

Hamsters on a wheel? Conflict over the role of School Teachers in the primary education state school model

by *Marco Pitzalis*¹

Abstract: This article analyses the recent debate in Italy over the re-introduction of the traditional teaching model characterised by a single teacher managing one school class, in place of the previously existing team-teaching approach. This reform was recently proposed – by the Education Minister Gelmini – as a radical change of pedagogical approach in schools. The main feature of this change is its emphasis on the special close relationship between a nursery school-teacher and the child-pupil. The idea basis of this reform will be questioned in the light of a plurality of sociological issues concerning various facets of school life and teachers' work: the evolution of socialization models within school and society and “the challenge of complexity” in contemporary societies; the impact of reforms on real life and work within schools; the consequences of teachers' “individualism” and the “opacity of the classroom”; the teacher-pupil relationship and the effects linked to selection processes; finally, the importance of constructing a “teaching community” will be examined.

Key-words: Reform, Primary School, Teachers

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Introduction

After a long summer debate, on 1st September 2008 the Italian government passed a law introducing radical changes into the organisation of primary school classes and teachers' duties therein.² In short, driven by a plan to rationalise and introduce expenditure controls in the state sector, the Italian government intends to reduce the number of teachers employed in state-run schools. In primary schools, this plan involves the introduction of two measures, namely the rearranging of school hours and the reorganization of school teachers' work. Families have been asked to choose from a selection of different possible schedules (24 or 27 or 30 or 34 hours a week). Furthermore, the *plan* is also introducing the following major pedagogical change. In Italy, primary school classes have until recently been run on a 'team-of-three' teaching approach, known in Italy as "co-presence", with each team comprising three teachers managing two classes. This model was introduced in the early 1990s following a heated pedagogical debate at the time, but was also dictated by the need to save teaching posts in a period when the school population was falling.

The most striking thing about the discussion prior to the introduction of the reform was the almost total absence of any serious debate before the law was pushed through. Indeed, the *plan* was presented as a "media event" – with sketchy commentaries from journalists, politicians, intellectuals and other "by-standers" – in a vain attempt to pass for what should have been a systematic multidisciplinary study of the organisational, pedagogical, psychological and social impact of such a change. The media focused mainly on the nostalgic theme of how things were in "the good old days". Thus, no preparatory study was undertaken to review pedagogical or organisational issues that the Gelmini reform plan would involve, and the Ministry's official web site does not furnish any specific technical information about the plan's consequences. Nevertheless, in her announcements to the press the Minister Gelmini has claimed that the change is an important pedagogical one centred on the idea that children need an exclusive one-to-one relationship with a single teacher. The Minister's declarations have so far failed to provide any insights into the psychological and pedagogical framework that would support her arguments.

² Decreto-legge 1 settembre 2008, n. 137 : "Disposizioni urgenti in materia di istruzione e università".

Clearly, the Government's main objective was to reduce the number of teachers but the cultural or ideological stance reveals a marked conservative about turn as regards how the mission of schooling should be conceived. A Member of Parliament belonging to Mr Berlusconi's party (Ms Aprea) recently presented a bill concerning the reform of state schools in Italy. The bill put the emphasis on instilling morals and controlling the behavioural development of students, in line with the thinking that schools ought to adopt precise educational models to this end. All this constitutes a radical change. Contemporary state schooling in Italy is pluralistic in pedagogical, moral and ethical terms,³ and the presence of a team of teachers is an important guarantee for the preservation of this pluralism.

This article discusses the "reform" and its ideological assumptions linked to the introduction of 'team teaching' in primary schools and will argue that there are several good reasons why this Italian "anomaly" should be maintained.⁴ Several aspects concerning class life, teachers' work, school organization and reform, socialization processes within school and society and the teacher-pupil relationship will be taken into account and analysed referring to current sociological literature.

As the first matter to address is the "challenge of complexity", there follows a general account of the changes occurring in school and society and the consequent transformation of pedagogical and socialization models. In addition, the impact of reforms will be analysed from an insider's viewpoint, stressing the perspective of actors in the field, from whose standpoint the reform is raising a number of legitimate concerns, not least because it impacts on the micro-political dimension of school life and it demands a reconsideration of the perspective of individuals and groups

³ Even if this pluralism deals, day by day, with the presence of Religion's catholic teachers in schools. This presence manifests a will of hegemony from Catholic Church on State and Society in Italy, if his practical effect is maybe limited there is a symbolic effect that means for non-catholic families to constrain their children to leave the classroom and the class-group to join external alternative activities. So the symbolic violence which consists in the imposition of religious symbols in the classroom (the Cross on the wall) and the presence of catholic teachers of "religion" is doubled with the real violence of the exclusion of a child from his group. The family choice and his freedom his deeply conditioned by the alternative between two kinds of violence.

⁴ The main discourse accompanying the bill affirmed that Italian model is unique or almost rare in the world. That is, nevertheless, the strongest argument against this model that is brought up by the partisans of reform. In fact, as shown by the article of Larkin (1973), cited below, the experience of team-teaching in schools has been experienced in USA and deeply analyzed by specialists.

within an organization (Conchas and Rodriguez 2007; Hargreaves *et alii*, 2002; Hubbard, Mehan and Stein, 2006; Wood, 1977; Ball, 1990; Acker, 1990a; 1990b; Benadusi and Consoli, 2004; Landri, 2000; Landri and Queirolo Palmas, 2004). Literature on the sociology of school experience (Dubet et Martuccelli, 1996) together with ethnographic research studies (Lareau 1989, 2003; Fele and Paoletti, 2003) brings to light how the complexity of school life cannot be reduced to an exclusive one-to-one relationship between a teacher and a pupil. This complexity has also been borne out by studies on the social mechanisms at work in every day school classroom life (Wood and Jeffrey, 2002; Mehan, 1992; Rist, 1977) and the relationship between family and school (Lareau, 2003). In the last part of the article, a critical view will be taken of the notion of “educational community” and its ethical and metaphysical foundations. As a counter argument, the concept of “teaching community” functioning as a professional community will be looked at, emphasising the importance of shared professional values and convictions.

The Challenge of Complexity

The spirit of school reforms instigated in different countries has been much criticised. The French sociologist Edgar Morin affirms that these recent reforms share one common characteristic: the appraisal of educational problems in merely quantitative terms. Numbers of teachers, numbers of students and various quantitative indicators are today placed at the core of the debate or analysis of problems regarding schools. By contrast, and quoting Montaigne, Morin affirms that it is better to have a good head on your shoulders than one crammed with too much information (Morin, 1999). A good head meaning one that prepares you to live in a complex world. Sociologists have analyzed schools as spaces where socialization takes place, where individuals acquire the social competences needed to integrate into social groups and society in general. In a socio-historical perspective, school socialization models change in space and time, as Steven Brint shows – in *Schools and societies* (Brint, 1998) – States and societies put a different emphasis on achieving social conformity through three principal dimensions: behaviour, culture and moral values. These dimensions constitute the latent or explicit target of socialization in school socialization processes for every society.

During the 20th century, models of school socialization and their educational objectives were adapted to the demands of society. For example, during the 1970s, Italian primary schools removed the sexual segregation of boys and girls into either exclusively male or female classes. This change followed previous transformations in moral values connected with sexuality. The abolition of the pink or blue sashes, distinguishing female and male uniforms, together with the abolition of the division of sexes in classes, indicate that an essentialist conception of roles had been formally achieved, in both society and the family.

During the industrial revolution, schools were modelled in a manner that today resembles *Fordism* and were expected to furnish a standardised product throughout the whole country. The model of socialization was centred on a bureaucratic order and was engineered to 'shape' students to the mould of an authoritarian world of industries and bureaucratic administrations. The primary aim of schools was to ensure and attest to the cultural and behavioural conformity of their students (Bowls and Gintis, 1976).

This model is now partially (and largely unintentionally) outdated. In contemporary schools, while the curriculum may no longer be so rigid, in its place there is now the 'problem' of choice: i.e. parents and students select schools on the basis of strategic assessments of how attractive and extensive the extra-curricular activities offered seem to be. The term *education market* (or school market) has been used to refer to this trend (Ball, 2003; Campbell, Proctor, Sherington, 2009), with parents behaving as consumers (Ballion, 1982; Hirshhorn, 2001). In Italy, this whole process of the commercialisation of schools has been bolstered by the assigning of autonomy to schools (under National Law n. 59/1997) and the creation of a sort of market where choice is given to parents and students, and where schools are in competition to attract students. Every year, each school outlines the courses it plans to offer (the Italian abbreviation is POF) where the education programmes as well the extra-curricular activities are designed to appeal to as many students as possible. In this way, diversity has now become a sort of trademark that has transformed the Italian school system, formerly characterised by an overriding uniformity.

As a result of this change, the need for the behavioural conformity that was the distinguishing feature of the old school system, has been somewhat overlooked. This whole process occurred concurrently with the coming of the third industrial revolution (the electronic and ICT revolution) and the

emergence of a more consumerist and globalized society, bringing about a major challenge for the pupil-subject and his/her identity. The pedagogical debate which drove the reform movement of Italian primary schools in 1980s and 1990s focused on the concept of *cultural literacy*, by which was meant the acquisition of the diverse languages and alphabets required to function in today's culture (Dutto, 2002: 19). This new conception placed much emphasis on instruction and reason and required a radical structural reorganisation of schools in the shape of "modules" taught by a team of teachers, specialised in different disciplines and subject areas (mathematics, literacy, foreign languages,) for specific groups of classes. Team-teaching was intended and expected to assure that pupils mastered the different curricular areas (ivi).

In Italy today, instead of moving towards a global approach of re-organising practices and procedure in schools, the pedagogical debate on student conduct and behaviour has taken a repressive and moralistic turn, eschewing any engagement or reflection on culture and society.

The so-called "project-based school system" – a polemic contrast with the traditional *chalk and talk* ex-cathedra classroom lessons – as well as "modular-based schooling" is in essence a school where the model of socialization is pluralistic in its structure and is consequently geared to educating pupils to deal with complexity. The opposition between the "single" teacher versus the co-presence (team-teaching) model is, in fact, merely a latter-day manifestation of the more traditional struggle between a progressive and a conservative conception of school, education and society. This conflict appears to be an echo of the post-war dispute in education, when the education system was markedly characterised by the Catholic church's domination of infant schooling (Bonetta, 1990). Some elements of current debate recall the *Guidelines for the activities in infant school* (*Orientamenti per l'attività della scuola materna*) adopted by the government in 1958. The pedagogical ideology underlying these guidelines was defined as *agazzismo* (in reference to the pedagogy of the Agazzi sisters), the chief characteristic of which was the eulogy of the special close relationship between teacher and child. The former was considered to be a maternal figure, the second a mere specimen of "humanity and spontaneity, deprived of any autonomous intellectual capacity" (Bonetta, 1990: 39). If the focus of the educational process is the child-teacher relationship, "...then education doesn't need any didactics as such: the teacher, we hope more cultured now will, with her vocational aptitude, promote spontaneous

activity in children, in an exclusive relationship with each single child, in a school closed to the world and removed from its social environment ...” (ivi).

Today, we are observing a nostalgic revival of this form of pedagogy. An implicit *neo-agazzism* seems to underlie Gelmini’s proposals, with a return to the ‘privileged’ relation between a nursery school-teacher and the child-pupil. Moreover, this metaphysical pedagogy seems today to have been extended to the primary school. Gelmini’s project for a return to the “single teacher” method, founded on such conservative inspiration, appears highly flawed in a society where communication chaos reigns.

Twenty-first century children engage in a number of activities: the local parish, school, games and sports, friendship and exchange experiences, not to mention traditional media such as TV, music, books and the new medium of Internet, whose characteristics pose totally new problems in relation to the construction of identity and the development of sociability.

The simplification inherent in the Minister’s proposals seems to be nothing more than an anachronism, and it ignores the complexity of the socialization processes that present-day children must face.

Even if not immediately evident, these multifaceted processes are functional to the education of citizens obliged to live in an increasingly globalised and complex world. Given the need to help students deal with complexity, a plurality of teachers working in a team and managing more than one class guarantees an enrichment of experience that is consistent with and mirrors the plurality of socialization experiences that children today need to face.

Conceiving and imagining school to be a protective glass case in no way helps us to encompass the complexity of running a social and cultural process. Moreover, we ought to reflect on the very function of schooling: is it to protect children or to provide them with the autonomous means to operate successfully in the world at large?

The impact of reforms

When S. Ball wrote that “innovations are rarely neutral” (Ball, 1990: 32), he was referring to the fact that reforms not only have an impact in the

direction of the change intended by the reformers, but they can have perverse effects, often induced by individuals' reactions to the proposed changes. Change within institutions has a fundamental political dimension, or what Ball calls the micro-politics of the school. Since institutional change has an effect on the life of individuals and groups within the organization, it creates "dissonance among individuals or groups within the membership [...]. The introduction of, or proposal to introduce, changes in structure or working practices must be viewed in terms of its relationship to the immediate interests and concerns of those members likely to be affected, directly or indirectly"(Ball, 1990: 32).

A reform act introduces changes that oblige actors to reconsider their position in the organizational field. The change will concern power relations, symbolic or material elements: prestige, autonomy, status and rewards. Moreover, a feeling of risk and uncertainty accompanies the change process – in particular, when a reform deemed to touch the dimension of power relations among actors within an organization. So if uncertainty sets in and comes to characterize the normal status of the life of an institution, we can argue that the state of actors is more likely to be characterized by fear, suspicion and a tendency to turn to various kinds of exit strategies.

Reforms pose specific problems that actors have to solve in practice. So, they can have a negative impact on the sense of actors' commitment, and can lead to conflict between the goals and aspirations of individuals and the institutional itself (Wood, 1977; Ball, 1990).

In a "cultural" perspective, moreover, teachers are influenced by professional, organizational or institutional cultures (Hubbard *et alii*, 2006; Mehan *et alii*, 1996; Acker, 1990; Hargreaves, 1986; 2002) and the "reaction" to an innovation process will vary in different contexts (Acker, 1990b); moreover, although the micro politics of the school are never totally isolated from its social environment, any conflicts arising within the school are likely to be generated by factors not directly connected with public political debate. (Ball, 1990: 38). School is characterized by a complex series of social dynamics: "the various teacher cultures predate and mediate any government initiative" (Acker 1990b: 261). Such a condition leads to a struggle, especially if teachers feel that what they have accomplished has not been recognized or appreciated by politicians (Acker, 1990b: 268). For example, referring to his witnessing the mood of teachers during a change process, Acker commented: "Mrs. Clarke – the head-

teacher - began to display more signs of gloom and stress than I have seen previously” (1990: 268).

In Italy, the introduction of greater autonomy in schools has had considerable impact on the transformation of each school into a “complex and reactive social system” (Benadusi, Consoli, 2004: 78) and a “political arena” (Landri, 2000: p. 72; Landri, Queirolo Palmas, 2004: p. 78).

The introduction of this autonomy has brought about a crucial challenge for teachers who are now embroiled in two spheres of “uncertainty”. The first sphere concerns the hierarchy within the school itself, or chiefly, the emergence of a new kind of leadership (the head-teacher becoming a sort of manager) and the creation of a middle management (teachers assigned special functions and objectives). The second change concerns the new tasks and activities (such as extra-curricular projects) that change the *legitimate* definition of what constitutes a “good teacher”. Organizational and “bureaucratic” activities acquire a new centrality and enhance the crisis of the traditional normative model of teacher defined by her/his work within the classroom (Pitzalis, 2006). Thus teachers have spent the last decade learning and negotiating a new definition of their role and very purpose within the school.

Although the recent years in particular have been a time of accelerated change, it is almost four decades now that contemporary school systems (not only in Italy) have been the object of endless attention from politicians wishing to unleash their “innovative” esprit on school and university reforms.

During the last 25 years, Italy’s primary schools have witnessed a long series of bills and reforms, whose implementation has invariably produced a cost ‘met’ by the actors in the field.

Adaptation, organizational learning and conflict resolution have been some of the processes activated by actors (individuals or groups) to deal with these changes. Yet have their efforts led to any recognition from administrators and political actors? As Acker has noted, teachers have the sensation that their efforts and the commitment demanded by organizational and institutional changes have never been properly acknowledged.

In fact, not only has the implementation of previous changes not led – in Italy – to a serious evaluation of results and consequences, but it has been simply followed by critical public discourse emphasizing the idea of a crisis in contemporary schooling (habitually compared with a mythical

golden age). In these circumstances, teachers develop a sentiment of general disesteem, which depresses and weakens their motivation and commitment to work.

Moreover, reformers' rhetoric – accompanying proposals in the political fight – tends to exacerbate this problem. Public discourse misrepresents teachers' work, giving a sense of a school's inadequacy in relation to the needs of the young generation and society as a whole. The result has been that school actors (teachers, head-teachers) often feel they are undervalued by political actors.

The opacity of the classroom

The school classroom has often been characterized as a sort of sanctuary for the teacher (Warren, 1973). This image aims to focus on the central character of teachers' work, with the teacher depicted as being confined to his/her class-room and surrounded by protective walls.

This could be construed as an image representative of every teacher in every school in the world in the realisation of his/her labour. This cocooned work condition establishes an advantage for teachers, presumed to be the instigators and directors of their action, while walls protect them from external eyes. The fear that information about the real quality of this "direction" may extend beyond the physical limit of the class-room in the form of unmanageable disruptive hubbub, is one that worries many teachers! Such noise may indeed give colleagues and the head-teacher the impression that he/she has lost control over the class.

The theme of teacher isolation has been discussed in sociology literature (Dreeben 1970, Warren 1973, Boocock, 1978), with descriptions of how teachers become solitary actors (Jackson, 1971) and how this isolation protects them from "the development of strong collegial bonds" and social control mechanisms (Boocock, 1978: 4).

From this viewpoint, the *opacity* of the class is a resource manipulated by the teacher to avoid any form of evaluation and control. However, such *opacity* can backfire and turn into a trap for the teacher, because it can limit her/his professional growth and the opportunity of exchanging views with her/his colleagues. In sum, the structural organization of the workplace tends to strengthen teachers' individualism.

Co-presence system, though, does allow for the bypassing of this traditional isolation of teachers and their work. It also creates new problems for teachers, particularly relational ones and additional problems connected with the *minute but dramatic* decisions that characterise every-day class-life. Such decisions demand an effort of negotiation and dialogue among teachers and also pose the problem of competition and domination within this framework. (Anderson, Hagsstrom, Robinson, 1960; Martin, 1975; Bredo, 1977; Boocock, 1978). These points have been made by Italian critics of the team-teaching approach.

However, in my view, relational complexity promotes the realization of more virtuous processes in class life. In particular, with regard to the construction of a supportive and dynamic relationship between teacher and child and the better realisation of well-planned pedagogical activities.

One of the areas that can potentially draw most advantage from the existence of a team of teachers is to be found in the dialectic between *control* and *autonomy* in the class life. Fele and Paoletti's analysis of power in classroom, points to the delicate balance between the two main objectives teachers have in governing their classes: keeping control over the class while also allowing the pupil to develop and express his/her autonomy. The main difficulty in obtaining such a "balance" is that the conversational order of the class "naturally" tends to continually reproduce and legitimise the power of the teacher (Fele e Paoletti, 2003). Because it is hard to keep a balance between the need for control and the demand for autonomy, the tendency is to impose forms of control that inevitably limit or suppress pupils' instinct for autonomy. The conversational order is founded on a three-stage pattern: the teacher asking, the student responding and the teacher then evaluating. This triadic system therefore imposes an order founded on total teacher control of discourse and its production. It is a recurrent framework that characterises everyday classroom life (Fele and Paoletti, 2003).

The team-teaching approach has the potential to help break this rigid mode communication by introducing a more complex structure in relationships and division of power as well as a more dynamic life in the class.

Larkin observes that differences in school structure have a strong effect on the classroom environment. In his 1975 study he reported that "both the demographical and the internal organization of the school had strong

influences on the perceived classroom leadership styles of the teachers in it” (Larkin, 1975: 471).

Larkin examined how teachers’ leadership style is influenced by both “the community context of the school and some internal aspects of the school as an organization” (*ivi*), specifically comparing the leadership role played by teachers in self-contained vs. team-teaching classrooms. Larkin asserted that “the monotonic relationship between organizational structure and teacher-leadership style is very strong ... the data suggest that teachers’ leadership behaviour can be changed quite radically by changing the context in which they must teach. Administrative arrangements such as team-teaching and non-grading tend to have very important effects upon the leadership styles of the teachers” (*ivi*: 478). So, in team-teaching situations, teachers are less concerned about asserting themselves as leaders in classroom situations. In self-contained classrooms, on the other hand, once the teacher closes the door to the classroom, the development of his relationship with pupils is autonomous vis-à-vis any external influences (such as the school organizational climate). The self-contained classroom facilitates the (re)production of ideal conditions for the existence of the “classroom-sanctuary”.

Another problem analysed by sociologists is the definition and the assessment of ability, measured as and considered to be the result of a social construction. Classroom structure is the critical element that Simpson and Rosenholtz examine in terms of the opposition between the *unidimensionality and multidimensionality* of class life. The unidimensional structure of the classroom is likely to constrain and determine an institutional and unidimensional definition of ability on its students. Contrariwise, classes with a multidimensional structure enable and foster the development of different dimensions of ability (Simpson and Rosenholtz, 1986).

The sociology of school experience, developed by F. Dubet, gives us an interesting standpoint on the complexity of relational life and perspectives in school life. The life of a child may be divided into two dimensions that Dubet calls “the child” and “the pupil”, a distinction that stems from the separation of a child’s life into different areas of experience (family, school, peer group). This division is not only linked to the domain of different ‘learning’ roles, as attested by T. Parsons, but is also at the origin of the specific process that underlies an individual’s experience. The dynamic in the construction of personal individuality is founded on the

interplay between these different dimensions of experience: a nine/ten year old child will typically conceal aspects of his/her school life from parents, just as the “Pupil” will tend to hide their childlike side from the teacher. Different aspects of identity emerge in this process, where autonomy is asserted in the face of the absolute power wielded by teachers and parents. The dialectic between “infant” and “pupil” is reinforced by another force at work in the classroom life: when a teacher evaluates a child, the latter will form an opinion of the teacher and this judgement is mediated by the class-group (Dubet and Martuccelli, 1996: 81-82).

In the tradition of catholic pedagogy, emphasis has always been placed on the relation between teacher and child (Borghini, 1958), and the central role of teachers is viewed in terms of cognitive and emotive guidance (Divincenzo, 2009: 103), which tends to take focus away from other relevant sociological aspects, such as the social recruitment of primary school teachers. Jubin, for instance, looks at the phenomenon of the “teacher’s pet”, suggesting that the choice of favourite pupils is a matter of social selection (cit. in Dubet and Martuccelli, p. 82). The feeling of injustice can also develop in stronger pupils who will feel “victims” of positive discrimination because it focuses the teacher’s attention on the poor performance of a “bad” pupil.

The social dimension of class life is, moreover, crucial to the realisation of pupils’ autonomy and success in guiding them to moral and cultural conformity. According to Dubet and Martuccelli, the triangle pupil/group/teacher is essential for the personal development of a pupil: the class group stands before the teacher, and the autonomy of the pupil is the product of this confrontation (Dubet and Martuccelli 1996: 85-86).

The current reform being implemented by the Minister Gelmini is in line with the conservative ‘about turn’ in the Italian political-pedagogical debate and is likely to fortify the repressive discourse sustaining sanctions and punishment as the best means to *restore* a measure of “serious credibility” to schools. A first critical response to this attempt is to be found in the work of Dubet and Martuccelli, who show how abuse of punishment can lead to a weakening of institutional power, because the teacher’s authority, they argue, will diminish when castigation is endorsed. Punishment incites a reaction in the group, often resulting in an increase in the castigated group’s power (Dubet and Martuccelli, 1996).

The Pygmalion effect and labeling theory

The Pygmalion effect, also known as the "teacher-expectancy effect", is an example of self fulfilling prophecy, a process first analysed by Rosenthal e Jacobson (1968) that has since been widely applied in the fields of psychology and sociology (Rist, 1970, 1977).

It is a vicious circular process that has been observed within educational processes, as well as in other fields. In short, it refers to the fact that every pupil possesses certain "social qualities", as well as "academic qualities", and that a teacher's judgement of a pupil will rest on these two aspects. A number of factors will induce the teacher to form his/her own expectations of a pupil's ability and potential. A teacher's "expectancy" will typically not be impartial either in social or academic terms. H. Becker showed how teachers produce a definition of "bad" and "good" client-students and how this notion is determined by school norms and prevailing social norms (Becker, 1955)

In Italy, school teachers use the concept of "schooling" to define the good student that responds and satisfies school demands in terms of moral, cultural and behavioural conformity. "Schooled" students are those that succeed in taking on board these school norms. They have successfully undergone the socialization process that labels them as being institutionalized in a Goffmanian sense (Goffman, 1961). In short, the "schooled" pupil is a good client; the rest are bad ones.

Teacher's *expectancies* – as attested by the labelling theory – seem to condition pupils' behaviour and will either positively or negatively influence their achievements and perspectives. In its more radical version, the Pygmalion effect results in a veritable labelling process of the child, affecting the social construction of her/his social and academic identity.

The effectiveness of this process is founded on two basic but not wholly encompassing elements: the coherence and the persistence of the action. It is evident that these mechanisms are less likely to take effect when the school class is managed by a team rather than by a single teacher. The plurality of the co-presence ought ideally to limit the potentially harmful effects of a teacher's 'coherent' actions.

These mechanisms and processes are not the product of malevolence or vice in teachers, but are instead the consequences of the construction of social micro-processes in every-day reality (Berger and Luckman, 1966) – such as routines and classifications. Every-day life, in general and school

life in particular are founded on a *common sense* structuring of this reality. Thus, while it is a process that occurs without premeditated conscious devilry, an endemic lack of awareness and transparency with regard to educational processes within the school classroom will most likely facilitate the setting in of a “Pygmalion effect”.

It must be remembered that teaching is a profession that entails coming into contact with a radically diverse ‘public’. Teachers must meet both good and bad clients. The latter present a real problem for teachers obliged to deal with them every day of the school year; they make a teacher’s job more difficult, problematic and tiring and also force the teacher to dedicate more time and action to controlling rather than teaching. Bad clients also make it necessary for teachers to expend additional energy in the planning and organization of their activities, which can obstacle the accomplishment of their objectives. In other words, these students demand superhuman patience and a good measure of reflexivity from teachers.

Building a teaching community

More recent pedagogical debates are viewing the objective of the construction of schools as “educational communities” (Decimo Rapporto, 2008). It is a concept first developed within catholic pedagogy and is today broadening its influence on state schools. Indeed, there are a number of documents elaborated by state schools that use the concept of “educational community” or ones edited by trade union organisations using the same notion in opposition to the “entrepreneurial” model inherent in Mrs Aprea’s proposals. Today, this apparently fascinating concept has met with a broad consensus, despite its evident ambiguity.

It implicitly poses the objective of an educational monism founded on a consensus on values.

Does a similar consensus exist in Italian society today or is our society more pluralistic in its moral values? State schools manifest an internal diversification and pluralism that mirrors the diversity of the social environment. This pluralism constitutes both a risk and an opportunity: a risk, because the plurality of perspectives and values make it more difficult to create a consensus within the schools concerning educational objectives and methods (Hirshhorn, 1993); and an opportunity, because it represents an open door to a complex and plural world.

A concept less laden with metaphysical connotations is the notion of *teaching community*. The idea of a “teaching community” is not borne of any unified consensus on general values about the nature of *Man* and *Society* but has the rather more pragmatic and less pretentious goal of sharing professional values and objectives.

Does the team teaching approach facilitate the construction of a teaching community?

A good teaching team environment entails continuous negotiations and a *de facto* reduction of individualism. This dynamic mode of interaction is far better suited to cultivating the emergence of a teaching community than is the traditional individualistic notion of school teacher.

Pluralism is a fundamental attribute of the school as a political arena. Negotiation and conflict are to be expected but also constitute a risk, which is why schools today ought to view themselves as “communities” in a professional sense: i.e. a *professional community* founded on common sense about professional norms. A workable diversity can be attained by the fusion of the parts that allow for the greater growth of the whole system.

Such was the sense of reforms introduced in Italy a decade ago by Minister Luigi Berlinguer.

The creation of SSIS (School for secondary teacher training) as well degree courses for primary school teachers (*Corso di Laurea in Scienze della Formazione Primaria*) have attempted to create a professional corps with specific professional competencies. During their years of training, student teachers are given a grounding in the specific processes of socialization that enable the construction of a consensus on what a teacher’s role and duties should be (Oppo e Pitzalis, 2006). This is the basic condition required to create a professional teaching community and a renewed professional corps of competent staff in our schools.

In truth, the abolition of team-teaching has been motivated by the government’s intention to reduce the number of teachers. The first consequence of this is to block any turn-over and the introduction of newly qualified teachers. The teaching corps is thus destined to remain old, often unmotivated and under-qualified.

Conclusion

Some might argue that the reform advanced by Minister Gelmini focuses essentially on the idea that employing a single teacher is the best pedagogical approach for children in primary schools. In reality, the majority of families have chosen a school time-schedule of eight hours per day (40 hours per week), in which classes will be managed by two teachers. The other available options (30 or 27 hours per week) also demand a plurality of teachers assigned to each class. Only the “24 hours per week” option needs a single teacher, but only a small minority of families have opted for this.

So the metaphysics of this pedagogical option and – justifying the elimination of the team-teaching approach – does not in fact establish a real “single teacher” teaching model. On the contrary, such a perspective seems today to be unworkable because the very organization of modern schools demands the presence of a plurality of teachers. Indeed, the abolition of co-presence seems not so much a major pedagogical change as an incidental, residual outcome with a *post quem* justification.

This article has presented some of the sociological arguments in support of the team-teaching approach as opposed to the traditional one-teacher model.

The above arguments may be summed up by the idea of *reduction of risk*. It seems undeniable that the concrete dynamics of school life – as observed by sociologists – confirm the conviction that a class managed by a group of teachers will always be more transparent than a single teacher class.

Finally, dividing responsibilities among a group of teachers makes the classroom less opaque and will enhance and facilitate reciprocal control over professional conduct.

Overriding individualism is a marked characteristic of the teaching environment and teachers will tend to regard the classroom as a sanctuary. Opening the school-classroom and making teachers’ work more transparent ought to be a primary objective that can only be achieved through day-by-day efforts to reach this end. While team-teaching may not be the definitive solution, it does appear to be a *sine qua non* condition for containing and restraining the predominance of individualism.

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