



Case 10: Managing Change and Employee Well-being in an Italian School: Psychosocial Training Intervention as a Possible Solution

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Introduction

Over the last 20 years the Italian education system has lived an intense and tormented epoch of reforms and radical changes culminated in the introduction of school autonomy and decentralisation. Such institutional pressures have created, in the Italian school system, contradictory effects at an individual and organizational levels leading to employee resistance or indifference on one hand, and investment in training for developing coping strategies, on the other. The Italian school system comprises of teachers—the largest professional group of workers within public schools, who are also viewed as individual participants of change. Managing professionals and their professions is increasingly gaining momentum as organisations realize the importance of attracting and retaining key talent and human capital. Managing change in a professional setting such as in the case of school teachers, can be difficult as the nature of their profession affords them high autonomy, paradoxically, at the same time, there is a low level of observed cohesiveness amongst the teachers.

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The Italian Educational System

The education system in Italy is organised as follows:

- pre-primary school for children between 3 and 6 years of age;
- first cycle of education lasting 8 years, comprise of: primary education (six-10 years) and lower secondary school for children between 11 and 14 years
- second cycle of education offering two different pathways: State upper secondary school, for students from 14 to 19 years of age; three and four-year vocational training courses organized by the Regions; and higher education

The principal institutional bodies governing the Italian education system are: at national level, The Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR, Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della ricerca) at regional level, the Regional School Authorities and the Regions; at local level, the Provinces, Municipalities and schools. In Italy, the responsibility of educational system general administration is the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR). The MIUR is organised into three Departments:

- Department for the Education and Training System, responsible for the general organisation of the school system;
- Department for the Planning and Management of Human, Financial and Capital Resources, responsible for financial policy, procurement, administrative human resources in schools, and managing information systems;
- Department for Higher Education and Research, responsible for higher Education.

School education is organised at a decentralised level through the Regional School Offices, which operate at provincial level in Local Offices and support and advise schools on matters such as administrative and accounting procedures and the planning and innovation of the educational offers. The Local Offices, which operate at provincial level, are an internal division of the Regional School Office and have no autonomy. The Regions are responsible for the planning, management and provision of vocational education and training through recognised institutions. Through the State/Regions Conference, the Regions work closely with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour, which define the minimum national standards for the education system and the vocational education and training system. Local administration includes Provinces and municipalities have responsibilities in different areas and at different levels of the education system. Provinces are assigned specific functions for upper secondary education only. Municipalities, often representing small residential communities and restricted areas, are distributed throughout Italy and have their own or regionally or provincially delegated responsibilities for functions and services relating to pre-primary, primary and lower secondary schools.

Reforms in the Italian School's Institutional Environment

Since the year 2000, the Italian education system was significantly reformed with the aim to establish a new institutional structure opening new spaces of autonomy for educational institutes (Law n. 59/1997). They can now plan and implement interventions in education, training and instruction, adapting them to different contexts in line with the objectives of the National Education System. Each school draws up its own Educational Offer Plan (POF, Piano Offerta Formativa) which is the basic document setting out the cultural and planning identity of the school. It must be consistent with the general and educational objectives of the various kinds of study and specialisms set at national level and, at the same time, it must reflect cultural, social and economic requirements at local level. Schools are allowed to adopt flexi-hour timetables and activate personalized courses, create training programmes to answer the special needs of the territory, choose methods and instruments in line with the training/teaching opportunities on offer. Secondly, schools were strongly encouraged to build partnerships with other public and private stakeholders, in order to pursue their educational mission. Partnerships were explicitly identified as a potential channel through which to gain public or private extra-resources and enrich the educational provision. In this perspective, the "School Autonomy Regulations" (Legislative Decree No. 275/99) strongly stressed the possibility for schools to constitute networks with other schools and public or private actors in order to pursue their educational aims. In order to create greater flexibility and customisation of training from 1 September 2010 a reform of the upper secondary schools was launched (DPR 81/2009; DPR 89/2009; MoU MPO-MIUR 2012). The spirit of the reform was in line with a search for greater clarity, and the aim of facilitating the choice of the course of study and to better address university education and the world of work. Among the strengths of the "new secondary education", there is definitely a closer link with universities and higher education, with the world of work (i.e., internships and project works) and with the territory (e.g., with the presence in technical and scientific committees, representatives of the business community in the area). Within this general framework, primary education plays a crucial role since learning is becoming increasingly more tied to the way the new generations learn through practical experience and cutting-edge practices and techniques with an enhanced use of laboratories, which make the school a centre of permanent innovation.

Schools are administered and managed by the school manager who is also the legal representative of the institution and responsible for its overall management, and the school manager acts autonomously in discharging his/her duties of direction, coordination, and deployment of human resources, in order to organize school activities efficiently and effectively. In carrying out the management and administrative duties, the school manager can delegate specific tasks to Teachers' Council. It formulates the educational offer plan (POF) in accordance with the general management and administration guidelines issued by the School. The Council submits proposals to the School Manager on the organization of class groups, teaching timetable and allocation of teachers to individual classes. The Council is also tasked with

evaluating the general development of teaching staff and verify its effectiveness in line with the planned objectives and proposes, and wherever necessary, take appropriate measures to improve the educational activities by making decisions on teaching methods. Finally, the Council selects textbooks, after consulting the Inter-class Council and the Class Council, as well as teaching materials within the financial limits laid down by the District/School Council.

The Reform of the Educational System in Italy and the New Skills of Teachers

The Italian public schools have been asked to play a role much more complex than what they did in the past, as they are now called to help young people to design a way of life, with a sense of contributing to the training of future citizens. The reform of education systems is essential to achieving higher productivity and the supply of highly skilled workers. In this context, the Ministry has defined the knowledge and competences that all students are expected to have acquire on completion of their compulsory education. New curricula are now defined in National Guidelines that suggests the specific learning objectives, knowledge and skills that students are expected to acquire as the basis for building their competencies. The teachers need to help students to not only acquire *“the skills that are easiest to teach and easiest to test”* but more importantly, *ways of thinking (creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making and learning); ways of working (communication and collaboration); tools for working (including information and communications technologies); and skills around citizenship, life and career and personal and social responsibility for success in modern democracies”* (OECD 2011).

The roles of teachers is changing, and so are the expectations from them. Teachers are now asked to teach in an increasingly multicultural classroom, integrate with students with special needs, implement use of ICT in effectively teaching students, engage in evaluation and accountability processes, and involve parents in school meetings. These changes have implied a critical redefinition of the teaching profession and the identification of new competences needed by teachers. A competence is described as ‘a complex combination of knowledge, skills, understanding, values, attitudes and desire which lead to effective, embodied human action in the world, in a particular domain’ (Deakin Crick 2008). The concept of competencies, in teaching, include having a combination of tacit and explicit knowledge, cognitive and practical skills, as well as dispositions such as motivation, beliefs, value orientations and emotions (Rychen and Salganik 2003). The new approach enables teachers to meet complex demands, by mobilising psychosocial resources in context, deploying them in a coherent way and it empowers the teachers to act professionally and appropriately in a given situation (Koster and Dengerink 2008). It also helps ensure teachers’ undertaking of tasks effectively (achieving the desired outcome) and efficiently (optimizing resources and efforts).

The knowledge, skills and commitment of teachers, as well as the quality of school leadership, are of most important factors in achieving the high quality of

educational outcomes. For this reason, it is essential for selecting and preparing teachers to fulfil their tasks.

General Changes

The changes in institutional setting and the definition of tasks and roles within the school context has been redesigned due to the profound changes that have involved the figure of the teacher. The advent of the computer age and the increasing demand for more important socio-educational, psychological, relational and management skills, for which the teacher has rarely received proper training and often remain confined to his or her initiative and its personal capacity, have certainly disturbed teachers' awareness of their professional skills. In addition, in many developed countries, the school environment has become increasingly multiethnic and multicultural. Furthermore, the numerous cultural exchanges enacted by globalisation, new policies for disability which have led to the inclusion of disabled pupils in the classes, the presence of an increasing number of single-parent families, and the constantly growing number of women being introduced into the workforce, have burdened teachers with more responsibility for the education of students. Finally, the relatively low salary, the lack of career opportunities, and the – often – difficult relationship with colleagues, school manager, students and their parents, are factors that seem to justify a situation of general dissatisfaction for the Italian school teachers (Ichino and Tabellini 2014).

Nature and Extent of Impacts

The radical changes that have affected the Italian school system in recent times have focused on creating a more flexible way of organising the work of teachers and the management of human resources in schools, thus, making it more individual and more result-oriented. Together with this, the efforts were addressed towards the achievement of positive effects on health issues in the workplace or, more generally, on well-being at work. For several years, psychology and occupational medicine have been dealing with diseases that may arise in the workplace and that may depend on the relationships between people. In particular, despite the large number of European documents dealing with the issue of the risks from work-related stress, the Italian legislation has delayed this matter and made it the subject of regulation as late as 2008, with the Legislative Decree No. 81/2008 – “The Code on Health and Safety Protection of Employees in the Workplace”. More specifically, the Art. 28 reads: “The risk assessment should include [...] all the risks to health and safety [...] including those related to work related stress, according to the contents of the Europe Agreement of 8 October 2004, and those relating to workers in pregnant [...] as well as those related to gender, age, origin from other countries [...]” (Legislative Decree No. 81/2008, Art. 28).

The fact that the European and Italian national legislations have focused more and more on psychosocial factors is related to the clinical risks that medicine and

psychology scholars have emphasised during the last decade. Accordingly, a higher level of social awareness has also pervaded the job design in all areas. Stress itself is not considered a disease, instead, it is a functional adaptation of organisms to their environment and its stressors. One of the most common definitions of stress speaks of adaptation syndrome for relatively nonspecific stressors of the stimuli (Selye 1956). The adaptive response to stimuli can become dysfunctional – or what is commonly noted as distress or negative stress – because of the particular intensity of the stimuli, its duration, or the individual's personal dispositions. People, in fact, can withstand intense stress situations very well, provided such stress is reduced over time. Among the employment sectors most affected by work-related stress, education is identified in the literature as a sector that is increasingly becoming prone to high risk.

Different researches (Austin et al. 2005; Johnson et al. 2005; Pithers and Fogarty 1995) have found that the teaching profession is exposed to numerous stressors. A recent study has identified workload, perception of work environment, teachers' perceptions of the head teacher's and attitude towards change as typical work stressors in Italian teaching (De Simone et al. 2016). In Italy, as a result of the Legislative Decree No. 81/2008, all employers should have a specific policy on work-stress issues for the management of the health of their workers. Work stress can be managed effectively by applying risk management assessment tools, which could enlighten the possible risks that the work environment might generate, and the specific hazards it might cause to employees.

The Case of Margherita School

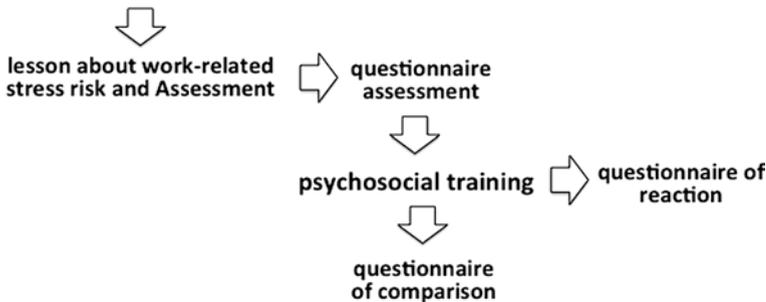
The case presented here is that of an Italian school committed to managing change processes invoked by the Italian education system. These changes have led to school autonomy. Margherita primary school is a southern Italian typical school, headed by a School Manager, a young man, who graduated in science and this is his first experience as a school manager, responsible for managing human, financial and instrumental resources. The Teachers' Council is composed of eight members supporting the School Manager in some specific tasks, while the Teachers' College is composed of all teachers in service in the school and is responsible for the didactic-educational goals.

The Margherita school takes 126 teachers, predominantly women, and 500 students, about 6 to 10 years, divided into 32 classes (between first, second, third, fourth and fifth levels) in different sections. According to Legislative Decree No. 81/2008 that obliges all Italian employers to assess work-stress risk and to manage health risks of their workers, the School Manager turned to an external professional to measure the teachers' work-related stress risk. A medium-low level of risk was found and the School Manager decided to implement training intervention, as indicated in the Art. 36 of Legislative Decree 81, and to organise a lesson about work-related stress risk conducted by an external trainer and addressed to all school' teachers. At the end of the lesson, the Assessment

Questionnaire was given to the teachers in order to identify the specific training needs and subsequently design training. From data emerged that teachers complain about relational and communicative problems linked to ongoing change processes (see Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1: Description of Process

work-related risk assessment



Based on the expressed needs, and taking into account the work-related stress theme, an intervention of psychosocial training was planned, performed and subsequently its effectiveness was evaluated through the administration of a Questionnaire of Reaction and a Questionnaire of Comparison. The training lasted 4 months and involved 92 volunteer teachers. Questionnaire of Reaction was administrated to all participants in the training at the end of each training module in order to measure the affective reactions and the utility judgments. The efficacy of the training was tested by a Questionnaire of Comparison, that was administered before the training program (test) and 2 months after the end of the training (re-test) also to a control group, composed of school teachers who did not attend the training (see Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2: Assessment' Tools

Tools	Objects	When	Who
Questionnaire of assessment	Training needs	At the end of the lesson	All school teachers
Questionnaire of reaction	Reactions of training participants	At the end of each training module	Only training participants
Questionnaire of comparison	Subject dimensions: <i>Interpersonal strain</i> (ISW Scale, Borgogni et al. 2007, 2012) <i>Job satisfaction</i> (Brief Overall Job satisfaction measure II, Judge et al. 1998; De Simone et al. 2014) <i>Self-efficacy</i> (Bandura 1994, 2006)	Before the training (test) and after the end of the training (re-test)	All school teachers (<i>training group</i> and <i>control group</i>)

The Intervention

The intervention presented follows the model of psychosocial training, focused on social processes and based on practical activities and on experience useful to “help” the teachers to manage the change processes. According to a sociological learning approach, the psychosocial training is effective in producing change, when it responds to the training’ needs and it focuses on social processes. According to this approach, learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb 1984). Learning is based on practical activities and on experience: learning occurs through the interaction with others and learners acquire new skills and knowledge when they see these as relevant to what they do in practice.

The psychosocial training intervention consisted of four training sessions, one behind the other, of 3 h each, involving on a voluntary basis the school’ 92 teachers divided into groups of 20 participants. The training program addressed the following topics: work-related stress and coping strategies, group dynamics, effective communication, problem solving, and decision making. The sessions with the teachers were highly interactive, with open discussion, role playing, teamwork and case study (Cicotto et al. 2014; Kolb 1984; Putnam and Borko 2000; Wilson and Beard 2003) to involve the learners. The tests were administered to make teachers aware about coping strategies, communication style, ability to work in a team, and problem-solving ability (see Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3: Psychosocial Training Program

Training sessions	Goals	Contents/ activities	Methods	Times	Assessment
Start up	To share the training program	Presentation of the training program and definition of objectives Administration of the questionnaire	Interactive lesson open discussion	Three hours	Questionnaire of comparison
Face the stress	To understand the stress and make the participants aware of their coping strategies	Definition of stress, antecedents, consequences Administration of two questionnaires, one on coping style and the other on problem solving	Interactive lesson tests administration open discussion teamwork	Three hours	Questionnaire of reaction

(continued)

Training sessions	Goals	Contents/ activities	Methods	Times	Assessment
Communicate in group	To experience the communicative styles in group settings	The characteristics of the groups and the communicative styles Administration of two questionnaires, one on ability To teamwork and the other on communicative styles	Interactive lesson tests administration open discussion teamwork	Three hours	Questionnaire of reaction
Tackle the critical issues	Learn to analyse critical cases of school life and make appropriate decisions with the help of colleagues	The critical issues at school The decision-making process	Case study role playing teamwork	Three hours	Questionnaire of reaction

92 teachers, all women, participated in the training. The mean age was 45 years ($SD = 7.3$), the average tenure was 6.7 years ($SD = 7.4$) and the average employment seniority in teaching was 17 years ($SD = 8.7$). The absence of male teachers is not a surprise, since in Italy the majority of teachers are women (OECD 2012). An external trainer was chosen, a psychologist with experience in organizational training, in fact the psychosocial training programs require a psychological expertise. The trainer was well received by the teachers who participated with the involvement and motivation for the activities proposed, probably because in line with their needs. The teachers' feedback and his monitoring of the data (Questionnaire of Reaction) suggested a high degree of appreciation, a signal that the contents and methodologies have satisfied the participants' expectations. The participants' evaluation of what they learned was very positive, and this denotes that the goal to make the teachers aware of themselves and of their actions was achieved. The trainer said that during the course, the class group climate was collaborative and enthusiastic. The excellent interaction between teacher and class group favoured the learning process. These results underscore the utility, in the design phase, to include the needs expressed by the recipients of the training. The results of the Questionnaire of Comparison showed a decrease, slight but significant, in Interpersonal Strain, and an increase, slight but significant, in Self Efficacy, as expected, while there has been no change in job satisfaction, dimension not subject to training.

Exhibit 4: Effectiveness of Psychosocial Training

Psychological dimension measured	Definition	Outcomes of training
Self-efficacy	Beliefs relative to various activities and challenges at work	<i>Increased</i>
Job satisfaction	Overall feeling about the job	<i>Unchanged</i>
Interpersonal strain	Mental and emotional distance from others at work	<i>Decreased</i>

The case presented suggests the effectiveness of psychosocial training program as enabler of change management (see Exhibit 4). Teaching profession is exposed to numerous stressors and the teachers interviewed expressed a need to train on how to handle stress at school and what strategies to adopt to deal with difficulties. The teachers claim to have learned something useful for their working life evaluating positively the psychosocial training intervention. Teachers have expressed substantially high beliefs of human agency that regards acts performed intentionally to achieve particular results (Bandura 2001). The training has implemented self-efficacy beliefs and reduced interpersonal strain. Furthermore, teachers said they are more aware of their coping strategies, communicative styles in group settings and decision-making styles, skills that can be used to prevent stress and improve results in teaching with students.

Case Study Questions

- Q1. Describe the nature of institutional changes in the Italian schooling system. How did these have an impact on the school in question?
- Q2. Explain the importance of teacher' competences for the achievement of educational goals. What are the principal competences that the teachers of the school in question should possess to keep the pace with the ongoing changes?
- Q3. Students may first discuss the nature of the stressors and then identify from a list the principal stressors for the teacher of the school in question.
- Q4. Evaluate the effectiveness of the training intervention. Did it work? Why/why not?
- Q5. Would you have done anything differently? Provide a rationale for your choices.

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