An operative model of team work in the Scholastic system: school as a promoter of competences and related social, health and clinical repercussions.

ANTONIO IUDICI
Department of Philosophy, Education, Sociology and Applied Psychology of Padua (FISPPA), University of Padova, Italy.

ELEONORA BRAGA
Psychological Counseling (Melzo, Milano), Soc.Coop. Dialogica (Milano), Italy

Abstract

Considering recent social and, coherently, legislative changes, the school, as an institute of educational professionals, must recognize one common objective by way of a common practice should it realize maximum effectiveness; each professional (teachers, senior figures, managerial staff, students, and families) must generate a transition from a culture of “self-referential” (i.e. focused on personal beliefs and operative methods) to a culture of “team work” (i.e. focused on how roles interact toward a shared aim) becomes strategic. This paper will present an operative method, known as project (P.R.O.M.O.S.S.I., Promoting an Organizational Model of Team work in the Scholastic System), in which will form the basis of how this transition can be achieved by each professional, and thus the school.

The methodology P.R.O.M.O.S.S.I supports the development of an interactions net, coherently with the principles of development of competencies and intervention portability by the organization. The following actions have been defined: organizational consulting to management and staff roles, training for teachers, a peer tutoring project, support to the class councils, training in a working team for all the peer-tutors of the school, coaching for the role of the referring teacher of the tutors. The results point out that the effectiveness of a school is realizable according to the responsibilities of all roles, including parents and students. Moreover, they allow the creation of a permanent condition of sharing strategies and operational modalities and activate an assumption of responsibility by students to facilitate the formative distance of the other students.

Keywords: team work, development competencies, school, peer tutoring, education

Introduction

Italian schools are in a very difficult situation at present and it is due, in large part, to heavy reductions of National Government investment, and, as well, the continuous shifts in social, political and economic situations that tend to abandon the importance of education which has ultimately led to an increasingly popular belief that school is useless, and thus a waste of time. Finally, it is due to Italy’s very recent large-scale influx of immigrants students into its local schools that the country is simply not sufficiently equipped to manage. This particular situation has caused a considerable differentiation among student bodies (the local-, foreign-, and learning disability diagnosis student bodies) to arise.

In fact, in synch with reflections expressed by Lyon et al. (2003, 2001), Ziegler et al. (2005), Fuchs et al. (2003), Vaughn et al. (2003) in the matter of complex learning disabilities, schools presently have to face a new kind of accountability: teachers have to be able to give combined and adequate answers, as argued also by Chard et al. (2002), Gersten et al. (2001), Vaughn et al. (2000), Sleeter (2001).

Simultaneously working on school is fragmenting in multiple individual experiences of the teachers and in many different interventions on “cases,” neglecting the essential dimension of class group and of teacher teams. These modes of intervention, although could be useful for specific
situations, are not always transferable or estimable concerning their effectiveness given that they are produced and used by single teachers for single “cases.” It is thus that a school’s potential to impact student education with maximum effectiveness is largely wasted. Therefore, a school needs new operative methods that are able to develop precise competencies of team work at different levels, and between the various staff bodies, (i.e. between managerial staff and teachers, between teachers, teachers and parents, and teachers and students).

CONCEPTUAL REFERENCES

Current Legislation

Concerning the present regulatory and social framework of Italian schools, and taking into account their overall aims, the Board of Supervisors (MIUR, 2007a) about the study plan for pre- and elementary schools gives the following summary: “In a brief period of time, we have lived the transition from a relatively stable society to a constantly changing one. This new situation is ambivalent: for each person, for each community, for each society, both risks and opportunities proliferate. The context in which school is deeply included is presently more abundant of cultural stimulus, but also more debatable. Currently scholastic learning is just one of the multiple educational experiences that children and adolescents live and scholastic contexts are often not necessary to develop specific skills. Exactly for this reason, school can't abdicate to its task to make sure that students become able to attribute a precise sense to the variety of their experiences, in order to reduce the fragmentation and the episodic nature that otherwise risk to characterize their lives”.

Therefore the institutional aim of “education instruction” becomes “to promote the competence to give a meaning” concerning pre- and elementary schools, and “to promote citizenship competencies” concerning junior and senior high schools, in particular regarding the elevation of school regulatory requirements to ten years. Therefore, school does not represent the only agency of knowledge anymore, and distribution of a unique culture and programmatic knowledge no longer answers to the needs of the various communities and of the entire country.

By virtue of this complexity of social and circular relational plight, legislation about scholastic institution autonomy has represented a precise cultural choice that considers planning and flexibility as the two elective strategies; “in order to pledge the education achievement, coherently with the general purposes and aims of education system and with the need to improve the efficacy of teaching and learning process” (DPR, 1999).

Another reference is the law n. 296 of the 2006 wherein, “compulsory education must allow the acquisition of relevant knowledges and competencies for curricula, for the first two years of upper secondary education institutions” (G.U., 2006).

This legislative reference is associated with the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December, 2006 (EU, 2006, p. 1-2) on key competencies for lifelong learning. The European Parliament and The Council of the European Union “Recommend that Member States develop the provision of key competences for all as part of their lifelong learning strategies, including their strategies for achieving universal literacy, and use the ‘Key Competences for Lifelong Learning — A European Reference Framework’ in the Annex hereto as a reference tool”.

D.M. 139 is an essential regulatory point of reference to comprehend Italian schools, as it points out that the educative aim of the schools regards a development of citizenship competencies. More precisely “Compulsory education is characterized, therefore, for the consistency of knowledge and skills acquired .... the key competences outlined are as follows: communication in mother tongue, communication in foreign languages, mathematical competence, basic skills in science and technology, digital competence, learning to learn, social and civic competences, spirit of initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression” (MIUR, 2007b).

School as an Organization

In relation to the previously described socio-cultural transformations and the related regulatory specific applications, precise and detailed training for managerial roles and teachers has not been done for the diffusion of an organizational culture in terms of a “sharing of aims” and “competences of role”. 
The potentials given by scholastic autonomy prescription are often reduced to good practices or a summary adjustment (e.g., the scholastic time-table and five-day week). Otherwise it could be necessary to conduct a precise reflection about the adequate ways to optimize the management of teaching and learning processes. In particular, training for teachers on the basis of principles is considered as though a right-obligation but a precise system for continuous training for the strategic role of teachers is not produced. This lack could entail that those who work in the school system follow their own aims and goals that are based on personal beliefs (in addition, personal thoughts, opinions, judgements, and affirmations oriented to sanction how reality is) that do not permit them to pursue shared aims of their role (Pajares, 1992). In fact this personal methodology leads to operate only using common sense arguments, which generate heavy repercussions on pursuits of overall institutional aims. Doing a parallelism with the “organism” theoretical construct, we can consider teachers of a school as the “teachers body,” that is the set of elements that contribute to a functioning of the organism itself. So, it becomes obvious that since each element pursues personal aims, there will be heavy repercussions on every part of the organism and its general functioning. In the same way students that are considered the student body in the mentioned parallelism act through the same processes and behave using cultural modalities of common sense that are often produced and maintained as a conflict and opposition status. In this sense, they are not complementary to the modalities used by teachers to pursue the scholastic aims and they are facilitated in this; by the current condition of asymmetric relationships among the roles of school and by a fragmentation in multiple parts of the teachers body.

In this sense, presumption, emulation, and victimization behaviours among students become the most widespread modalities to relate to each other. This implies that students cannot use school as a unitarian reference to develop their education. Taking this into consideration, many critical situations, such as the desertion of school, isolation, and stigmatization are ascribable to a non-sharing, common method in terms of interaction modalities between all roles making up a scholastic organization.

Most recent sector literature has worked largely on this matter. As Kats (2010) points out, teachers must not be considered as singularities, separated by scholastic system, and autonomously effective. Furthermore, Sheldon et al. (2011) and Jourdan et al. (2011) highlight the relevance of scholastic and managerial staff, teachers, and the involvement of parents and the community in which the school is situated as aspects that contribute to the scholastic success of students.

The effectiveness of a school comes to be connected with an organizational system in which operative modalities acted out by each role are related to the modalities used by the others, effectively contributing to the success of the entire organization in order to successfully pursue a common aim (Barr et al. 1988; Bryk et al. 1988).

In fact, when considering a school as an organization, with an institutional purpose and with roles that constantly interact with one another, it becomes clear that the more each role (teachers, managerial roles, students, and families) operates sharing a common aim, and modalities and practices, the more effective the entire organization will be (Judici, 2014a). The result of non-shared modalities between teachers has direct consequences on students, as shown by the social emergence of scholastic dispersion.

**Co-Operative Work in School**

Consequently, with the formative aim to develop citizenship competences (MIUR, 2007b), it becomes necessary to promote interaction modalities that are oriented toward making and managing the transition from an individual culture, based on its own beliefs and personal interventions, to a co-operative or team work culture oriented in interaction modalities between the various roles toward a shared purpose.

In this regard, social psychology has largely worked on theories about functionality of group work (e.g. Levine & Moreland 1990, Mc Grath, 1984). Progressively, scientific advancement has led to the conceptualization of “team work” as an organizational model that is based on operating using external to individual references with delegated aims and shared operative practices, useful to increase the effectiveness of the organization (Stevens et al., 1994; Thomas & Pender, 2008). As school is an
organization, team work is also transferable in this field. In fact, the related sector literature highlights that efficacy and success of schools are strictly connected with active collaborations between managerial roles and teachers, who create the adequate conditions and situations to achieve the scholastic success of students (Newmann et al., 1989; Marks & Printry, 2003). Moreover, the same roles have to be able to create and develop collaborative relationships with students’ families, considering the school as a resource within a specific community; its territory, within a cultural context, has to be known and understood in respect to its peculiar and various aspects (Epstein, 2001).

As an extension of the track heretofore described, the proposal of the present article proceeds as a development of the reflections up to this point reported, presenting an operative model that schools can refer to. A group of teachers that works on the planning of cooperative groups, oriented in promoting a sense of belonging and mutual dependence in scholastic work and positive interactions within the class group, has to improve the competencies of planning and team work. In fact, a teacher team, in interventions with students, can dramatically increase its efficacy when it operates as a unique identity addressing the class group. Differently, when a teacher addresses students as an individual speaker, he or she risks modesty in promoting effective cooperative group intervention. It implies that it is necessary to structure interventions and planning projects in school, creating coordinated work in reference to the specific competencies of each role.

Peer Tutoring

The term peer tutoring refers to a system of the development of knowledge based on the interactions of help that is generated from students with different skills. It is now established from the scientific belief that the use of peers can facilitate the learning process (Sinclair & Beverley, 1989; Waliski & Carlson, 2008). This is also based on epistemological contributions of authors such as Piaget and Vygotsky and the concept of “interdependence between individuals and social processes in the generation of knowledge” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). According to Vygotsky, social interactions with peers offers countless opportunities for the development of knowledge in fostering a child’s cognitive development and affective states (Vygotsky, 1978; Kozulin, 1998; Hogan, Ettz & Tudge, 1999). According to Piaget, social interactions involve an ongoing evaluation of their competencies, in order to produce higher levels of reasoning and learning (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). In general terms, this methodology can be inserted as part of the methods of cooperative learning, while being used in different ways according to the different authors who care for them and the institutions in which it is implemented (Topping, 1996). Some authors (O’Donnell & King, 1999) prefer to use the term collaboration in the broader and less defined roles. Others distinguish between cooperation and collaboration (Kneser & Ploetzner, 2001). In some schools, the methodology of peer tutoring is an integral part of the educational program and it is applied in all classes of the school. In other schools, the peer tutoring is applied only for one year, or is a personal initiative of a teacher (Topping, 1992). The methodology is applied both with respect to the teaching of certain subjects such as math, language, and reading (Ezell et al., 1994; Schloss et al., 1997; Arreaga-Mayer, 1998), and with respect to the development of skills related to social inclusion (Gumpel & Frank, 1999; Prater et al., 1999; Gardner et al., 2001). The latter approach is the one that inspired the methodology presented in this work. In many cases, it is identified with the name of peer-mediated instruction and intervention (King-Sears, 2001) or peer-assisted learning (Topping & Ehly, 1998). The most common approach requires the presence of a student more experienced (the tutor) and a student less experienced (the tutee) (Beasley, 1997; Rofoth, 1998; Monereo & Duran, 2002;). In fact, more than experience or age, what seems to count the most are the competences of the tutor to effectively communicate to the tutee (Verba & Winnykamen, 1992).

Effectively, King, Staffieri and Adelgais (1998) argue that the strategy of peer tutoring should not be limited exclusively to couples pre-defined with respect to technical skills. At the same time, other studies highlight the importance of developing an individual relationship between tutor and tutee (Fitz-Gibbon, 1996). Many authors argue that peer tutoring can be effective if the tutor has had previous training experience (Bentz & Fuchs, 1996; Fuchs, Fuchs, Bentz, Phillips & Hamlett, 1994) and that this training is monitored and encouraged during school (Durán & Monereo, 2005). The effectiveness of this method with respect to the tutee is now a given (Lloyd, Forness & Kavale, 1998;
Sinclair & Beverley, 1989) for scholastic motivation (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1981; Wentzel & McNamara, 1999) from the point of emotions (Berk, 1999; Van Velsor, P., 2009), for the development of social competencies (Garfinkle & Schwartz, 2002; Ivory & McCollum, 1999) and to combat premature school abandonment (Phelan, Davidson, Locke & Yu, 1998). Research has also shown that there are positive effects for the tutor (Simmons et al., 1995; Fantuzzo, Davis & Ginsburg, 1995; Mathes et al., 2005), that is in part a very surprising reflection. Fuchs et al. (2000) attribute it to the fact that the tutor, being helpful and knowledgeable, is seen differently than their teachers, from which an improved image of the tutor results. This aspect also associates an improvement in the tutor’s sense of self-efficacy, leadership skills, social relations, and other academic skills (Greenwood, Carta, & Kamps, 1990; Greenwood et al., 1988; Mathes & Fuchs, 1993). In the methodology of peer tutoring, at present, we are witnessing a transition from the first generation of studies on cooperative learning (which designs and analyzes the effects of methods of learning, often by means of test and retest drawings), to a second generation in which the focus shifts to the “process” and the methods of interaction among students (Melereo & Fernandez, 1995; Hogan & Tudge, 1999).

PRACTICAL APPLICATION
An Organizational Team Model in the Italian School System

This paper aims to present the methodology of intervention (P.R.O.M.O.S.S.I), first implemented in Milan, which is based on the principles of team work, which involves, in a synergistic way, all the roles in the school system. It is an experience that witnesses how it is possible to integrate diverse interventions on key roles in the school system (managers, teachers, students, and parents). The ultimate aim is to systematize an organizational model that facilitates the management of the transition from a culture of single (focused on the theories of the individual) to a culture of team work (focused on interactions with other roles with the purpose of achieving a shared goal). This change is also suggested by many standard references, which means the school as a context of competencies development. In this sense, the methodology pursues the following general objective: to create a culture of school as a promoter of competencies in reference to all the roles of school system, especially teachers and students.

Beneficiaries

The targets of the methodology presented in this paper can be divided into direct recipients (directly involved in the project activities) and indirect recipients (those who have used the products of the different project actions without being directly involved).

Direct beneficiaries:
Teachers of schools participating in the project, School leaders, figures of staff, and representatives, Class councils, Tutor students aged between 11 and 16 years, Parents of student tutors, Tutees.

Indirect beneficiaries:
Classes I, II and III of lower secondary school years (from 11 to 13 years) and classes I and II of secondary school grades (14 and 15 years).

Specific Goals and Needs

From the overall objective descends the following specific objectives for each role involved:

School leaders: Developing organizational skills and staff roles jointly inside the school (managers, staff members, contacts). This objective stems from the need to precisely define the characteristics, activities, and tasks concerning the mentioned management roles. The goal is to help scholastic managers to acquire the necessary skills in order to perform their role in relation to all other expected roles in the organization. Often the decisions made by managers are based on the criteria of power, and not through the comparison of roles. Many times teachers are also “references” (those to which they are assigned management functions, for example the charge of the committee or
The creation and facilitation of a network of interactions within the school system and falls in line with the principles of the diffusion of skills, sustainability, and portability of the project actions by the organization, even in the years following the conclusion of the project, is the main strategy employed in this project.

In reference to the objectives described above, the strategy of choice has also been defined in the following actions:
A. Organizational Consulting to the Management and Staff of the Figures

The consulting process allows an intervention process to take shape within the existing organizational structure, and to optimize efficiency while promoting the establishment (by the manager and his staff) of organizational arrangements that allow the spread of specific management skills within the school. Through consultation, the roles of the organization will be specified, starting from the actual statute, which is organized along bureaucratic lines - that is, each role’s responsibilities are defined. In organizational terms, however, it is necessary to move from an approach based on what roles must do to one concerning what the roles want to achieve and moving from a bureaucratic approach to a method based on objectives and processes. This action therefore provides help in developing those skills designed to perform the role according to objectives built through networking with other roles. This action also provides for monitoring with respect to how the individual teacher or the manager increases his capacity to achieve the objectives assigned to him.

B. Training for Teachers

Training is the elective strategy for a step change related to the acquisition of a common language, the definition and construction of the role, and for the generation of specific competencies. Therefore, training uses a type of interactive teaching methodology, which considers the wealth of knowledge, experience and expertise that each person has gained with respect to the role assigned to his or her profession. Training, therefore, is a tool that will maximize the active participation of the trainees (teachers) and will also lead to:

a) an increase in the competencies of identification and analysis of organizational processes and relationships that occur within an organization;

b) methods of critical analysis, i.e. the ability to anticipate problems that may characterize the context in which the role fits; and

c) arrangements for monitoring and evaluating what is put in place by the role.

C. Peer Tutoring

Peer tutoring generates and disseminates a culture of teamwork and specific skills, useful for the management of the interactions among peers and with regard to the role of teachers within the “student body”. The expectation and purpose of this perspective is that students themselves can become not only beneficiaries of what is proposed by the teachers but can also become active resources for the pursuit of the educational and training objectives of the school. The specially-trained tutors operate within the class as facilitators of processes, that is they activate opportunities of changes and integration. In particular they affect the scholastic path of students in isolation, marginalization, and stigmatization conditions.

In methodological terms, the required assumption of responsibility of tutors is sanctioned by the signing of a contract, which defines, in addition to the objectives to be pursued, even awards given from the commitment: tutors remain in office for a period of four months (from September to January and from February to May) and acquire credits in agreement with the school.

It’s possible to define the methodology of peer education according to the following scheme:

- The role of the peer tutor in each class is identified by students interested in covering the role of peer tutor.
- The group of peer tutors from the whole school follows a course of training in order to acquire the skills to recognize situations of hardship, marginalization and isolation experienced by students, and useful skills to facilitate their inclusion. Those who perform this role meet each other weekly, during and after school time, for about two months.
- The role of the teachers tutor is reserved for teachers identified by the scholastic manager and his staff. The tutor referent aims to facilitate and monitor the activities of peer tutors and to share the progress with the class councils and parents. The roles and activities above described are supplemented by the following three actions:
  a) The support to the class councils,
  b) The training of the working group of peer tutors,
c) The coaching to tutor of the teachers of the tutor’s group. The activities described were carried out in each of the four schools involved, with participation of an average number of ten classes per school.

**Tab. 1 MATRIX ORGANIZATION OF THE METHODOLOGY**

In view of the complexity of the actions, and thus organizational processes it is necessary to activate the action defined as “peer tutoring”. Below is an organizational matrix that shows the management layout of the different processes.

---

**C.1 The support to Class Councils**

The support, with respect to the class council, concerns a way to practice the skills developed during the training by applying them to:

a) the choice of interventions of any shared problem in the class, both for the students or the teachers;

b) the strategic identification of candidates for the role of facilitators (peer tutors) and situations that require a tutor. Each class council will have to choose which student can play the role of peer tutor in accordance to an agreed upon criteria. Such a decision should be made by identifying the problematic situations experienced by students, such as student stigmatization.
or students with little knowledge or learning difficulties;
c) the definition of working arrangements with the teacher as the coordinator of the group of tutors; and
d) planning of parental involvement.

C.2 Group Training for the Peer Tutors of the School

The creation of a working group among all peer tutors enables participants to: a) undertake an analysis of their role in relation to the management; b) develop and utilize instruments and procedures for the pursuit of a pre-defined goal; c) identify and manage critical aspects and strengths of what is produced by the same work-group; and d) design and implement improvements in actions. This working group is run by a teachers tutor who has the task of promoting the necessary skills to play the role of peer.

The activation of a group allows the students to experiment in different contexts and modalities of interaction, different by those of the class, and therefore represents a direct chance to build management competencies and break stigmas, for example, against “rejected” student stigma.

C.3 Coaching to the Role of Teachers Tutor

The management of the inter-class group of tutors implies, on the part of the referring teacher, the acquisition and use of skills that will be developed through a coaching course run by an external trainer. These skills relate to support for the creation of a group of “peer tutors”, the management of problems that may occur, the shared vision of the project with the staff management, advice of the class, with parents of peer tutors and all other parents. The direct management of the group tutors and networking with the class council by the referring teacher is itself an alternative training strategy to delegating an “expert” and allows the implementation of managerial skills of the school. At the end of coaching, the teacher will in fact be able to be stably fixed within the matrix of the organization, not only as a direct manager of the team of tutors, but also as a promoter of the same competencies toward other colleagues.

Conclusions

This paper has presented the application of the P.R.O.M.O.S.S.I methodology in some secondary schools in the province of Milan. This is in response mainly to the need for change that is felt today in Italian schools: from a “hierarchical - bureaucratic” design to a “for objectives and processes” design. This step is based on the need to consider school as an organization, placing secondly the vague idea of school as a reference point for knowledge. Working in a school as an organization which pursues defined objectives, means implementing some basic competencies, primarily those related to team work which has, historically, not been considered in the school. The development of these competences does not refer to a single role, often one of the students, but must be understood as a process aimed permanently at all the roles of the school system (Judici, 2014b). The P.R.O.M.O.S.S.I. methodology differs from other interventions in which it simultaneously involves all the roles: school manager and manager staff, teachers, class councils, students, and parents. It also integrates strategies such as group work and peer tutoring. After two years of implementation, the results have pointed out that this methodology: 1) it allows the school to pursue long-term continuity of teaching and training and regardless of the replacement of the individual teacher or school administrator; and 2) allows the creation of permanent conditions for sharing of strategies, methodologies, and operational instruments.

The general effect that the application of this methodology has generated mainly concerns the effectiveness of the education system which cannot be attributed only to teachers but is realized according to the responsibilities of all roles, including parents and students. The idea of co-responsibility also involves the incentive to understand the efforts of other roles. For example, the differences in teaching are now considered by teachers as a matter of style and not of substance, also because of the competence of working toward precise objectives, acquired by the teachers themselves.

Coherently with this reflection, it has been observed in the students the perception to attend the school environment in an active and responsible way, with all the connected emotional and
psychological aspects. The strategy of peer tutoring has also made possible the generation of permanent accountability processes as students are more competent in helping those who are less competent in a continuous virtuous circle. For these reasons, it is to be hoped that such results could be applied on a wider scale.

REFERENCES


