

Everyday Multitasking, the Various Roles of the Head Teacher in Italy: An Ethnographic Study

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Rec date: Mar 16, 2016; Acc date: Mar 29, 2016; Pub date: Mar 31, 2016

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Abstract

This paper presents some of the results emerged from a recent ethnographic research into the Italian school world. Employing the shadowing technique, I followed four school managers (two men and two women) in four Italian secondary schools (North-East, North-West, South-East, and South-West). The different roles that the schools managers are compelled to 'perform' in their daily professional life are highlighted in this paper, reporting what has been observed in support of the proposed sociological interpretation. Employing a Goffmanian interpretative perspective, this paper shows how, because of the absence of an adequate staff to support their daily activities, head teachers are forced to perform different roles and interact on different social stages, although often lacking the skills to do so.

Keywords: Shadowing; School manager; Daily life; Roles; School

Presentation

In Italy, the secondary school head teacher has the duty to manage the structure assigned to him, as well as coordinating the different figures working in the school. He is responsible for numerous activities including the construction of the organization chart and the appointment of his closest collaborators; managing the relationships with the teaching and ATA (Auxiliary Technical Administrative, Technical Administrative Auxiliaries) staff (the caretakers and laboratory assistants), listening to the students' and parents' requests; monitoring the administrative-bureaucratic field and navigating the often conflictual and not very empathetic relationship with the local bodies and the ministerial offices.

The manager has an enormous penal, civil and administrative responsibility. He is accountable for the school's malfunction. He is as a captain in command of a ship sailing upon uncertain waters, depending on the territory considered: criticism and characteristics emerge according to the school's context, which could completely change as soon as the location changes (from one region to the next, but also from an urban-metropolitan context to a suburban one).

In a recently completed study, carried out for over a year (March 2014-May 2015), head teachers were studied on the field, observed and analysed during their activities and daily interactions. In order to observe and study the daily life of the head teacher, a comparative research has been set up. Four Italian schools were selected, from the North to the South of the peninsula, according to their typology: two scientific high schools—one in Turin, Piedmont, the other in Calabria, in the Cosenza urban area and two technical professional institutes—one in Veneto, in the Treviso province, the other in Puglia, in the suburbs of Bari. I stayed in each of these schools for a week, following the respective school managers (two men and two women) from Monday to Friday, six hours a day, from 8 am to 4 pm.

The scientific technique employed to carry out the investigation belongs to the field of sociology and anthropology: the shadowing, a type of participatory observation, which consists in 'being the shadow' of the subject under analysis [1,2], following all his movements, listening to his conversations and reporting all that has been observed [3].

This study is a contribution to the so-called "everyday life sociology", which focuses the attention on the habitual and routine behaviours of a subject observed within his context (professional, in my case). Much research into the daily life of the disparate subjects has employed the shadowing technique [4-8]. In my case, the main reference has been a study on the school undertaken twenty years ago, which represents a milestone for everyday life sociology: these are Marinella Scavi's 1989 observations and analysis, who followed two students, one in Rome and one in New York, each for one week, during their school hours [9]. Throughout this long year of research, I have followed the same method, benefiting from the availability and kindness of the head teachers, all of them aged between fifty-five and sixty-five years old, who agreed to have me as their shadow. I have tried to closely study their figure and to focus my attention on the multicolored school world, which, as an Impressionist landscape, varies according to its local context.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the material emerged from the study, focusing on a main theoretical starting point. A general hypothesis pertained to the apparent ability on the head teachers' part to play different roles during their professional activity. The hypothesis is that, because of the absence of a staff supporting the manager, he or she is compelled to play different roles and interact on different social stages.

Numerous sociological studies demonstrated that in daily activities, each of us plays multiple roles, wearing a mask accordingly [10-12]. However, the same rule does not necessarily apply to the professional sphere. And yet, this is exactly what happens to the head teachers observed, characterized by a skill/obligation to play different roles according to the situation they find themselves in and the person they

are interacting with. I have created a list of typologies summarising what has been observed.

The Mediator-Head Teacher

This is probably the main role played by the head teachers, who must mediate between the various requests coming from the teaching body, the ATA staff, the students, the parents, the union representatives, the external institutions. The mediation is necessary to end a diatribe between teachers, between collaborators, between teachers and collaborators, between the DGSA (Director of the General Services Administration, Head teachers of General Administrative Services) and the teachers, between the ATA staff members, between teachers and parents, between the parents and the school, the teachers and the students, the union representatives and the DGSA, between the ATA staff members and the DGSA, the institutions and the DGSA. The shadowing carried out with the head teacher of the agrarian and hotel management and catering school in Veneto exemplifies what has been stated.

Monday 27 October 2014. 12:00 pm. I had an appointment with two teachers specialized in teaching students with learning disabilities. They entered the office in silence, their heads lowered. The school head teacher invited them to express them, to tell her what the problem was and the two colleagues began their two-voice narration, supporting each other.

They complained about the lack of communication with the teacher of a year five class (In the Italian school system, the high school or liceo is structured over five years. The year we are referring to is, therefore, the final year). Specifically about the tense relationship between the teacher and one of the students affected by learning disabilities (whom the two teachers were assisting).

Head teacher: "Have you tried to talk with the teacher? To explain yourself? (She spoke in a calm voice, her hands on the desk, her body tending towards the interlocutors).

Teacher 1: "Yes, during the break, but with no success". (She lowered her face).

Teacher 2: (she struggled to gather the strength she had left. She seemed exhausted): "Head teacher, the teacher accused me of being a deceitful anarchist, all because I have apparently 'disturbed' him during a lesson, interacting with my student. However, I am assisting the student; I cannot be passive or stay silent. As I said, we have tried to clarify our position but without any success". (She was about to start crying).

H.: "We could try and find a solution by changing the timetable, provided this is approved by the class committee. They are the body authorized to make such changes". (The head teacher opened some drawers, perhaps looking for the class' timetable. The two teachers, with newly found courage, showed interest).

Teacher 2: "The teacher's behaviour is disrespectful towards my work and my profession". (She looked at her colleague. I started fearing an endless philosophical diatribe).

Teacher 1: "We are not 'one day support teachers.' We learnt how to tolerate the intolerable, but there is no way of communicating with him... and then the students... Our colleague does not have the skills, and we are speaking from a long class-based experience". (They spoke in unison. It created a strange effect. Had they been rehearsing the performance?).

H.: (firm but open to listen, as her look and body pose showed; never relaxed but always tending towards her interlocutors): "I can intervene if such criticism is presented in a written form. (There was a pause and traces of concern in the teachers' eyes]. In that case, my intervention could be more decisive". (Another pause. The teachers' started shifting in their seats, uneasily).

Teacher 1: (with an increasingly hesitant tone): "But I just wish for my professionally and work to be safeguarded ... Another type of collaboration is necessary, and I would like this to be made clear to the teacher...".

H.: "Well, then I could summon you all to my office in order to resolve the situation face to face".

The teachers did not respond to this offer, but started shifting the focus of the conversation on the dynamics of their relationship with the students they assisted.

The head teacher took notes on a pad, which stored reflections on various topics. She wrote with a stylographic, Aurora style, and pen. She was very attentive, actively listening, and only intervened on a few occasions. She invited the teachers to continue, to clarify, to express what they felt inside. The conversation lasted for about forty minutes, during which the teachers spoke nearly all the time and unfolded a series of other issues regarding the hours of teaching done, the ones still to teach, and projects to be undertaken which were submitted to the head teacher. The latter emphasized the drastic cuts and that there was always less funding; that now projects had to be undertaken exclusively out of passion (later she would also tell me: "I have made clear the severity of the economic situation to the teachers. I told them that, today more than ever, one must work out of passion"). An hour had nearly gone by and the head teacher seemed to have completed her task as mediator, persuading the two teachers. The talk slowly came to a close and they said goodbye.

The mediation must be ongoing in order to hold the complex social "fauna" of an educational institute together. In such cases, of course, the relational professionally characterizing the subjects is evident: from Veneto to Calabria, from Piemonte to Puglia, the head teacher is a social mediator *honoris causa*. He is sometimes endowed with an unexpected amount of patience and what I would call resilience, that is to say the ability to deal with situations of stress and tension, overcoming critical and difficult circumstances in order to transform them in experience to draw strength from in the future [13].

The Counsellor-Head Teacher

Many times, I have witnessed, from my privileged observation point usually located in a corner of the office, counselling sessions taking place. The head teacher metaphorically arranged the bed upon which lay students going through a relationship or family crisis; teachers dissatisfied with their work or dealing with domestic problems or an existential crisis because of their retirement; cover teachers on the verge of a nervous breakdown; parents complaining about the surrounding environment; ATA staff seeking attention. In Calabria, I have witnessed how a head teacher dealt with a student's mother.

Tuesday 24 February 2015. 12:30 pm. We entered the head teacher's office and he shut the door. He invited the mother to sit down. They sat opposite one another, at the main desk.

H.: "Please, I am all ears". (He welcomed her in).

M: "I am X's mother, of the IV Z class (The Roman numeral refers to the year and Z to the sezione or section. In the Italian school), she moved to this school this year. She is shy and quiet, speaks little in class and has difficulty making friends. Do you remember her?" (She seemed uneasy on the chair, and sat as if she were going to lose her temper any minute: the chest and the neck leaning forward, her movements accompanying her words, the bag in her hands).

H: "No, I cannot remember her. There are thousands of students here... But please, do carry on". (His expression was serious while he carefully listened, his hands clasped).

M: "My girl is Italian, even though she does not speak the Cosentian dialect (The dialect of the city of Cosenza) and is made fun of because of this. She speaks Italian because this is how I educated her. That's it! (The woman will adopt such attitude: she would emphatically make a statement and pause, as if waiting to see what impact her words would have on the head teacher. The latter would, however, always stay rather detached and careful not to fall into emotional traps). There are teachers—always women—who do not respect my daughter. Miss X, who feels like nothing or no one, can attack her, and insults students, both boys and girls, whom she does not like. How many complaints have you received about this teacher, who should be teaching a foreign language and struggles to speak her own? In addition, my daughter has a certificate of proficiency but for her she is 'not bad'. 'Not bad', obviously, because she does not like her. (The head teacher stood still, during yet another long pause).

And then there is Miss Y, the Italian teacher, and I am sure you know of all the complaints she has been the object of. She criticizes my daughter because she does not speak much. Why, is one compelled to speak? She criticizes my daughter for the way she dresses. Why, is she the one to determine the choice of clothing? This behaviour is unacceptable. Who does this woman think she is? Does she think she has a right to judge my daughter outside of the teaching context? (Her voice broke, as if starting to cry).

Then there is Miss Z, who complains about my daughter's low grades in written Latin while other students give better answers. They give better answers in the written tests because they cheat. My girl does not do it because that is what we taught her at home. That is what we told her: you never have to cheat; you have to grow and learn. This teacher, all the teachers, do not take care of my girl, teaching her how she can improve, staying beside her to help her grow. Why do they judge her? How dare they? If she is quiet, it does not mean she does not know the answers. I can't stand this anymore. If I came to you is because I don't know what would have happened if I had gone to them." (She dried her tears and seemed to have exhausted both tears and motivations).

H: "I will speak with the teachers. Personally. The situation will improve but, if you think it is appropriate, we could consider a change of class".

M: "I don't know... a change, you say?"

H: "Yes, we are still at the beginning of the second term, it is still possible".

M: "Let's see, I don't know. What matters is that you talk with the teachers".

H: "I will do it, do not worry". (He stood up, and brought the conversation to an end). She thanked and greeted the head teacher. He accompanied her to the door, which he had left open, looking at me,

seeking understanding. Then he said: "You see, the parents come to the head teacher instead of going to the teachers or the class coordinators. It should be the other way round: the head teacher should be the last option. Yet, I am the first they come to. The parents, today, no longer support the school in an educational sense, but they are the school's counterpart: they do not always agree with the school's work, but most of the time they share their children's work and this leads them to clash with the work of the school staff".

The method is always the same, regardless of the place: the head teacher lets the interlocutor talk, confide in him/her, and voice his /her inner demons. S/he listens, looks into the interlocutor's eyes, physically puts him/herself in a sympathetic pose, showing empathy (this may not be necessarily genuine, but the body is in a listening posture), just as a sociologist or psychologist would do in a counselling session. The head teacher hardly ever gives an indication on how to act, nor does he suggest the solution to the problem: it is not necessary. The 'patients' show their need to talk to the authority; see that the authority is ready to welcome them. Once they have unburdened themselves, they get up from their seats, looking relaxed, and thank the head teacher. S/he is listening and present. After all, s/he is invited to promote transformative processes: these are set in motion due to the possibility for confidential narration, which is received with sympathy, and attention towards the educational responsibilities.

As the head teacher of the school in Veneto told me in private: "I should put a sign outside the door saying 'Counselling sessions'".

The Lawyer-Head Teacher

External circumstances cause the head teacher to 'wear the robe'. There are two triggering factors: the dramatic increase of lawsuits undertaken by the teaching and ATA staff or the students' families against the school because of damages (including moral damages) which often have little economical recognition on the part of insurance companies; the small number of state lawyers available. This is how the head teacher-lawyer is born: he tries his best to memorize the constitutional acts in order not to cut a poor figure before the judge in the labor courts. Bari provides a good example.

Monday 2 March 2015. 9:30 am. Head teacher: "Today it is part of the head teacher's role to appear in court, because the state lawyers do not have enough available professionals to employ in the various lawsuits. They therefore appoint the head teachers. Whom could I send? A substitute? The administrative secretary? They do not have the suitable juridical profile and they know nothing about it, how can they participate? I myself am not adequately prepared, but I am the head teacher and this is how it works. They appoint me and I have to be there with the right documents, keep up to date with the court hearings calendar, etc.". (To sum up: the head teacher, among his many daily roles, wears the lawyer's mask as well. During my shadowing in Calabria, this characteristic had emerged, but here it acquired crucial importance. They are appointed to 'impersonate' lawyers and attend the hearings. It happens often, as I can observe by comparing my notes. The issue of competence seems to be completely ignored: how can a head teacher, with a background in literature or languages, have legal competence? Furthermore, he has other tasks, which do not include dedicating time to update citations or learn practices (from legal to engineering skills, considering my most recent observations) which are not, theoretically, within his sphere of interest). "Resorting to a judge used to be extremely rare and it did not concern the head teacher. Today, the state lawyers, which should support the schools, are

so occupied with lawsuits that they delegate the head teacher to appear before the judge because of his role as a 'head teacher' (today he is a head teacher, whereas yesterday he used to be a functionary). Formerly, the state lawyers carried out this task through private paid lawyers. Since the pay was removed, due to its being costly for the State, and the numerical reduction of the lawyers, it is our turn to appear in court. We go there, with little experience, trying our best to put together, or use, the legal motivations provided by the state lawyers. There is nothing else we can do and, during a cross examination, we can only say that 'this is the position of Public Administration'. Such situations are anything but rare. We could be called to court for all sorts of reasons: a child who is injured, a debate between teachers, or teachers and parents etc. There are a series of legal responsibilities we have not been properly trained for, and we use our own skills, trying to be as just as possible".

Between 11:30 and 13:30 the head teacher spent his time updating a court appearance for a lawsuit regarding an issue between two teachers, one regularly appointed, the other constituting the offended part (...). It was another example of a head teacher playing the lawyer's role: "I have to appear before the judge with this constitution and read it to him. This way, hear (he read the first lines out loud). As I was saying, the State does not have enough available lawyers and it assigns the task to legally represent the lawyers to the teachers".

As I have observed in Bari, the head teachers appear in court in person, representing the school they direct, substituting the state lawyers. This implies the acquisition of technical language, some familiarity with the world of jurisprudence, the scheduling of court hearings, much time to dedicate to updating and monitoring the current lawsuits, as well as keeping up to date with the state lawyers.

The Investigator-Head Teacher

Within the teaching and ATA (caretakers and administrative auxiliaries) staff selection process, it is the head teacher's responsibility to verify the truthfulness of what has been declared by the subjects upon signing the contract (previous career, medical certificates, disability certificates, etc). As it has been observed, during this process (which usually involves the head teacher and the administrative secretary), fake self-certifications are often found out, signed by different schools. This leads to a lawsuit, (not necessarily in court, but to be held with the unions' representatives) and a considerable waste of time in assigning the job. The checks done during the staff selection are often connected to employee training which is necessary as these may lack the required skills. Such was the case in Turin and Bari.

Turin. Wednesday 15 October 2014. 12:30 pm.

Meeting in the head teacher's office with the technical assistants. Eight people entered the room, together with the secretary. The head teacher announced the new duties, gave a paper to each, and asked that they be read carefully in order to discuss them together.

The secretary gave some technical information related to the server. The eight staff members were standing around the desk. The head teacher was standing too, highlighting clearly and systematically the issues regarding personal access to the computer: "The head teacher and secretary have the main responsibility as far as the data usage is concerned. In the case of a few days absence on your part, we access the account and create a new profile. When you are back to work, you can newly access it with your details. The PCs are not ours, so nothing personal can be installed. The profiles have been created so that

everyone will be able to use the Internet, but only the websites which are useful to the job, in order for spam and distractions to be avoided. Lists of useful websites will be created". (The complicity between the head teacher and the secretary is evident and, in terms of communication, very successful: they transmit the sense of being in a team, and competence, and also reassurance on the school's complex organizational system. They seemed to say, 'we are here for any problem you may have. You can trust us').

The head teacher asked whether there were any questions. One of her collaborators answered there were none, at least for the moment. This was followed by a discussion about software's and issues emerged the previous year, guided by the head teacher. The collaborators began arguing about attendances. The order was re-established by the head teacher: "You will have to help each other, but this does not mean the procedures will be shared, as you know how much work we have. Questions will come up later? I will tell you what I answered the parents: 'the best questions always come up later'. Do not worry: we will give you answers and we will hold meetings in order to discuss".

The conversation went on and information on technical procedures was exchanged. The head teacher continued: "Do not ever leave the office. If you need to have a break or make a phone call—which you are kindly requested not to have so often—arrange this among yourselves so that the office is not left empty". When the meeting came to an end, there was a friendly atmosphere.

I spent the last hour of observation together with the head teacher, discussing what a thorny and somehow absurd issue seemed to me. Besides the staff training, as I have just described, it is the school's responsibility and the head teacher's to check the documentation provided by the new assistant, as someone may claim a false family status or health conditions. This is what had happened to the school a few years ago, as I was told by the head teacher: she had found out that a laboratory assistant who had just been assigned to the school through the 104 Disability Tutelage Law, did not meet its requirements. The truth had later emerged. He had claimed to have a disabled daughter but after the head teacher's checks on the relevant documentation, it was found out that the girl was his partner's daughter and that her father was living together with her. Another case concerned a technical assistant, who had nearly made an instrument explode by connecting it to a plug three times more powerful than what it needed (he was stopped by the physics teacher).

Bari Thursday 19 March 2015. 12:00 pm. Once the teacher went out, the head teacher told me of the strange case of the cover teacher who wanted to accept two teaching offers. She had gone to the first school which had offered her a place and she had accepted it. A few hours later, she had done the same thing in the head teacher's school: "We only realized what had happened because of the communication with the DGSA and the secretaries. We asked the teacher for an explanation. She answered she had accepted both 'to be safe'. She then expressed regret over her choice and said she preferred our institute out of 'personal reasons'. Is it possible to work this way? You tell me: we are forced to check the declarations, certifications and documentations presented by the teachers and ATA staff. And I am not mentioning the 104 disability certificate. Soon everyone will claim one because everyone will have someone old at home to take care of".

The head teacher's directions may be ineffective against the appointment of a collaborator who is not competent enough. This is because in Italy, the selection of the school and ATA staff (caretakers and laboratory assistants) is done without CV evaluation, and is based

on the position covered by the subjects in a ministerial graded list. When selecting and appointing, the head teacher cannot evaluate the candidates' CV, but only 'pick' the subject who is appointed according to the list. The list itself is based on a rather old title scoring system. In Veneto, the situation was further complicated by the size of the institute, which also had a cellar and provided accommodation, and by the fact that some of the selected caretakers and laboratory assistants had never seen a cellar or a barrel in their life.

Conegliano Veneto. Thursday 30 October 2015.

During a conversation with the head teacher, I was told that, according to the law, the caretakers employed in the canteen are only required to possess the diploma title which makes them eligible for a specific grade list (for the cellar, farms etc.) but are, in fact, exactly like all the other caretakers working in Italian schools: those who welcome you to the school, who open and shut the classrooms or who take care of the corridors. This means that a collaborator, who was employed, for example, as an usher in another school, could be picked from the list and be appointed, in the new school, to the cellar. He will then have to adapt to the situation. Or, as the head teacher says: "... he will hopefully adapt. The truth is that you must adapt. You are lucky if you pick young people from the list, they may be more malleable, willing to learn about new roles. This is the case with the boy you have met: he has been willing to learn since the beginning and he has been working in the canteen for a while now. Until a few years ago, the teacher who has been monitoring the whole production process in the cellar-winemaking, maceration, bottling-was begging me not to send anyone to him, terrified of who may end up being assigned to him from the notorious list. He even preferred washing the barrels by himself!"

The 'External Expert'-Head Teacher

During my research, a deficient relationship between provincial state officials and public school emerged. Usually, the former should support the latter when carrying out technical tasks (building, IT, safety and road works etc.) However, this does not happen often and the school must provide for its needs autonomously. Therefore, when the designated state offices do not adequately perform their tasks, these become the head teacher's responsibility. I have observed different head teachers having to play various roles, such as engineer (in the case of the Calabrian school's renovation works, for example), or IT expert, and even fireman (such was the case in Puglia).

Calabria Tuesday 24 February 2015. 10:00 am. The head teacher informed me he had to reach the provincial office to meet the engineer and discuss the renovation project with him.

We reached the office, parked the car and went to the first floor, where the engineer was waiting for us. He started amending with the head teacher the economic plan and solving the issues related to the restructuring of part of the school. I notated some terms used during the long conversation (about an hour) held between the head teacher and the engineer, aided by two of his colleagues: contract remodeling, appointment date, competition, enterprise head office, deposit, guarantee, estimated assignment prohibition.

After an hour, they seemed to have agreed on a plan. They cordially said goodbye and agreed to speak again via e-mail and telephone with the compiled document.

In the car, on the way back, he explained he was taking care of the whole project even though it was complicated, as he had no engineering qualification: "Sometimes we are forced to substitute those

who should perform a certain task and we do it for the school's and the students' sake, but it is not one of our responsibilities. Look at what is happening these days, for example: because of the school's renovation project, the obligation to finish the works by August and the expenses report and certification by the 31st December, I had to ask for the classes to be transferred. If I wait for the local body to contact my colleague and ask him if he has free classrooms, if we can use them, etc. the academic year will pass, considering their slowness with such procedures. So, for the sake of the school and the students, us head teachers substitute those who should complete certain tasks in order to speed up the process. Clearly, many times the local body uses the good relationship between the head teachers to solve such problems: but the local body itself, owning the premises, should take care of everything, as the completion of the works, as well as the students not being held back during classes, is in its own interest.

This is another reason why I ask the Province engineers for help: they guide me and cooperate with me during the drafting of documents and the progression of the process. The responsibility is always mine, it is a complicated issue. One has to be careful. (I wondered how a head teacher, without any engineering competence, could take care of such a field. The ministry should have automatically employed an engineer who could deal with this aspect. The result is that the head teacher spent whole days studying engineering, instead of doing his job).

Puglia, Tuesday 3rd March 2015. 12:20.

The vice-head teacher came back. The head teacher insisted: "Excuse me, what do we have to do with the fire brigade?"

V.: "Head teacher, the engineer is coming, he will explain. He received the message, not you, that was the problem. See, that is the copy".

H.: "Sorry, but here I am reading that the message is addressed to the mayor and the prefect".

V.: "I don't know".

H.: (as he read some parts of the document): "I was explaining to him earlier (referring to me), that nursery and primary school should not be mixed up. Have they realized it only now?"

V.: "There is an issue with the fire safety doors and it is necessary to isolate the classes and the part where the nuns live (we were talking about the notorious third plex, which we had visited before). There are some common spaces. We must make the evacuation plan together with the engineer, who should be here shortly".

H.: "They should do it at the state technical office, not here".

V.: "They should... But they say they have no staff, that everyone is busy and they want you to sort it out".

H.: (he turned towards me): "I have to think about getting a technical plan together and division of the premises, as if I were a fireman or an expert. How many tasks should the school head teacher perform?"

(His words remained unanswered. The vice-head teacher had the expression of someone who has been through many of such situations. I was left speechless, and continued taking notes).

In such cases, it is possible to observe the lack of synchronization between state offices and the school, with the latter's necessity to substitute them or 'beg' them to perform their functions. Such critical

situation seems to me to be characteristic of Southern Italy, as the next typological figure will show.

The Pilgrim-Head Teacher

The head teachers of schools in the South of Italy are particularly compelled to play such role. From what has often been observed in Southern Italian schools, offices and state bodies must be 'stimulated' to perform their support functions in the school. The case of the renovation of the Calabrian school or that of the new construction works to be undertaken in the school in Puglia is an example. Council and provincial state offices seem, in part, to be uninterested in the school's necessities and in monitoring the structures. At that point, it becomes the head teacher's duty to personally go to the designated office and intervene, usually after having made various phone calls without having had any response.

Puglia, Thursday 19 March 2015. 8.00 am.

The 'new' part of the school had recently been renovated by the Government after much insistence on the head teacher's part (once again, the relationship with the state bodies emerges. While in the North of Italy the bureaucracy seems to work mainly through the official channels—the state body responds to the head teacher's request for intervention and takes charge of the request—in the South, such process is not very successful and the head teacher's 'pilgrimage' to the state body, with the aim of obtaining attention and for his request to be hopefully satisfied, is common. The head teacher's query is clearly on behalf of the school and the students, not out of personal interest. The head teacher's words on the 'peculiar' relationships found in the South are very clear: "Yes, this is the situation. I realized it years ago, when I was appointed in central Italy. My colleagues in the South, who became head teachers in the North, were surprised by the fact that the formal, and therefore written, requests addressed to the council, were rapidly met. On the other hand, south of Rome, this type of written request would be made various times, but you would then have to go knock on the office door in order to receive interest, in the hope of starting something, as if such request were to the head teacher's personal advantage when that is clearly not the case. Today, the situation is the same: one out of fifty of the various requests which we formally present is satisfied. We have to beg, and more than once, as the local bodies always state that they do not have enough money. I do not know to what extent that is true or not. It is probably partly true, but they could make an effort and manage the situation in a more balanced way since the beginning of the year, in order to satisfy as many bodies as possible).

Calabria, Friday 27 February 2015. 9:00 am.

We went back to the Province office where we were on the second day of shadowing, in order to solve yet another contract problem: the definitive performance bond which is not complete. If it is not handed in, the contract is void and the works cannot be submitted. The contract must be also underwritten by the person responsible for safety in order for the works to be submitted.

We remained in the engineer's office for an hour and a half, during which the phone was continuously ringing, in search of an expert to solve the problem. The engineer and the head teacher discussed technical issues using technical terms. (I greatly admired the head teacher's effort to ask questions and request an explanation on themes which clearly do not pertain to his sphere of competence, which will become his responsibility once the contract is submitted).

These head teachers are often forced to ask the state for what is due to them: interventions towards the school which are, by law, the state's responsibility. A marked difference between Northern and Southern Italy emerges here: in the North, the formal relationship between head teachers and institutions is more effective as, once the official intervention request message has been sent, the appointed body immediately takes charge of it. In the South, on the other hand, friendship, if not even patronage, seems to be operating, causing the head teacher to beg the body for its intervention. According to the law, the opposite should be the norm: the body should monitor the situation of the school and propose to the head teacher different intervention options or, in any case, promptly and formally respond to the head teacher's requests or questions. Such ambiguous relations are highlighted in various historical-sociological studies [14,15]

What would then happen if the head teacher of a Southern school were not to have the right connections, the right 'friends', within the state body and thought it more appropriate to only have a formal, institutional communication? Would the school be left alone? What is at stake here is the growth and health (as well as safety) of the future generations, and it does not seem appropriate that the one described above should be the school's operational mode.

The Mendicant-Head Teacher

However similar to the previous figure, this role directly concerns the issue of the 'voluntary financial contribution' which every school requests from each student's family. In this case as well, a great difference between North and South emerges and the southern head teachers are the ones walking the tightrope in order to obtain from the parents at least part of the contribution. This is a sum of money established each year by the school board, contributing to various services within each school: insurance, attendance books etc. Being a 'voluntary' contribution, as the Ministry itself has often emphasized, many families in the South refuse to pay it. This is also due to the economical problems in the area. If we consider that the contribution requested in the South is half of that requested, by the same schools, in the North, and that, unlike in the North, foundations or private bodies from which to obtain funding to buy equipment or support new educational activities are lacking, it is easy to see the widening of the gap between the two contexts. The students are the ones paying the cost of this, as their schools are often not able to offer a great variety of educational activities or modern equipment.

Piedmont, Monday 13 October 2015. 13:30 pm.

The head teacher told me about the 'notorious' financial contribution that the schools ask from the families: this is not a tax, it is a voluntary contribution. She told me that previously, in the same year, she had sent the families a letter in order to clarify that, obviously, the school benefits from such contribution, but it is not compulsory for the families to pay it. She printed the letter for me:

Dear parents,

The Liceo Scientifico XXX, as decided by the n. X School Board, confirmed the sum of XXX euro to be contributed voluntarily every year at the beginning of the student's enrolment. The contribution includes the set compulsory expenses of the school on behalf of the parents and those in support of the formative offers, the technological innovations and works of small maintenance.

The 1/6 part, amounting to XXX, of this sum, corresponds to the compulsory expenses (insurance, student's personal grade booklet,

final results printing costs) and the rest, a voluntary contribute, will finance different projects aimed at the students according to the criteria described in the formative offer published on the school's website.

The families are, therefore, encouraged to give a contribution to the expenses of the school on their behalf and, considering the value of the voluntary contribution in order to keep the quality of the projects high, to contribute the full amount.

The voluntary contribute is controversial, as I learnt later. In the liceo scientifico it amounts to a sum above 100 euros.

Calabria, Monday 23rd February 2015. 10:55 am.

The head teacher told me about the 'card' the students need in order to use the photocopiers (each student is allowed about one hundred copies per year). Often, the school has to anticipate the money for the voluntary contribution (about fifty euros) as the families do not pay within the deadline. While I was in the office, discussing the contribution, the phone rang. The head teacher had a brief conversation with the engineer he was looking for earlier. We then resumed our conversation. "In the past, everybody used to pay. Since the Minister insisted on the contribution being voluntary, various families believe they do not have to pay it, so I ask the families who do not want to pay it or who are under financial strain, to at least pay the basic expenses."

Puglia, Monday 2 March 2015. 13:00 pm.

The head teacher looked at me, as if reflecting on something. He opened a topic already discussed in previous shadowing sessions: "It is better to have external funds as the school's own funds are decreasing year by year. And when it comes to the family's contribution, there is a big difference between North and South. It is a serious problem. I have spent some time in Verona, for training courses: there I noticed how some schools asked a 200-250 euros voluntary contribution. My colleagues, eight, nine or ten years ago, had all the necessary equipment. We are asking for 60 euros, for the economical-touristic sector, which mainly uses, equipment. In the other school, we ask for 90 euros because we have equipment and chemistry and physics laboratories. In the agrarian and hotel management and catering institute, as well we ask for 90 euros, which we need for supplementary help for the kitchen training. In our territory, these sums are considered very high, and the Ministry does not help us, because it publically states that the contribution is voluntary and it strengthens the national belief that this may be just the head teacher's request. This is not true, because this is money that will benefit the students and these sums will be declared, categorized and certified: there cannot be any fraud. The Ministry supports the families stressing that, until sixteen years of age, school is compulsory and whether the parents contribute or not, it will be the same.

In the South everything is more complicated. We do respect the families, we are willing to extend the payment deadlines, but we are only asking for 60 euros a year, after all. It does not seem to me an unreasonable sum, considering the average daily expenses. We always stay below the sum we should reach: we obtain the sixty/seventy per cent of voluntary contributions, about 60 euros. The schools, which belong to the lower middle class, are penalized, because they receive lower contributions and have fewer possibilities. Those who pay for this are the students who have less possibility to use equipment and services than their colleagues in the Northern schools"

The difference in the quantity of voluntary contribution reveals a territorial gap between Northern and Southern Italy in terms of services offered to the students: for example, with the voluntary contributions, the students and staff are provided with wifi and counselling. Such services are unthinkable in the south because of the lack of financial resources.

Conclusions

Finally, the shadowing undertaken in the course of my fieldwork supports what has been argued initially: the school head teacher in Italy is compelled to play different roles depending on the situation. This mainly occurs because of the absence of support on the part of the state institutions whose task it would be to work beside the head teacher in the management of the school, substituting him when the head teacher lacks the skills and training to intervene. In Goffmanian terms, we have seen how the school-ship's "captain" is forced not only to wear many masks, but also to play various roles which are often very far from the main responsibilities of his profession.

The school head teacher appears as a matryoshka doll, within which many characters are found and performed by a multitasking subject who generally does not have the competence, and the obligations, to do so.

Acknowledgments

This paper has benefited from extensive research I conducted during my 2014 and 2015 Giovanni Agnelli Foundation grant. Andrea Gavosto and Gianfranco De Simone helped me tremendously during my studies. I have extensively discussed these topics with, and I am now in debt to, Gabriele Balbi, Giovanni Cerulo, and Chiara Giorleo.

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