by individuals to attempt to find styles of living - *modus vivendi* -compatible both with their interests and with external constraints and enablements [3].

Very briefly, by means of inner dialogues, or *mind lives*, those involved know, monitor and evaluate themselves, society (its structural and cultural characteristics) and their individual relationship with society and, with time, develop a wide variety of concerns and establish an order of priorities. Some "ultimate concerns" will be favouredand, "what we care about", others will be of lesser concern in an attempt to develop sustainable courses of action and ways of living: "we are who we are because of what we care about" - (Archer, 2000: 10) –. The internal conversation is thus a power which is exercised by individuals but which emerges through their continuous relationship with the surrounding environment. And it is only through daily experience of the world and society that the individual can

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[3] With the internal conversation construct the theme of individual reflexivity is fully confronted which in this location is absolutely impossible to discuss. We are limited to underlining that in the outlook adopted «*"reflexvity" is the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) context and vice versa*» (Archer, 2007: 4). Following Archer's motto "no reflexvity; no society" (2007: 25), reflexivity is not conceived as a characteristic which has come to light in late modernity and in some way connected to the processes of change, but is a necessary condition for some sort of society of human beings to be able to exist. Therefore the «*necessity of reflexivity* for social life and life in society» (p. 46) is established even in traditional society where in fact, just like now, reflexivity carries out an important role in the processes of social reproduction. Currently, individual reflexivity is at the centre of numerous studies and bodies of research (Archer, 2007; Bourdieu, 2004; Giddens, Bech, Lash, 1994; Bauman, 2000) and was widely utilised for analysing the conditions of teachers, even if based on different theoretical perspectives and frameworks (Romano, 2004, 2007; Colombo, 2005).

know and evaluate, choose and learn, wonder and find answers, make mistakes and start again.

Different modes of internal conversation

Each individual, depending on his/her personal life history, will generate a distinct and specific conversation. Archer's studies (2003, 2007) however have identified typical modes of conversing and thus particular generative mechanisms, which produce as many types of mediation. Four types of conversation in particular have been identified, and classified as follows: fractured/dislocated conversation, communicative conversation, autonomous conversation and meta-reflexive conversation.

In each individual all types of such conversations are present, but one, which conditions the style of life of the person, usually predominates although it does not necessarily prevail for the whole of the person's life. The conversation in fact, not being a natural gift or society, is a dynamic element which individuals can modify more than once throughout their lives.

In this article three types of conversation will be described briefly[4], but before proceeding a short introduction is needed. These types of conversation are differentiated in several ways, such as for example, the level of trust that each individual places in his/her own capacity for reflection or the type of mental activity engaged in (imagining, reliving, budgeting, etc.). Within the parameters of this work there will be a focus on the aspects relating to the strategies of mediation - *elusive*, *strategic* or *subversive* – which individuals develop with regard to their surrounding environment, and above all in the sphere of work.

Communicative conversation

The first mode of reflection which will be described very briefly regards communicative internal conversation. Those who practise this kind of conversation, unlike the autonomous and meta-reflexive types, do not have much faith in their reflective capacity and after having begun their interior

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[4] The "fractured/dislocated model will not be discussed here as the principal interest of research is oriented at understanding the strategies of mediation which subjects develop, while this type is different to the others mainly due to a passive attitude in relation to social conditioning. These subjects thus end up enduring social and cultural pressures without mediating them and often their life is dictated by external circumstances and situations.

dialogue in solitude, they complete it with the support of others. This need to share and work with others ensure that the "ultimate concern" of such people is interpersonal relationships. The communicative reflective types in fact need particular interlocutors, people who they trust, with whom they can share values and experiences in order to receive "opinions" which complete and reassure their reflexive process. The caring of such relationships constitutes a continuous bind, which leads such people to sacrifices in other spheres of life, above all at the expense of their professional career.

How are these people to deal with society? And with what effects on a personal and social level? Those who reflect in such a way will tend to shut themselves off in their own little world of interpersonal relationships which will limit their experience of the constraints and enablements of the wider social order, thereby constructing an *elusive* relationship which limits the processes of change both on a personal level and in the wider social context. Unlike the other two types of conversation – autonomous and meta-reflexive – the externalisation of the conversation makes the process shorter, less intense and poorer in terms of mental activity, which involves imagination and fantasy. Such elements reduce life projects to the sphere of activity, which is already familiar and well known, drastically limiting the possibility of change. In this way the exchange with the wider social system will be very contained and thus no benefit will be gained from what is available and social binds and conditioning will not be faced.

Those who are communicative reflexive represent the agents of social reproduction: their closure in the community makes these subjects a "social cement", but it distances them from institutions and civil society with which they relate in an elusive way. The disavowal of civil society and its institutions does not allow space either for self-examination or for examination of society and its generative mechanisms. But more pertinently, what happens in the professional sphere? How do the communicative reflexives reconcile their working environments and face the constraints and enablements? The mechanism is the one that has already been outlined: their planning capacity, even in the working arena, reveals an absence of innovation and the orthodoxy of similar interlocutors. In order to reconstruct and maintain that micro-world, also in the working sphere, which allows for the exercise of their reflexivity, the communicative reflexive desires an activity which does not damage but actually reinforces and improves his/her set of interpersonal relationships.

To this end, the communicative reflexive, by subordinating his/her professional interests will be quite willing to forego a promotion or accept a job that he/she doesn't like.

Autonomous conversation

Autonomous reflexives, unlike communicative reflexives, and in full harmony with the the meta-reflexives, begin and end their internal conversation in solitude with complete trust (*self reliance* - Archer, 2007) in their own reflexive capacity and fully respecting their own deliberations for which they feel entirely responsible.

The internal conversation is a "lone inner dialogue" practised "all the time" and "about everything" which allows for a more complex decision-making process because the person thinks a lot and multiple configurations of possibilities and probabilities of effects are weighed up.

The conversation moreover remains implicit and that allows for a free reign to fantasy, not censuring daring projects and thus protecting their deliberations from being conventional. That happens even when very complex issues must be resolved. These subjects do not seek advice or judgements from other people but look for *information* and/or the *technical skills* of experts, which they then elaborate on autonomously.

The "ultimate concern" of the autonomous reflexive will be his/her work. But how does that come about? Archer hypothesizes that during the autonomous reflexive's childhood there is a lack, by choice or necessity, of those subjects with whom they can share experiences or from whom they can receive advice and examples. The autonomous conversers therefore dedicated themselves body and soul to solitary activities (sports, hobbies, games) and much less to interpersonal relationships. Their "ultimate concern" will be to be able to freely and autonomously practise the performatory activity which they have been carrying on since childhood and which they are trying to transpose to the work context. There is nothing left but to ask ourselves how the autonomous reflexives mediate the context of work? The autonomous reflexives start an *autonomous* and *strategic* mediation directed at the world of work to satisfy their "ultimate concern". But in this context the autonomous type is exposed to a large risk: the boredom of the working routine and the lack of new and challenging goals. This leads him/her to autonomously and progressively improve his/her skills which he/she will then use to find new jobs which are more competitive and innovative which allow him/her to keep boredom at bay.

The strategic confrontation with the constraints and enablements of society is almost exclusively dependent on the possibilities there are to improve his/her own work position. The wider social, cultural and institutional world, will be instrumental and functional to his/her professional interests. For all the meticulousness and depth of his/her conversation it will never be directed at social or systemic goals such as the emancipation of workers or the improvement of the working environment. In other words, this refexivity is not practised towards society but is directed at a purely personal change, which could leave society unchanged.

Meta-reflexive conversation

A more detailed examination will be made of the meta-reflexive conversation as the case, which is presented, regards a subject who practises this type of reflexivity for the most part. As it is interpreted the meta-reflexive conversation has much in common with the autonomous type. How then do they differ[5]? One can define as meta-reflexive a person who is «reflecting upon our own reflection» (2007: 127), who questions him/herself a lot and why he/she acted or thought in a certain way. Meta-reflexives tend to autonomously ask themselves questions and, conversing above all about themselves, end up with questioning themselves. It would seem that the meta-reflexive conversation, unlike that of the autonomous, is interminable and not restricted to performatory activities and with a greater tendency towards self-interrogation. But the fundamental element that distinguishes the two conversations is that the autonomous one is *task-oriented* while the meta-reflexive is *value-oriented* (Archer 2007). Archer decisively dusts off the Weberian category of *wertrational (value-rational)* action since: «meta-reflexives are presented as exponents of the *Wertrationalität* - that is, people for whom the pursuit of values is an end in itself, regardless of the considerations of costs» (Archer 2007: 309). The emergence of interests linked to a set of values makes these subjects constantly busy in their conversation in order to achieve two objectives: (1) understand what type of people they want to be, in accordance with their values and (2) «make a difference», ensure that even a small sphere of

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[5] Archer hypothises, based on her studies, that the meta-reflexives originally belong to the autonomous group and differentiate themselves from them progressively in the course of life as a result of salient episodes, but what explains the emergence of such a divergence still seems to remain «obscure» (Cfr. Archer, 2007: 153).

society exemplifies such values.

All of this contributes to that which is defined as *concern-context incongruity:* a tension between *structure/culture* and *agency*, which is generated during the process of meta-reflexive mediation. *Incongruity* means that meta-reflexive are «contestually unsettled» (2203: 257) because of a sort of irresolvable inappropriateness between the mere "finding oneself" of the subject in a social context and the qualified way in which one "places" oneself self-consciously throught the identification with a series of commitments and interests. This subject applies him/herself to realizing some of their interests inspired by their values, giving them an ideal and vocational nature. It is difficult to find an objective opening in the surrounding environment but for the meta-reflexive subject it is difficult to dismiss or change such commitments without the bitter taste of having "betrayed" themselves. Meta-reflexives rarely identify themselves with something which society offers them since «no existing social arrangements approximate to their ideal, nor ultimately does any institution or organization to which they are vocationally drawn» (Archer, 2003: 258). Aware of the price to pay when faced with a context, which will always limit the achievement of their dreams, meta-reflexives, as a "personal compromise" prefer the "institutional critique", but in their lives they will however descend to pacts with society in the name of other responsibilities (children, family, lack of resources, etc.). How do meta-reflexives confront the constraints and enablements with which the conditioning of the structure and the culture of one specific social context are practised? Meta-reflexives entirely and exclusively bear the load themselves of the cost of the challenge of the binds and the forsaking of enablements, and immunize themselves from external opinions in the name of their values. Communicative elusiveness and the *goal-oriented* autonomous solitude find it's corresponding meta-reflexive in *subversive mediation*: the action in perpetual contextual incongruity acts as an antidote to the reproductive/communitarist action of the communicatives and the reproductive/*homo oeconomicus* of the autonomous group. Meta-reflexives can give innovative values to members of society, but above all give critical values, opening new perspectives for living together. A lively and heterogeneous process of mediation which opens society to more diverse and innovative changes does not derive automatically from that: there still remains, for each of the types discussed, the problem of *collective* agency or, according to Archer, *corporate agency*, still today believed by society to

be transformative par excellence. Put very briefly, if the communicative reflexives safeguard their micro-world which is made up of personal relationships and if the autonomous reflexives take care of their professional activities which allow them autonomy and liberty, the meta-reflexives preserve their personal integrity both by resisting compromise – they don't betray personal vocations – and by criticizing and pressurizing the social system.

The vocational nature of their own interests, the perseverance with regard to their own commitments, the simultaneous self-critical and critical tension towards society and the self-society relationship and finally, the willingness to pay the costs personally distinctively make up the meta-reflexive subject and this will emerge clearly in the world of work which is one of the major areas of meeting/clashing between the individual and society. The working context will in fact be one of the main spheres for the development of the *concern-context incongruence*. How the meta-reflexives mediate the context of work?

Work like other spheres of life constitutes for the meta-reflexives a vocational commitment in which they can fully express their own identity. The irresolvable tension connected to the incongruity between *concerns* and *context* will present itself very early on in this sphere too and the meta-reflexives will mediate such incongruity not by reviewing their vocations but by attempting to act in the hope of subverting the established orders - aims which are, according to Archer, very difficult because it is easier to change themselves than it is to change society. The probably numerous defeats will be accepted by paying the costs (resignation, dismissal, missed promotions, *mobbing*, etc.) and heading for other career routes to begin again from the start in the hope of having more of a chance to «make the difference». A laterally or even downwardly mobile route is undertaken and which often leads the meta-reflexives to hold care positions (nurses, social assistants, teachers) in the public sector. These are professions which, basing themselves on interpersonal relationships, in some ways may allow greater margins of discretion providing more possibilities to «make the difference». In the working context too their conduct is thus perpetually based on self-evaluation with the aim of understanding his/her contribution to personal integrity and to the improvement of society: personal success will not be relevant, but rather the contribution provided with regard to the person's own values.

The research

Teachers also reflect and converse internally, but if the principal *medium* of the conversation are the words, that must not lead to its exclusively or prevalently cognitive vision and Archer observes: «care must be taken not to stack the cards in favour of *logos*» (2000: 231). Conversation is not a calculation and anything but impassionate and rational, it is «a blend of *logos* and *pathos*» (*ibidem*), but also of *ethos* in which the balance between the various interests and circumstances may be far away and hard to achieve. Teachers will ask themselves in the light of their passions, aversions, preconceptions and plans how to play their role and how much of their identity should they invest in it.

> I am satisfied, but it wasn't the job that I was looking for ... it was the most boring thing that I could ever have done, but I asked myself: will I ever have another job like this one? ... a "stable" job ... Finally I went to live on my own! I had time to continue studying and then so many projects...

> At the start I was enthusiastic, now I ask myself all the time what is the point of school? ... we don't manage to give enough! What we give is not enough. The students find themselves in a seriously disadvantageous situation and we give very little. What is the point of my work?

> It's nice ... with time your students listen to you, respect you, you are their reference point, they love you ... I love them too... I couldn't do another job... retirement? I often think of what I will do without the school...

> Could it be my job for the whole of my life? ... the main problem now is the salary... will it be enough for my needs in the future too? I should have found another job to do in my free time, but it's not easy with my degree ... I don't want to do things which I don't like...

> I have to hold on at least a few years, enough time for things to change, but will they change? ...I get married and go on maternity leave then ... with the points of the training course ...? What place will I have in the list? .... I have to find out!

> Will they back the project? And if a good expert doesn't come like last year?

They just waste my time... next year I'm not going to do anything! I always say that and then I work so much ... too much? But last year was very interesting, if only all the projects were like that.

This passionate, technical, rational and ethical discussion is full of questions and answers: each teacher, depending on the circumstances, may ask themselves millions of questions and for each one of them there may be as many replies.

In the light of the considerations and the theoretical framework illustrated, this article presents the professional history of a teacher who may be considered to be a *meta-reflexive* converser, who in order to exemplify his values in the professional sphere, seeks to activate the resources at his disposition and to face the constraints of the context to alter the status quo. It is preferable to give ample space to an illustrative case because the research interest in this location is above all oriented to showing, on the one hand, the complexity of the interaction which is developed between the teacher and the context - *concerns and context*. On the other hand, the research interest is to understand the peculiar role which the *meta-reflexive* conversation assumes for the value-oriented teachers who experience a constant *incongruity* with their context and desire to change it in order to be able to experience their teaching by representing their own ideals and values. The internal conversation will thus be utilized to comprehend the attempts of enactment made by the meta-reflexive teachers who mediate the constraints and the resources available to exemplify an idea of school and teaching inspired by ethical values and principles. As already said (cfr. § 1.), in Italy teachers must deal with and *confront* a context characterised by paradoxes and contradictions (cfr. Gewirtz, 2002a and b; Ozga, Liangard, 2007). The school system continues to endure a long and profound crisis despite the introduction of significant reforms, most importantly the school Autonomy. This reform tried, in fact, to offer a structure of *governance*, which would allow for *enactment* from below. Teachers and the headteachers were identified as protagonists of the processes of innovation. However, successive policies did not contribute to providing a clear direction of the route of change and the new framework of responsibility. The teachers, for example, participated in some transformations, such as the new school management, while their professional status remains unchanged and their work is progressively being standardised in full harmony with the dictates of the New Public

Management in the Anglo-Saxon mould (cfr. Gronn, 2003).

The study of processes of innovation, also in the sphere of public reforms, amply demonstrated the relevance, but also the complexity of analysis, of processes of individual *enactment*[6]. If the process of *enactment* is taken as a metaphor for the powers and levels of freedom wielded by the individual in the processes of change of the social system, both locally and globally, the internal conversation can represent a valid heuristic instrument which, without reductionism or conflation, deepens the analysis of such processes, seen as activities of mediation which are achieved by the practise of the evaluative/reflexive capacity of individuals[7]. In particular, in the case studied, the process of *enactment*, themed as the outcome of the meta-reflexive internal conversation, will thus be seen as a process of *value-oriented confrontation* of challenges where a teacher tries to make sense of his/her own pedagogical profession in a school system animated by instrumental and mercantilist reasoning. The interest in the question of values arises from a precise need. In fact, as evidenced by various commentators (Woods, 2005; Serpieri, 2008), the crisis of the educational system and of our western societies cannot be overcome merely by interventions by social engineers, moreover resurrecting the *Scientific Management*, with the pretext of neutrality. Each organisational solution must necessarily be weighed against the idea of the citizen that the school should mould in a society where any bond of trust has been lost and the democratic institutions are in a deep crisis.

Before moving on to the results, one should assume that the professional history presented forms part of an ongoing wider body of research, whose data collection is based on in-depth semi-structured interviews (3-4 hours of conversation) and observations which document teachers' choices, value-commitments, strategies, second thoughts, failures and experiences. The observations were made during lessons or while teachers were busy with the other daily work activities (staff meetings, refresher courses, etc). The interview constitutes the principal instrument of research and its discussion guide was developed based on the indications contained in the

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[6] cfr. Romano, 2005.

[7] The perspective offered by Archer is considered an overcoming, not only of the forms of reductionism («conflations» downwards - objectivism – or upwards – subjectivisim -) but also of the forms of «elisionism» («central conflation» - cfr. Giddens, 1985; Choen; 1989; Bagguley, 2003; D'Epelteau, 2008) that establish structures and act on the level of social interaction (Archer, 1995; Crespi, 1999; Donati, 2006; Romano, Serpieri, 2003, 2006).

most recent work by Archer[8] (2003, 2007) and in the light of the research perspectives on professional identity which make wide use of biographical and professional interviews (cfr. Demazière, Dubar, 2000; Steensen, 2006). Put very briefly, the teachers were asked what they think about within the working context and how and why they do it. This allowed the teachers to decide freely which issues they wished to bring up and which, for whatever reason, were the principal objects of their internal conversation. The interviews and observations aimed to provide a "thick description" (Greertz, 1973) of the professional life of teachers, which would highlight on the role of the internal conversation and the processes of mediation put into effect. The interviews often were characterised by an involving discussion both on the social and existential condition of the interviewee and on more general themes relating to the school and its relationship with society. The data collection was interpreted in light of the issues faced by the research and the theoretical framework presented, attempting to understand and reconstruct in a holistic way the professional history of the interviewee (Corbetta, 2003).

The explanatory analysis was directed towards the construction of a single "analytical history" of each single teacher, highlighting his/her unique nature (Denzin, Lincoln, 2005). For "analytical story" (cfr. Archer, 1995,) what is intended is a detailed and broad-ranging narrative of the interaction between *concerns* and *context* considering the individual reflexive processes, or to be more precise, a detailed reconstruction which aims not solely at making a description, but also at interpreting and explaining how two distinct powers have interacted – those of the teachers and those of the school system, beginning from the point of view of the individual. The aim is to construct a *single* professional story to describe and explain the interaction between agency and structure; the researcher' interpretative and analyitical role therefore is needed to find out the structural and cultural conditioning behind the individual life trajectories (cfr. Agodi, 2002; Steensen, 2006).

Naturally a single case is limited by leaving little room for developing abstractions and generalisations, above all on some relevant issues such as,

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[8] According to Archer the exploration of the internal conversation does not vary from whatever other sociological research. The researcher, as always, deals with a hermeneutic work since, both in qualitative and quantitative research, *«data never speak for themselves»* (2003: 162) and in interviews the transmission of meanings, however partial, imperfect and difficult, is still possible, like any form of communication between subjects.

for example, questions relating to the macro consequences of the reflexive activity of the meta-reflexive teachers or questions regarding the strength of conditioning which the same educational and social system exerts on the strategies of *enactment*. But the present work is of an exploratory nature and represents a first attempt in order that the analysis of individual reflexivity may turn out to be a valid entry key to throw greater light on the tensions and the dynamics which are generated when teachers deal with a constantly incongruous situation in the work context which prevents them from giving full significance to their role, and thus to invest part of their own identity in it.

The analytical History of Paolo

In this section the analytical history of Paolo is reconstructed. He is an upper-middle schoolteacher who currently teaches drawing and graphic and technical design and advertising planning at a (professional/technical) state school in Naples, the city of his birth and where he currently lives with his family. Paolo is 48 years old, has been married for 13 years and has two children aged 5 and 7. He first earned a degree from the institute of art and subsequently as a set designer at the fine arts academy. He taught in a state school in a little town in the south of Italy as a supply teacher from the age of 26 to 30. Since 1992 he has been a staff teacher; he first taught in an art school in the hinterland of Naples; in 1997 he taught in a professional school in a poor area in the historical centre of the city, since 2001 he also has a organisational role: "funzione obiettivo/strumentale".

Paolo is born into an untraditional and very liberal family. Although he is much loved and supported by his parents he is fully independent and lives autonomously developing new experiences and friendships. This style of life allows him to quickly become a converser who is trusting of his reflexive ability and capable of not being influenced by conventions. When Paolo begins his career as a teacher, he has already had work experience. For example he started a video shop and went to various art laboratories, which introduced him to his great passion for artistic and creative activity and his desire for freedom and autonomy. Unfortunately he does not meet with great professional and romantic success and when, after the death of his father, the need for security and stability emerges, his internal dialogues direct him towards the teaching profession. Teaching appears to him to be a very secure job, but which also leaves a lot of room for freedom/creativity

and which allows him to teach the subject that he loves. The arrangement seems acceptable and he begins his career as a supply teacher in a little town on the sea in the south of Italy.

Coming into contact with the teaching profession

Paolo tells how at school, after the first weeks of disorientation, in which he doesn't even manage to teach, everything seems to be fantastic and his students – he teaches in an art school with predominantly female students – hang on his every word. But his internal conversation is far from questions of school and is driven by other professional aims and very shortly Paolo gets involved in organising art events. School is neglected and the first rumours begin of his close female friendships, which Paolo cultivates with his (ex) students. The headteacher decides to ask for an explanation but is also very understanding with the young inexperienced teacher. The long chats stimulate Paolo's reflexivity and little by little he begins to ask himself what kind of professional, teacher and person he wants to become and his internal dialogues tend to become more self-questioning. This is a very delicate moment and Paolo in his solitary conversations starts to review his interests and experiences and the values transmitted by his parents. On the one hand he can't give up the pleasure that he gets from his art activities; on the other, if he remains a teacher he wants to become an educator with a style of life that would be an example to others.

> ... bear in mind that I am someone who began at 24 years of age, I was a person who couldn't wait to get out of school, who arrived ten minutes late, a quarter of an hour… but I found a headteacher who was honest, a person of integrity who made me become a man while I was a teacher.

In these years, Paolo gradually and thanks to the support of the head teacher and his colleagues, managed to bring some of his passions to the school environment achieving a union between the field of communication and that of advertising and his budding interests in the themes of legality, non-violence and the fight against crime. But just on the night before one of his most important demonstrations against crime something happened about which he still thinks today: his car is robbed, but he doesn't report it to the police. Instead he decides to compromise himself in lots of ways in order to get his car back.

P.: ... that is, someone who presents himself as an educator, who gives an example, but then I am very far from being a Falcone or a Borsellino [two killed judges because they investigated agaist tha racket] that is to say … we have to take a serious look at ourselves ... we are all afraid of it. I am one of those…. that is, when they robbed my car I had the posters in the car, because … I did something, which was actually very nice, we closed all of the shutters at midnight. I had the idea, an advert at midnight. All of the shutters would be closed, they would open with all of my posters ... "You too can come and shoot your advert against violence. Don't be afraid of the Camorra" [Italian criminal organization born to Naples] . Then there was ... a meeting where all of the people came together, they formed a pistol and a slogan ... "yes, let's arm ourselves, but with solidarity". ... I had the posters in the car. I go to the beach ... to have a nice swim…well, I didn't find either the car or the posters … well…I become Neapolitan, of course I don't think of calling the police, justice, those things, no! ...I am willing to do anything to get the car back (laughs).
T.: the "cavallo di ritorno"[9]?
P.: Of course,... I the teacher ... had a lot of courage because anyhow I went to the worst square ... Then I went up to the dodgiest-looking types that there could be.... they gave me the appointment... they told me "bring a lot of money" ...I felt like a hero too ... someone who matters! They came to collect me on a big motorbike …they said to me "how much did you bring with you?" Instead of bringing what at the time should have been a million (lira) I brought 300 (thousand lira), so they beat me up a bit as well. And so I got the car back, and you know when you said to me, "When did you feel defeated?"…When I drove the car and behind I saw that I had the posters, "You too can come and shoot your advert against violence. Don't be afraid of the Camorra". What a great example of a teacher. I did the "cavallo di ritorno", all pleased with myself.

When Paolo tells his story he is struck by countless and contradictory emotions: on the one hand the perplexity at the inconsistencies which dwell inside of him, the sense of defeat for the behaviour which was far from his ideals and the wish to be different, and on the other hand, Paolo realizes that in him lives the Neapolitan soul which is ready for anything, used to lawlessness, proud of having managed to get the car back without the

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[9] A widespread practice in the south of Italy where a thief contacts the victim, inviting him/her to pay to have the stolen item back, in this way the victim automatically becomes a receiver of stolen goods.

intervention of the institutions of the state.

The themes of the difficult relationship with these institutions, of which he feels himself to be an "anomalous" representative, the incoherence between his behaviour and his values and the coexistence with the lawlessness which is widespread in the south of Italy will always be present in Paolo's internal conversations, above all when from 1992, having returned to Naples, he will always work in areas of extreme poverty and social marginalisation. Paolo begins to question himself about the real possibilities which teachers and the school have to make an impression on the problems of poverty, marginalisation and crime which in the south of Italy constitutes the principal cause of the abandonment school and lack of academic success. He asks himself how he can "make the difference" and make a positive contribution to the practical lives of kids who are crushed by the weight of their culture in an economically and socially depressed context. From these reflections emerges the lucid resignation of he who knows that poverty and crime cannot be defeated with slogans of public awareness campaigns or with afternoon courses organised at school. But a new way to give a sense and significance to the profession of teachers will also emerge.

The emergence of a meta-reflexive conversation

In 1992 Paolo returns to his city of origin and leaves his principal friend and some business failures behind in Taranto. Despite his enthusiasm, Paolo states that the return is a real *shock*. The principal and most of his new colleagues are completely disinterested in educational and school issues, but more than anything else vie with each other to win funding for projects and the various *extra-curricular* activities.

> ... funds which are divided up without criteria as if they were a cake ... Whatever arrives must be divided up to please everyone without thinking that even if there is little money it can be used to do something for the students...

Many teachers justify their disinterest as the only possible survival strategy. In reality Paolo describes a very problematic situation where it is almost impossible to conduct lessons. On the one hand, there are the students who belong to families from a low social class and live in a context of strong deprivation, who are disenchanted, irreverent, violent and the school has a negative influence on them. They don't like studying and

they are not assisted and encouraged by their families. On the other hand, the institutions seem to be completely inactive; the infrastructure of schools is crumbling and the human and economic resources are very scarce.

> ... it seemed to me to be only a waste of time and that I was stealing my salary ... I know how the teacher feels, in these conditions we feel walked all over!
> Then each one of us [colleagues and principal] ended up doing his own thing ... you couldn't talk to anyone ... what could be planned? How could we improve things?

Paolo in this period already is starting to ask himself, "What can I do in these conditions"? How can I "make a difference"? Questions emerge from his conversation but not answers and possible strategies of *enactment* and he starts to feel that incongruity between *concerns* and *context*, which will make the school appear to be an evil from which to liberate himself. Paolo, who can count on some friendships, begins a new professional adventure as a television set designer and as an *art director* and gradually he becomes a teacher with a double job. The new profession, on the one hand gives him great satisfaction because it allows him both to dedicate himself to the things he loves and to be socially and economically appreciated for his skills, but on the other hand, due to market forces it disappoints him since it does not respect his ideals, artistic research, creativity and freedom. During these years, neither of the two jobs satisfies Paolo who continues to approach the question of the school wondering if he should abandon it or if and how it is possible to improve the situation. His conversation is always animated by the same line of questioning, "How can I make the difference"? Or rather how can I help my students? Why don't they accept me? How can I make them love school? How can I get a flower to grow in the desert? In his free time, in the hope of setting up ways of learning more suitable for his students and to save some from their destiny of being marginalised – "getting a flower to grow in the desert" - Paolo goes to some courses which are based on the principle of informal learning. Despite this, like most of his colleagues, Paolo continues to have a lot of difficulty, even simply to be in the class and thus spends the hours of the lesson, limiting himself to observing his students.

> ... the teacher who is not curious about the students is finished. Above all in these contexts there has to be the moment when you leave your role and try to

understand the kids and then you try to understand their world. Your world is too different and if you want to help them you have to understand them, even if then you don't approve of or make allowances for them, but only in this way can you help them to change...
At the beginning in order to understand them made them play "schiaffo" and "l'albero" in class [two group games which are very violent which the kids often play outside of school or during their breaks]. One shouldn't do it, it's true but I was starting and had to understand or otherwise I wouldn't have been able to get into contact with them. I took a risk; the teacher has to take risks.

Paolo is aware that despite everything his commitment in many circumstances is a passive agent, a subject who undergoes a situation without the powers of mediation and gets by with two professions, which do not satisfy his ideals. But the internal conversation continues and critically evaluates the entire educational and social system asking himself

> ... where can the satisfaction for a teacher come from in such conditions? Above all in my case: a male teacher, with a degree and a family?

The internal conversation appears by now a proper self-sufficient conversation question/answer typical of a meta-reflexive which allows us to understand how Paolo *subjectively* values the cultural and structural order in which he works and how he tries to mediate it to pursue his *value oriented interests*. According to Paolo, by now each teacher is well aware that the school and his/her profession is in decline because there are clear political choices which transformed the school into a "parking place" (Dubet, 1999) which is incapable of making an impact on the social, cultural and economic destinies of the students. Paolo continues to feel the *incongruity* between his ideals and the educational institution which he sees as a bureaucracy concerned with falling within the designated European parameters, without paying due care to the level of effective skills achieved by the students, to their cultural preparation or their maturity as citizens:

The important thing [for the headteachers] is to formally increase the number of graduating students, but once they leave school [Minister of the education] abandons them.

Paolo also alludes to the conditions, which demanding principals and attentive parents who desire a competent teacher must face, but these

conditions are considered to be exceptions since the institutional objectives are different.

> ... therefore it is clear I feel alone, I feel alone with regard to the institutions.
> ... We are teachers, we are here, and we don't see the results of our work. The famous flowers that I told you about … no-one goes to check on them. So is there someone who instead of planting flowers in the field cultivates marijuana plants, who knows?

In 1997 Paolo is transferred to another school "at risk"[10], close to where he lives and burdened with many problems, in fact, he doesn't succeed in finding a stable place to work and principals with an annual remit come and go, one after the other... Even if the years of the Autonomy have arrived, Paolo feels that the situation has not changed.

> ... numerous proclamations, some refresher courses and some extra projects, in my opinion nothing has changed with the Autonomy... Everyone is tired and exasperated ... if you did something before you do it now too ... In my opinion nothing has changed. I have always tried to carry out so many projects, to open the school to society ... there I did [projects] when I was a supply teacher and I always relied on cross skills before the Autonomy... [they made] many teachers like me

Making the difference

Everything continues without any significant change until 2001 when a new headmaster is assigned to the school with whom Paolo finally manages to establish a stimulating professional relationship. The headteachers seizes the opportunities that came with the Autonomy and proposes that Paolo assume what is at the time the newly assigned additional role of "funzione obiettivo", now "funzione strumentale" (see § 1). Paolo, although not holding out too much hope, accepts mainly because he is stimulated by a new aim. During the last few years, spent more in observing rather than acting, his internal conversation was always at work and Paolo developed a strong interest in the issue of career guidance. Insertion in the workplace is seen as the favoured channel in order to demonstrate that the school can help to find a way out of marginalisation and crime. Paolo wants to move

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[10] For schools "at risk" it is meant all of the schools located in geographical contexts which are socio-culturally degraded and economically depressed, in which the users are at serious risk of non-attendence and abandonment of school.

away from the past and from the teacher at the centre of the story of the stolen car. He no longer wants to run campaigns against crime, which have no results in reality seeing as he himself did not hesitate to stoop to pacts with criminals.

> I can't do anything against the Camorra? Well I can do something to keep my students away from crime by offering them a route to honest work ... If the school helps them to place themselves in different contexts through work, I invest them [the students] in the school ... I also work on the cross-skills making them understand how nice it is to earn money in an honest way ... it is difficult but then even the kids understand how nice it is to be respected for being a professional.

What instruments and resources does Paolo have to achieve his objectives? The resources that the institutions provide to them are above all connected to Project '92 and Paolo affirms that:

> ... when he read the project he said: it's great! ... The project is right but unfortunately is so only on paper since it is laid out in a bureaucratic way and favours quantity over quality.

The project places each student for 600 hours in the hands of businesses or training companies between internships and training in class in exchange for sums which according to Paolo are ridiculous, above all if they have to accept *trainees* who are very troublesome such as his students. In order to avoid the project being transformed into the umpteenth bureaucratic ritual, Paolo decides to depart from the specifications of the project and after many attempts manages to establish a clear and explicit relationship with some graphic design agencies: informally the hours of the internship and above all of training in class are reduced in exchange for a higher quality of service:

> ... instead of doing five useless hours, they do two very well with real experts and not poor novice trainers sent into the class as the [education] Ministry does with us.

After having completed the hours with the experts the students remain with the *tutor* – a teacher from the school and sometimes Paolo himself – and go over the lessons, do exercises while watching a film or more simply

play among themselves. The first few years pass and things start to go better and the first success is achieved with the placement of some of the students in jobs with the agencies, which provided the initial internships. The principals who come one after the other in anticipation of an imminent transfer are completely disinterested and this for Paolo represents the true school Autonomy and gradually his initiatives increase gaining access to all and any types of funding, project or financial backing. Paolo participates in shows and competitions in the field of graphic design and advertising, organizes *internships* even for the other courses in his school ("fashion" and "business administration"), and is involved in career guidance, cinema, theatre and is in charge of the study trips and training committees.

> It is all transparent ... I got a large notebook and everything is written in it because I am not the one who set up the School Council because otherwise the kids just take a trip, when and if they reach the fifth year. So I have to write down everything and let them understand that they all are aware and approve. ... I charge all those who can afford it because my aim is to get them to go on as many trips as possible from the third year on. I charge the parents who have the means to pay and all of the teachers including myself (laughs). Then from the kids from the fifth year who are from families that are the best off, I get them to give back the contribution that they received from the school for the trips... I put it in my fund. It is all written down in the big notebook. The principal also knows about it and I also ask her for a contribution (laughs).

The trips are among his priorities because in his opinion they allow the students to get out of their narrow environment, to deal with other social and working realities and to offer a glimpse of real work alternatives. Paolo moreover starts to put *extra-curricular* activities into operation for the expansion of technical skills and attempting to involve his best ex-students as experts.

> Two pigeons with a broad bean: those with new diplomas have their first experiences of work ... students see kids like them, but different, who work, who have the remit of the school, they give lessons and are paid. ... they are motivated; they say "well then, is the school useful for something?" ... But it is all difficult ... to get some things through to headteachers who are afraid of innovation... it's not easy ...

In these years Paolo significantly reduces his work as a set designer and

art director and ends up spending many hours at school becoming a full-time teacher and even satisfied with his salary: "My wife gets angry, tells me that for all the hours that I am at school, I should be rich (laughs). However with the various earnings from projects and other things I manage to scrape together a good salary (pauses) I can't complain". But the *little successes alternate with large failures*. It is always getting more difficult to find serious companies for the internships; the rate of abandonment of school in the fourth and fifth years doesn't look like diminishing. Many students are dismissed from the companies because they steal or have traits, which could be truly defined as anti-social. And finally, for administrative reasons the new centre with a new graphic design laboratory is taken away from them.

By 2005, when the school is the beneficiary of a three-year funding from the Province of Naples (local government) to fight the abandonment of school and loss of students, and for Paolo it is the opportunity to include the Province of Naples in his dense network of relationships. The same year the new centre is finally assigned for the graphic design course. The President of the Republic is there at the inauguration and Paolo manages to be given the task of making the posters to promote the event. In this case too the graphic design laboratory is transformed for a few days into that perfect advertising agency which Paolo had always dreamed of with all of his students committed to participating in some national competition, to create some logo for some organisation or to involve themselves in small communication campaign for the Province.

> When [the students] can't manage (to do something) then I intervene because this is a job which we were commissioned to do and not just a series of exercises... they go to do the internship in the school… We cannot show ourselves up, but they [the students] are enthusiastic, they feel responsible, important, are with me for hours and hours.

Paolo often asks himself why he returned to work full-time at school and reduced the work as a freelancer, thus foregoing greater earnings and a higher professional *status*.

> …maybe I was afraid of leaving a guaranteed job and to deal with the life of a freelancer, which doesn't offer certainties or security. Instead I managed to have a guaranteed job and at the same time I also spend time doing the things I like, I do the things that I love …I don't do it just for the kids, I would be a liar,

I also do it as a means of self-realization, ... the teacher who doesn't manage to do his own job well feels walked all over, ...to be happy to do it, in my opinion you have to find your own space, your own situations.

Paolo has actually managed to involved many of his professional interests in his teaching and through the network of companies and schools, which extends to a national level, continuously enriches his wealth of knowledge and skills in consultation with other colleagues and above all with professionals from the business world. But Paolo is driven by being able to "make the difference". His activities allow him to offer little *chances* of social and economic improvement to his students.

For now I have the freedom and I have found my system, which works because it motivates the kids ... it shows them that in the world there are other things apart from the Camorra. It took years of work and I hope that someone doesn't come now and destroy everything. Each time that a new principal comes I warn him because my system works and allows (us) to do without the training companies [who are awarded the internships of the '92 project] who rob money from the State.
I would like to be able to make all of my students do various internships.

One does anything to avoid becoming a passive agent: a puppet
Despite Paolo having invested his professional identity in his work as a teacher, he is ever more aware of the perennial and irresolvable *incongruity* with the school context. His internal conversation gets more critical, complex and articulate and allows him to develop a personal morale, which brings him to assume attitudes, which can be quite controversial. On the one hand, beliefs emerge which are close to a neo-liberal position (Serpieri, 2008): to improve the educational system it is necessary to assign clear objectives and put meritocratic systems into operation which are capable of rewarding whoever achieves them. The introduction of systems of *performance* reviews of teachers and principals should hold in check the lack of commitment and absenteeism and be an incentive to teachers who are more competent and purposeful.

... in teaching you find yourself on your own because you see different interests in the school, meaning that we don't all work with a common aim. On the contrary I bring my business experience to the staff meeting. I say, "I wanted quality in the school". Quality should be an imperative...I am in favour of the

"funzionigramma" (general scheme of work for the whole school)... I now deontologically think that the school should have a "funziongramma", that is, like in businesses there are people who make mistakes, ok? It's not that they then get ten lashes for it, but it would at least be necessary to be clear by saying: "Look, you didn't do your work as well as another did, why? This [the school] is a firm, not a public work where you sign your name, go into the class and do whatever you like, are we clear?"

[My work colleagues] want to be the tutors of the *internship*? But they are not used to working like me, one who has had other experiences in the private sector. I tell them to be a tutor and not warm up the seat, they have to do a lot of things: motivate the kids who lose interest in it, monitor the external experts who otherwise don't do anything ... and instead what do they do? They go, they accompany them [the students] and then they leave the room, go to make a call, smoke... they want money, just money… Well I don't let them do anything because being the *tutor* is not a piece of cake. .... I prefer just a few colleagues, the other tutors are X, Y, etc. [lists the names of some of his colleagues] who are always with the kids ... they work like me.

... wouldn't it be fairer for us to decide the *mission* of what we want to do together? In your opinion is it more important that when we award a diploma to a student we see him/her then work in that sector where you were the teachers? Or if he is the one selling you fruit and vegetables you don't give a damn? No one tells us that we have to work to achieve certain aims for example. That is, (the idea that) the best teacher is the one who manages to get 30% of the school employed is out of the question.

On the other hand, Paolo recognises the complexity and importance of education, of the attention necessary to sustain the cultural and personal growth of students. Attention to interpersonal relationships and the need to take care of the students (Wilmott, 2000) switches the attention onto the capacity of the teacher to seize upon the specific nature of the educational context and to deeply know the students, to establish a relationship which is rich and genuine made up of improvisation and sensitivity, independently of the formative or occupational objectives. But Paolo perhaps (?) is forgetting how these skills, often tacit ones, which are acquired with experience, are elements, which are difficult to evaluate and measure in an objective-orientated system.

... the relationship is everything! This is another thing, which I think is

important to underline, when they say to me that I brought them to Mirabilandia [amusement park] and thay ask me: "what did you have them do at Mirabilandia?" Apart from the fact that there is marketing there too, I tell them: do you understand that these kids were in our company for twenty-four hours, even in the disco and we taught them because they saw how teacher x dresses, how he puts on his jacket, his tie, how he behaves with the staff, because for them learning manners and how to conduct oneself in a hotel, how to call the waiter etc. Do you want to know how much that is worth? Gold! And this is what providing cross skills means, because when I have to send a student to an advertising agency and he/she has the habit of stealing, how can I send him? And if he is rude and doesn't let them know that he can't go to work on that day, how is that received? For them [the students] that [the informal education activity] is worth a million times more than learning in class.

The calls for the need for controls, for a business-type management style, for the introduction of "management by objectives" are born of the demand for a State which is more present and that does not keep everyone perpetually waiting for some satisfaction, for an exchange which could enrich and improve our professionalism, for new experiences which can generate cutting edge ideas and projects. Paolo, who also has significant experience in the private sector, in some ways idealizes the managerial systems, perhaps in a provocative way to underline the decline of the public institutions.

[The institutions] come to our school to carry out projects that have come down from above and spend so much money and don't manage to do anything, but they don't ask to us. Do you know what I could do with that amount of money? Give it to me and then I'll show you the results ... if they give a damn they don't come to say, "Do you have some idea which has worked? Let me see, what do you want to do? And they (should) make large amounts of money available to us and not what they give us for little projects... [The funds] that they use for their projects, the ones they give to their experts who don't know how to do anything because they are not here with us...

In the past all of the headteachers came to the class to inspect the quality of the classroom ... maybe it was better because the teachers felt that their work was of interest to someone.

I know what it is that frustrates teachers. The teacher finds him/herself guided by the institutions without having control... it's as if they put a hoe into your

hand and tell you*" go and make a flower grow"*(smiles) do you get me? But you manage to grow a flower and no-one cares about it and so you say, well is it worth growing another...?

We have the solution in our hands, it angers us so much that we can't give our solution to the institutions ... I have to show the kid in the first year ... what he can do when he grows up ... instead here from the moment they leave school the state doesn't care anymore, do you know why? They aren't on the school register.

Training is also left to his own initiative and this for Paolo is something that confirms the disinterest of the institutions,

I got my education in the '70s ... I knew nothing about computers ... my subject evolves continuously... but did the State come to me once and say ... for you who teaches this subject, are you up to date or do you teach your students the same stuff as twenty years ago? No one ever came to me and I have plenty of colleagues who do the same thing as thirty years ago... I stay up to date because I do afternoon courses and get very good experts to come ... I do it for myself and my students ... then I have the professional job which brings me in contact with lots of good professionals ... I educate myself when I work away from the school ... (laughs) it's absurd.

The educational system by not motivating and not recognising the level of skills achieved and practised by the teachers ends up discouraging any form of professionalisation and, consciously or not, produces a body of teachers which is dis-empowered, insecure and frustrated, but on whom falls the responsibility for the performance of the whole system. The incongruity between *concern* and *context* is by now sanctioned by the failure of the process of identification in the educational institutions since the latter are perceived as something distant and negative and Paolo isn't slow to underline that years of emancipatory educational policies have failed miserably and many teachers feel at fault for all that has happened.

The important thing [for the headteachers] is to formally increase the number of graduating students, but once they leave school [the Minister] abandons them. Do you know why? Because they are off the school register...
…for the institutions only numbers count. How many of your students graduated? Instead you should ask yourself how many poor wretches you are churning out to society. They pretend to want to help them, but if you (the

school) didn't fail them society will. Teachers feel guilty because they feel like they have failed and pass everyone. It is the system that doesn't work... **things don't work**.

Meta-reflexivity, enactment and subversiveness

According to Archer the meta-reflexives have a *subversive* behaviour with regard to the *status quo;* the meta-reflexives are the agents of change, the protagonists of the processes of *enactment* for innovation. Paolo is actually a teacher who does his best so that the school might be transformed into an agency for social emancipation and equity, improving the life chances of the students, particularly for those students who are disadvantaged and marginalised. It amounts to an attitude that could make an impression on the system of social mobility and stratification, and thus Paolo's attitude is, in many ways, *subversive*. But as Paolo himself perceives, even with the school Autonomy, the practices of all the teachers, who like him apply themselves to this difficult "*subversive*" task, are very precarious, and are very limited in their outcomes and thus do not make any significant impression on the *status quo.* Paolo is very resentful because he doesn't receive support and satisfaction either from the institutions or from the school itself and his colleagues and remembers with nostalgia his first experience in south Italy. To Paolo it would be enough for his ideas on the school to be shared and not condemned to be easily snuffed out.

> Here? The whole thing could revert to the way it was or worse (laughs) within the space of a few days ... it wouldn't take a year; a few days would be enough.
>
> At the staff meeting I read my report every year and while I read my colleagues make me the sign "cut" because they don't want to waste time. ... So I write the report starting with "how I would like to be read". Only in the first year of work did a colleague stop me in the corridor and say that they had read the report and paid me compliments. Then again, I don't talk about the things that I do ... I talk about he things I will do or what should be done and that everyone should participate in... the staff meeting doesn't work [since] everyone wants to get it over with as soon as possible.

His identity is constantly threatened by the lack of recognition, but above all by the precariousness of his situation which could be transformed and prevent him from being able to continue to carry out his *modus vivendi*

which allow him to not feel a failure, or to put it in his words, "walked all over"

Conclusions

The school Autonomy and the *trend* of reforms, which followed, even if inspired by different lines of reasoning, slowly built a contradictory institutional framework. In this work, in particular, what was desired was to place the emphasis on the incongruity which evolved between, on the one hand, forms of devolution which give a sense of responsibility to the teachers and headteachers regarding the results of the educational system, and on the other hand, the oscillation between measures of supervision which tend to bureaucratise and standardise their work (Gronn, 2003) and the total disinterest regarding the quality of their work. If, therefore, in many ways, it aimed at individual *agency* and enactment from below, offering greater degrees of liberty to those working in the field, in other ways, the progressive reduction of funds, the lack of interest in the re-launch of the working department, the measures of *accountability*, which give the nod to the *New Public Management* and privatisation, heavily affected the destiny of the Italian educational system and its teachers.

The dominant rhetoric has not reflected the contradictions but relies on a specific managerial discourse (Serpieri, 2009), which ignores the needs of individuals as human beings and thoroughly undermines any possibility for ethical action (Willmott, 2002; Woods, 2004). The *New Public Management*, moreover, has always been linked to reductionist ontologies, in an individualist sense, which mark out teachers as free "enablers" (cfr. Archer, 1995) of the school, neutralising in one fell swoop the conditioning of the social structure (for example: the distribution of the society into classes, the organisational structure of the school, the policies of management of the body of teachers).

In this article the aim was to place the emphasis on the presence of generative mechanisms which are both individual (such as the internal conversation) and social (such as the organisational structure of the educational system), to reaffirm that the relationship between teachers and the educational system is complex and cannot be resolved by means of reductionism. In order to confront the issue of agency and the exercise of levels of individual liberty, often defined as *enactment* when the question

of change are tackled, it was necessary to get to the heart of the relationship between individual and structure. The internal conversation construct allowed the possibility to profoundly analyse the powers of mediation possessed by teachers and, in particular, the meta-reflexive conversation, intended as the place for a mediation oriented at developing strategies of *enactment* inspired by ethical principles, allowed for the exploration of the incongruities between meta-reflexive teachers and social and educational system.

As has been seen, in a climate where the rhetoric of the *New Public Management* dominates, there is no space for an articulate and complex vision of the situation that the educational system is going through and also meta-reflexive teachers such as Paolo end up leaning towards individualist or instrumental ontologies.

> ... [my colleagues] complain because the system is awful, thanks...I know it is! But they don't do anything [to change things].... Do you know what I say to them? I always say "Ask not what your school can do for you, ask what you can do for your school"

With the *New Public Management* individual generative mechanisms are uncoupled from the systemic ones; the means are uncoupled from the ends, and that does not allow for the comprehension of the behaviour of the teachers in the light of elements which, as Paolo himself has highlighted with lucidity on other occasions, condition the performance of the whole educational system. For example, the absence of the institutions when faced with the problems of deviance and delinquency or the imperious bureaucratic logic which instructs teachers from the initial processes of recruitment "by a points system".

Even if it is risky to generalise or theorise on the basis of the analysis of a single case, this analytical story illustrates the situation in which each teacher who has to deal with the educational system can find him/herself and tries to mediate it from a meta-reflexive point of view: as a potent and constant evaluator of him/herself and of the system and in the perpetual search for a context which is compatible with his/her values.

It is necessary to reaffirm that reflexivity is not a natural gift, a personal characteristic, but is itself the fruit of the relationship between the individual and society. Perhaps, unlike what is said about the growing reflexive capacity of individuals, the deception is precisely in the "liquid

society" (Bauman, 2000) and/or "reflexive modernisation" (Giddens, Beck, Lash, 1994) which celebrates the marriage between an individualist rhetoric (neo-liberalism) and a well-hidden but potent structure which, by dis-empowering the individual of his reflexive capacity, reduces him/her to a true exponent of the Parsonsian actor. This paradoxical marriage in the educational sphere blames and places the responsibility on headteachers and teachers and bases itself on the deterioration of any bonds of trust in their professional relationships (Lunt, 2008), which prevents the transformation of the individual *agency* into potent organised ones. The institutions, far from promoting reflexivity, help to render the contexts even more uncertain and contradictory, dis-empowering the individual and collective *agency*. In Italy, in fact, teachers run the risk of passively suffering the contradictions of a system that finds its scapegoat in the attempts at adjustment made by the same teachers while trying again to act as an intermediary in a situation that has reached a critical point. An individualistic reading sees the teacher as the party who enjoys higher levels of freedom and who is thus responsible for the continuation or alteration of the educational system. But greater levels of freedom can be practised only by teachers who aim low both in terms of their career, looking for *part-time* positions, and with regard to the functions of the school system, sticking to the "school-parking" without prospects. For meta-reflexive teachers, that is for those who wish to "make the difference" attributing a social value and meaning to their activities, are there real levels of autonomy and liberty? If their power is their reflexivity, are there spaces to cultivate reflexivity, or rather to plan, experiment and evaluate original and sincere mediations (or enactment, as we wish to better define them)?

   The case examined shows a teacher who, although in continuous incongruity with his working context, partly agrees to act in an educational and social system burdened by atavistic problems that will restrict his projects and render precarious any innovation. A teacher characterised by a similar conversation cannot give up because his/her *modus vivendi* exemplifies his/her professional ideals – "otherwise I feel like I'm being walked all over" -, but that consciously makes the teacher involved in actions and strategies which strain or even violate the rules imposed by the institutions and they achieve very limited results. Put simply, these practices - *modus vivendi* - are unlikely to leave behind long–lasting innovations but are indispensable above all because they represent and

nurture the personal and social identity of a meta-reflexive teacher[11].

In our school system, does meta-reflexivity serve only to give impulse to a strenuous defence of one's identity that is threatened by a suffocating and bureaucratic environment? In other words, is there nothing left for a meta-reflexive teacher in order to save his/her soul, but to push the boundaries of the system and apply oneself to micro-changes condemned to impermanence? The questions are numerous and relevant about the role of meta-reflexive teachers and should certainly be dealt with more deeply, above all if the Italian educational system does not wish to continue to rely on change from below, while it allows the experiments that it itself put into operation to die. The special *curricula* (i.e. "Brocca" experimental), for example, did not bring about lasting changes and this happened moreover with the knowledge and the skills developed following numerous and significant experiments starting from the 70s of which the system seems to have lost any trace.

For now the destiny of these meta-reflexive teachers is unknown - those who, used to living in hostile environments, do not have and do not give others an easy time, seeing as their simple presence is a reminder that "**things don't work**", but nothing is done to remedy it.

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[11] In the Archer's study (2007: 140-1) the possibilty that the metariflexives' action «is nothing more than expressive action – without impact» is avoided because their action is view as a «realistic investment in the pratical politics of the possible… is a concretelty subversive in seeking to empower a parih group and to include them in the local *demos*». It is difficult to reach such conclusion because it would be necessary to widen the context of search and, for instance in our search, to study students' professional life.

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