



Space of Relationships.

The Professional Activity of the Italian Public School Head¹

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Abstract

This paper presents some of the results emerged from a recent ethnographic research into the Italian school world. Mainly employing the shadowing technique, I followed four school heads (two men and two women) in four Italian secondary schools (located in North-East, North-West, South-East, South-West). The different roles that the school heads 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 Goffman’s interpretative perspective, this paper shows how, because of the absence of an adequate staff to support their daily activities, school heads ‘are forced’ to perform different roles, although often lacking the skills to do so.

Keywords: shadowing, school head, everyday life, Goffman, Bourdieu.

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1. Presentation

In Italy, the secondary school head has the duty to manage the structure assigned to him, as well as co-ordinating 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 (*Ausiliari Tecnici Amministrativi*, 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 [SERPIERI, GRIMALDI 2015; BARZANÒ 2010]. 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), school heads 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 school head, 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 [QUINLAN, 2008; CZARNIAWSKA, 2007], following all his movements, listening to his conversations and reporting all that has been observed [ELLIS, 1991].

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 most disparate subjects has employed the shadowing technique [GILLIAT-RAY, 2011; BRUNI, 2005a, 2005b; BOURGOIS, 2003; HUMPREYS, 1970]. 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 Sclavi'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 [SCLAVI, 1989]. Throughout this long year of research, I have

followed the same method, benefiting from the availability and kindness of the school heads, 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 multi-coloured school world which, as an Impressionist landscape, varies according to its local context [DORAN 2015; WOLCOTT 1973].

The aim of this paper is to analyse the material emerged from the ethnographic study, focusing on a main theoretical starting point. A general hypothesis pertained to the apparent ability on the school heads' part to play different roles during their professional activity. The hypothesis is that, because of the absence of a staff supporting the manager, he 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 [GOFFMAN, 1971, 1963, 1959]. However, the same rule does not necessarily apply to the professional sphere. And yet, this is exactly what happens to the school heads 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.

2. The mediator-school head

This is probably the main role played by the school heads, 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 *dsga* (*Direttore dei Servizi Generali Amministrativi*, School head 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 *dsga*, between the ATA staff members and the *dsga*, the institutions and the *dsga*. The shadowing carried out with the school head 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 invited them to express themselves, 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 class³, specifically about the tense relationship between the teacher and one of the students affected by learning disabilities (whom the two teachers were assisting).

School head: “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].

Teacher1: “Yes, during the break, but with no success”. [She lowered her face].

Teacher2 [she struggled to gather the strength she had left. She seemed exhausted]: “School head, the teacher accused me of being a deceitful anarchist, all because I have apparently ‘disturbed’ him during a lesson, interacting with my student. But 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 school head opened some drawers, perhaps looking for the class’ timetable. The two teachers, with newly found courage, showed interest].

Teacher2: “The teacher’s behaviour is disrespectful towards my work and my profession”. [She looked at her colleague. I started fearing an endless philosophical diatribe].

Teacher1: “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].

Teacher1 [with an increasingly hesitant tone]: “But I just wish for my professionalism 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 school head took notes on a pad, which stored reflections on various topics. She wrote with a stylographic, Aurora style, 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

³ 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.

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 school head. 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 economical 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 school head 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 professionalism characterizing the subjects is evident: from Veneto to Calabria, from Piemonte to Puglia, the school head 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 [see GOUSSOT, 2014].

3. The counsellor-school head

Many times I have witnessed, from my privileged observation point usually located in a corner of the office, counselling sessions taking place. The school head 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 break down; parents complaining about the surrounding environment; ATA staff seeking attention. In Calabria, I have witnessed how a school head dealt with a student’s mother.

Tuesday 24 February 2015. 12:30 pm.

We entered the school head’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 class⁴, 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].

⁴ The Roman numeral refers to the year and Z to the *sezione* or section. In the Italian school system, the classes are arranged in sections, each of them corresponding to a letter.

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 dialect⁵ 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 school head. 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? And my daughter has a certificate of proficiency but for her she is ‘not bad’. ‘Not bad’, obviously, because she does not like her. [The school head 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].

And 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 school head. 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 school head instead of going to to the teachers or the class coordinators. It should be the other way round: the school head should be the last option. And yet, I am the first they come to. The parents, today, no longer support the school in an educational

⁵ The dialect of the city of Cosenza.

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 school head lets the interlocutor talk, confide in him/her, voice his 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 school head 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 school head. 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 school head of the school in Veneto told me in private: "I should put a sign outside the door saying 'counselling sessions'".

4. The lawyer-school head

External circumstances cause the school head 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 school head-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.

School head: "Today it is part of the school head'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 school heads. Who 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 school head 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 school head, 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 school head, 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 school head. Today, the state lawyers, which should support the schools, are so occupied with lawsuits that they delegate the school head to appear before the judge because of his role as a ‘school head’ (today he is a school head, 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 school head 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 school head 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 school heads 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.

5. The investigator-school head

Within the teaching and ATA (caretakers and administrative auxiliaries) staff selection process, it is the school head’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 school head 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 school head's office with the technical assistants. Eight people entered the room, together with the secretary. The school head 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 school head was standing too, highlighting clearly and systematically the issues regarding personal access to the computer: "The school head 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 school head 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 school head 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 and issues emerged the previous year, guided by the school head. The collaborators began arguing about attendances. The order was re-established by the school head: "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 school head 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 school head, discussing what seemed to me a thorny and somehow absurd issue. Besides the staff training, as I have just described, it is the school's responsibility – and the school head'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 school head: 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 school head'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 school head 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 school head's school: "We only realized what had happened because of the communication with the *dsga* 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 school head'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 school head 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 school head, 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 school head 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".

6. The 'external expert'-school head

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 school head's responsibility. I have observed different school heads 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 school head 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 school head 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 school head and the engineer, aided by two of his colleagues: contract remodelling, 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 email 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 school heads 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 school heads 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 could a school head, without any engineering competence, 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 school head spent whole days studying engineering, instead of doing his job].

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

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

V.: “School head, 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 school head perform?”

[His words remained unanswered. The vice-school head 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.

7. The pilgrim-school head

The school heads 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 are 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 school head’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 school head’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 school head’s request for intervention and takes charge of the request – in the South, such process is not very successful and the school head’s ‘pilgrimage’ to the state body, with the aim of obtaining attention and for his request to be hopefully satisfied, is common. The school head’s query is clearly on behalf of the school and the students, not out of personal interest. The school head’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 school heads 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 school head’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 school head discussed technical issues using technical terms. [I greatly admired the school head'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 school heads 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 school heads 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 school head 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 school head different intervention options or, in any case, promptly and formally respond to the school head's requests or questions. Such ambiguous relations are highlighted in various historical-sociological studies [DINN, 2001; SCHNEIDER, 1998; LUMLEY ET AL., 1997]

What would then happen if the school head 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.

8. Conclusions

Finally, the shadowing undertaken during my fieldwork supports what argued initially: the School Head in Italy is compelled to play different roles basing on the situations. This mainly occurs because of the absence of support from the institutions whose task would be to work beside the School Head in the school management, substituting him when the school head lacks skills and training to intervene. Using Goffman's terms, we have seen how the school-ship's "captain" is forced not only to wear many masks, but also to play various roles that are often very far from the main

responsibilities of his profession. The School Head appears as a *matryoshka* doll, within which many characters are interpreted by a multitasking subject who generally does not have the competence and not even the obligations to do so.

In this regard, using Bourdieu's theory of fields [1996], I would consider each individual studied institute as a school field, that is a space of relationships [de MAURISSENS et al. 2016] within which there are several agents, i.e. subjects who are forced to interact with each other for the operation of the institute they work for. The image is that of the magnetic field, where the particles are in constant motion and cannot stop moving.

These agents differentiate according to the degree held, the roles recited within the school field (but also externally) and the *habitus* that characterizes them, that is to the biographical dispositions and characteristics that make each subject unique and therefore different from the others. Using Bourdieu's terms I can say that the difference between the subjects can be measured basing both on the different type and quantity of capital held - social, cultural and economic one - [BOURDIEU 1986], and the structure of relationships that the subjects build (mainly within the school field) using capital and habitus, as well as basing on the goals that they aim at achieving. In this theoretical space, agents have stakes to win (role playing, fund allocation, recognition forms, etc.) and, therefore, they struggle against each other apparently or latently: they are therefore forced to confront with each other, interact and reach agreements in order to achieve their daily goals. I therefore see the school as a field of forces that imposes its needs on the agents who work there and, at the same time, a battlefield within which agents deal with different means and ends depending on their position in the field structure, thus contributing to preserving or transforming the structure.

In this way, role-playing games and power games arise between the various agents who live in the school field, keeping in mind, however, that the School Head is thus the largest particle of the field meaning the agent holding the greatest power in terms of resources to be used in achieving the objectives set, as well as the main responsibilities inherent in the existence and the proper functioning of the field itself and of the other agents present therein.

It should also be borne in mind that the School Head has the task and authority to interact with and respond about his work with external agents: primarily those dealing with the management of the school system (provincial and regional school offices, local authorities, the Ministry), secondly the ones who care about the students (parents-families) and "invade" the school field by asking (very) often hearing to the School Heads. This necessary opening of the field, as well as its permeability to decisions coming from outside, make the School Head's work subject to contingency and unpredictability.

To conclude, the analysis that emerges from the field tells us that there is a strong imbalance in terms of space and time between the two roles provided by the legislator: that of educational-didactic leader obscured - if not erased - from responsibility of

Massimo Cerulo
Space of Relationships.
The Professional Activity of the Italian Public School Head

administrative duties of the School Head-Manager. The ethnographic research raises subjects that are overwhelmed by administrative commitments and are therefore unable to make room for the purely didactic field, which is often delegated to collaborators. If this is the case for systemic shortcomings or lack of will of individual subjects it is not easy to say: on the other hand, it seems to me, that in the view of the legislator, the other roles the School Head is forced to recite in his/her professional daily life are not taken into consideration; roles that, as reported by the observations, seem to fall on the School Head's shoulders without his/her will being able to oppose it.

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