Monographic Section

Italian Teachers: A Profession in Transition?

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Abstract. The teaching profession, like many others, is involved in a deep process of change. The sources of pressure are manifold: top-down, as a consequence of neo-liberalist policies and of the implementation of the logic of New Public Management and, later, of New Public Governance; bottom-up, as a result of the socio-demographic and cultural changes affecting the relationship with end-users. All of these elements are challenging teachers' professionalism. The article questions whether teaching in Italy is currently a profession in transition and, if so, which new features are emerging. To do so, we present a locally-based case study that draws on both Hargreaves's and Noordegraaf's theoretical frameworks.

Keywords. Teachers' professionalism; post-modern professionalism; organising professionalism; Italian teachers.

1. PREMISE

Teaching has long been considered a "semi-profession" (Etzioni 1969), or a profession *sui generis* (Colombo 2005), due to the absence of some key features of professionalism: a training path shorter than that of other professions (at least initially and for certain grade levels of teaching); a less specialized body of knowledge; reduced autonomy, as the role is enacted within hierarchically structured, formal organisations; minor status; and less powerful professional associations and unions. However, when abandoning the functionalist approach and embracing other analytical perspectives that look at professionalism as a process and at professions as conflicting segments that continuously renegotiate their identity (Strauss 1978), the dimensions of analysis change as well as the professional status attributable to occupational groups. On this basis, teaching can be considered a profession (Argentin 2013). Furthermore, the case of teachers is particularly interesting, since, from the beginning, teachers have worked within welfare institutions, and have thus been required to reconcile professional autonomy and collegial coordination, which are typical elements of professional-

ism, with bureaucratic regulation[1]. Therefore, they have faced one of the central issues in the recent debate regarding professions: the emergence of an organisational professionalism, in contrast to the traditional occupational professionalism (Evetts 2011), and of hybrid forms. Moreover, similar to many other professions such as health professions, teaching is currently involved in a deep process of change (Hargreaves 1994; Whitty 2000; Gewirtz et al. 2009). The sources of pressure are manifold: top-down, due to the implementation, even in education, of New Public Management (NPM) (Pollitt 1990) and, later, of New Public Governance (NPG) (Osborne 2006), and bottom-up, as a result of socio-demographic and cultural changes affecting the relationship with end-users (students and their families).

In regard to the former, the endless reforms of the Italian educational sector in the last two decades have affected both the macro level, that is, the governance of the system (Grimaldi, Serpieri 2014), the micro level, i.e. working practice, and the meso level, reshaping teachers' subjectivities and professional identity (Pitzalis 2016). In Italy, a "(soft) decentralisation process" (Benadusi, Serpieri 2000) began in the late Nineties: the turning point was marked by the passing of Law 59/1997, also known as the School Autonomy Reform, which introduced school autonomy and fostered localism. The law resulted in the devolution to schools of some responsibilities, such as management of their own budgets, defining the annual educational plan, and many organisational aspects. However, the greater autonomy of schools has been counterbalanced by the limited autonomy of teachers. Although the reform had only small effects and mainly involved headteachers, NPM tenets and recipes (entrepreneurial logic, marketisation, managerialism, etc.) entered the educational system for the first time (Grimaldi, Serpieri 2010).

The neoliberal agenda has been fostered at the beginning of the new millennium in the wake of austerity policies that brought about cost-cutting (e.g. Law 133/2008 increased the teacher-student ratio), stronger performativity, a rewarding system both for schools, headteachers, and teachers but also increasing standardisation of educational practice, internal and external accountability, and enhancing competition among schools for funding. In particular, the need for a new culture of evaluation has been stressed, thus justifying the introduction of centralised systems for measuring and monitoring the performance of schools. Key aspects were the introduction of performance management techniques and the standardisation of educational outputs through national tests managed by INVALSI (the National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education System). Schools have also been responsible for the implementation of improvement plans according to a self-evaluation annual report. Furthermore, the new discourse on public governance entailed the active involvement of service users and engagement with a wide range of stakeholders (Durose 2011; Whitty 2000; 2006b).

To sum up, the Italian educational system, like many others, is currently characterised by the «apparent paradox» (Whitty 2006b: 4) of "centralised decentralisation" (Grimaldi 2012; Karlsen 2000), as a consequence of the re-regulation of some aspects of teaching and «the introduction of new coercive "metagovernmental" mechanisms of control» (Grimaldi, Serpieri 2014: 135), in order for the state to maintain strategic control over educational outputs (ibid.). According to Grimaldi and Serpieri (2014: 120), «schools and professionals are increasingly being pushed to adapt to goals and targets coming directly from the government, as an ongoing result of the introduction of managerialist devices».

A new "moral environment" has also emerged, giving rise to public opinion complaints regarding the alleged ineffectiveness of teachers, and more generally in regard to their professional identity (Grimaldi 2012; 2014). Both the neo-liberal logic and socio-demographic changes contributed to this moral environment, first and foremost in terms of the higher investment in children (because parents often have just one child, conceived late), as well as an increase in the levels of schooling among the population. These factors have modified the expectations of the public toward the school system and the attitude toward teachers (Pitzalis 2006).

All of these elements are currently challenging teachers' professionalism. Against this background, this article questions whether teaching in Italy is currently a profession in transition. The article aims to develop a framework to typify traits of the teaching profession and to understand which phase/model of professionalism, according to Hargreaves' (2000) and Noordegraaf's (2007; 2015) theorisations, respectively, applies to Italian teachers today.

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[1] For fields such as the school or the hospital, Mintzberg (1992) coined the term "professional bureaucracies".

In order to do so, the next section (§ 2) provides the theoretical backdrop to teachers' professionalism and the tool that we developed to grasp the characterising traits of teachers' professionalism according to the two theoretical models proposed. The main changes occurred in the Italian context will then be briefly introduced (§ 3), before moving to the empirical section concerning the methodology (§ 4) and the main results of a pilot project research (§ 5). The article concludes (§ 6) by arguing that different aspects belonging to distinct phases and models of professionalism do indeed overlap at the moment.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TEACHERS' PROFESSIONALISM

Our theoretical framework is based on both Hargreaves' and Noordegraaf's theoretical perspectives on professionalism. It is argued that Hargreaves' (2000) theoretical framework can be integrated with the existing school of thought on new professionalism and, in particular, with Noordegraaf's (2007; 2015) theorisation. The underlying idea is that the two theories are interrelated and complement each other, and that they must be in dialogue with each other in order to avoid the risk of losing some relevant dimensions of analysis. The processual, longitudinal approach, which is substantive in Hargreaves' work, enhances the theoretical proposals on new professionalism. It gives dynamism to the analysis, allows events and processes to be examined from the perspective of causality, taking into account the commonalities in order to arrive at a complete understanding of the social worlds that are being studied (Strauss 1978). In this regard, it should be noted that, where the diachronic dimension is more explicit in Hargreaves' theoretical framework, even Noordegraaf believes that the ideal-typical models of hybrid and organisational professionalism are today more representative of reality, implying a change of paradigm, which embeds a dynamic character. On the one hand, Hargreaves' phases succeed one after the other; on the other, Noordegraaf's models can coexist, despite their fluctuating relevance depending on historical phase and on socio-institutional context.

Therefore, the integration of the two approaches appears necessary in order to acquire as much information as possible to read the transformative processes that are underway. After all, the substantive changes that are occurring in the teaching field are impacting on professional behaviour, on the practice of the profession, as well as on professional identity. The transition that teachers (and the school system more generally) are experiencing can then be analysed with the aid of conceptual categories offered by studies on new professionalism, such as hybridisation.

Hargreaves (2000) provides an interesting theoretical framework for examining the evolution of teachers' professionalism from a historical perspective, focusing on English-speaking countries. The long-term focus and the consideration of the wider institutional context reinforce the validity of the decision to compare this model with a more general one, such as Noordegraaf's model. Hargreaves distinguishes four phases: the "pre-professional" phase, the phase of the "autonomous professional", the "collegial professional" phase, and the final phase, which is ongoing and is still open to different scenarios that the author defines as "post-professional" or "post-modern". Since his analysis considers English speaking countries, it would be interesting to verify if this typology can also be used to interpret the changes that have occurred in Italy. In particular, the authors question if, in the Italian case, some elements suggesting an evolution from the collegial professionalism toward a post-professionalism or, by contrast, toward a post-modern professionalism, can be found. In order to do so, it is worth briefly recalling the three phases of Hargreaves' theorisation, linking them to Noordegraaf's models of professionalism. However, before doing so, it is worth outlining that the features of different stages do not replace each other but can accumulate over time due to "each phase carrying significant residues and traces from the past" (ibid.: 152).

The third phase of the *collegial professional*, which like the previous one of the *autonomous professional* recalls many elements of Noordegraaf's (2007) model of "pure professionalism", took shape in the mid-Eighties, at least in the English speaking countries studied by Hargreaves. In this period, pedagogical and methodological approaches become more pluralist, while both the educational work and the need for a more personalised and inclusive didactic increased. In order to handle these changes, teachers opened up to greater collaboration with colleagues but still maintained their role as "guardian" of public services and public interest (Hendrikx, van Ges-

tel 2016). New burgeoning managerial views favoured, at least formally, teamwork and the collective engagement of teachers in decision making as well. However, this often meant the transmission of technical tasks to collegial bodies, without time and space being devoted to real confrontation in order to permit shared reflection on the ultimate goals of the educational-learning project. As a result, these forms of forced participation and imposed collegial activation were ultimately experienced with scepticism and regarded as a waste of time, at best, or as «a form of exploitation and enslavement» (Hargreaves 2000: 169), at worst, rather than as a possibility for effective self-governance.

The following phase, that is still ongoing, is considered by Hargreaves as remaining open to opposite outcomes, depending on whether managerialism or cooperative form of organising teachers' work will prevail.

The first scenario is defined as "post-professional": teachers' work would become more regulated and would increasingly be subject to performance management measures, with the additional tasks being related more to form-filling than to teaching. Increasing control from outside, declining support, excessive workloads, reduced and individualised forms of professional development would indeed lead to the de-professionalisation of teaching. According to this managerial view on teaching, teachers have been described as "service providers" (Hendrikx, van Gestel 2016), while schools are expected to become «more productive and competitive institutions» (Fischer 2009: 114). The post-professional phase corresponds to what Noordegraaf defines as "controlled professionalism", as individual professional autonomy, which was a constitutive element of "pure professionalism", is strongly limited by external accountability (Ablemann, Elmore 1999) of activities and performances.

In the second, "post-modern", scenario, teachers' professionalism would become more flexible and inclusive, with a greater consideration of the collegial nature of teaching, and would be better connected with the surrounding territorial context and its societal stakeholders. This would mean, for example, recognising the need for networking with other social agencies and moving from a strenuous defence against external interference towards a valorisation of surrounding resources. Teachers are thus redefined as "network partners" (Hendrikx, van Gestel 2016) and schools as "educational communities" (Fischer 2009). In this perspective, families would be considered as a proper asset to be involved in decision making, rather than merely an outside support for learning processes or extracurricular activities. Moreover, collegial work would become a necessity and the scheduling of such work would be formally envisaged, and not just left to the will of individual teachers (or even imposed) beyond formal working hours. This cooperative and collaborative dimension would overcome the borders of the single school in order to create networks that would be able to self-define (and improve) professional standards. Professional development would draw not only on life-long learning, but also on reciprocal learning from colleagues, parents and communities (Hargreaves, Lo 2000). Other important aspects of post-modern professionalism are concerned with the care of and responsiveness to more diversified learners, rather than with control and discipline, and an expansion of the primary role of teaching in which the question of meanings and ends would be embraced (Hoyle 1975). So defined, post-modern professionalism shares many common features with other conceptions of the alleged "new professionalism", which has referred to education and other professions as well. In particular, it echoes the "democratic" (Whitty 2000; Dzur 2004a; 2004b; Day, Sachs 2004; Gale, Densmore 2003), "civic" (Sullivan 2004) or "activist" (Sachs 2000; 2003; Tonkens *et alii* 2013) professionalism. The post-modern professional phase also resembles that "hybrid" professionalism (Kuhlmann 2006; Noordegraaf 2007; Evetts 2011; Kirkpatrick, Noordegraaf 2015; Vicarelli 2016), which has been recently redefined as "organising professionalism" (Noordegraaf 2015). The factors that characterise the latter are indeed: horizontal partnerships with users and colleagues, collegiality, the joint definition of guidelines in strong connection with research (instead of both the complete discretional power and of standardisation), a shared process of peer-self-evaluation (that differs from both unconditional confidence and managerial performance evaluation), active responsibility and organising connections with outside stakeholders.

Particularly relevant in this regard is the argument put forth by Elmore (2004; 2008) who suggests that collegiality, if properly sustained and developed, can lead to a redefinition of teachers' autonomy, which would become collective, rather than individual. This is a key aspect of the distinction between pure, controlled and organising professionalism. The new emphasis on collective autonomy leads to internal accountability – i.e. an actual openness

to peer discussions concerning contents, results, and evidence of learning – that differs from the external accountability of controlled professionalism.

To sum up, drawing on the existing literature and in particular on Hargreaves' and Noordegraaf's theoretical frameworks we tried to identify some items that could represent the pillars of each phase/model of professionalism, which have been summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Phases and Forms of professionalism: main features.

Noordegraaf's types:	Pure professionalism		Controlled professionalism	Hybrid/Organising professionalism
Hargreaves' ages:	Autonomous professional	Collegial Professional	Post-professional	Post-modern
The societal contest	Unconditional trust; improving status		Widespread distrust, discourses of derision, lowering of the status	Active trust to be rebuilt on the base of active, mutual responsibility
Organisational model and coordination mechanisms	Hierarchical coordination: the school as a public bureaucracy; standardisation of skills		Managerialism: the school as a company; standardisation of output	Horizontal partnership: the schools as a network; network mechanisms for coordinating
Professional autonomy	Professional autonomy based on expertise and service ethic		Reduced autonomy by performance management	Collective self-regulation based on reliability and evidence based methods
Evaluation	Individual self-assessment		External assessment	Peer-assessment
Professional Development	Off-site: workshops and courses	In-site: embedded in the daily activities of the school	Market-driven: individual vouchers; training targeted to school managers more than to rank and file teachers	Life-long: action research, self-study, peer learning, etc.
Relationship with colleagues	Individualism: isolated professional	Collegiality and collaboration	(forced) Cooperation: teamwork and collaborative planning reduced to technical tasks	Collaborative community: shared and participatory forms of inter and intra-professional learning and planning
Relationship with outside stakeholders	Isolation: teachers 'insulated' from communities, avoiding interferences		Contractualisation: market relationships with external stakeholders	Connectivity: breaking down the barriers of schooling, openness to local contexts and stakeholders
Professional identity: teachers' role and responsibility	Primary role of teaching	Primary role of teaching and 'social work'	Role expansion: role diffuseness, with no sense of where commitments and responsibilities end	Role enlargement: as researchers, innovators, collaborators of principals; secondary roles explicitly recognised
The pedagogical view	The transmission- teacher still prevails; polarised pedagogical views emerge	Combined pedagogical approaches; more individualised learning	Standardisation and centralised curricula	Reciprocal Learning; personalised curricula
The role of end users: students and families	Passive users		Clients	Co-producers

The first column shows the dimensions based on which the different phases and models can be compared. The cells were filled based on the existing literature, integrating those features that Hargreaves specifically relates to teachers (teachers' role and responsibilities, the pedagogical view and the role of students, professional development) with more general aspects, derived from both Hargreaves and Noordegraaf, that have been adapted to the case of teachers: the societal contexts, the organisational model and the mechanisms of coordination, professional

autonomy, evaluation, the relationship with colleagues, end users, and outside stakeholders. These features were used in the pilot project research to understand the current situation with regard to teacher professionalism in Italy. It is worth noting that the table is a simplification, produced for analytical reasons, as the two frameworks do not perfectly overlap: Noordegraaf's pure professionalism does not distinguish, for instance, between the autonomous and the collegial professionalism; by contrast, Hargreaves' post-modern professionalism does not capture the differences between hybrid and organising professionalism, as Noordegraaf properly does.

3. AN OVERVIEW OF THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

As shown in the literature (Grimaldi, Serpieri 2010; 2012; Pitzalis 2006; Landri 2009; Argentin 2013; 2018), the recent history of the Italian school system can be divided into two macro-phases. Grimaldi and Serpieri (2012) define these as ages, which can be distinguished by different traits, values, and characteristics, although there are also different interests at stake, different philosophical-cultural approaches and political positions within each.

The first macro-phase covers the period from post-Second World War to the early Nineties, but is marked by breaks and discontinuity. During this period, in light of the constitutional authority, education was considered a lever of social mobility and the most critical means to counterbalance inequalities and support students with fewer cultural, economic, and social resources. In regard to governance, the Italian education system was highly centralised and bureaucratic. The Ministry of Public Education was the main decisional centre of the system and controlled both human and financial resources through its local bureaucracies; however, at the same time, a high degree of professional autonomy for headteachers and teachers was guaranteed (Grimaldi, Serpieri 2012). The first important reform of this period came in 1962 when the tripartite lower secondary school was unified and made compulsory; in addition, the curriculum of the new secondary school was re-shaped, with the scope to adapt the contents of teaching to the needs of the new economic environment and the development of the new Fordist mode of production. The second reform took place in 1974, when the school governing bodies were reformed in a more democratic fashion, a unified professional status of all teachers was recognised, and decentred regional agencies were established whose aim was to promote bottom-up teaching innovation, pedagogic research, and professional development in schools. This, however, was not sufficient to counterbalance the authoritarian and centralistic path dependencies of the school system. After a few years, it became clear that the whole governance of the system had not changed. Finally, during the Eighties, a silent reform of upper secondary school occurred. Due to the continuing political instability and the conflicting positions within successive governments throughout this period on education, upper secondary school was transformed through small changes to curricula, administrative acts, and the logic of pilot innovation programmes (Benadusi 1989).

The second macro-phase, defined by Grimaldi and Serpieri (2012) as "the era of restructuring of education", was characterised, on the one hand, by an increasing pressure exerted by international organisations (the OECD, World Bank, etc.) and, on the other hand, by the advent of the neoliberal wave that introduced new values, new principles, and new priorities. In this context, the reform of autonomy took place with the aim of easing the hierarchical relationship between the Ministry of Education and schools, as well as opening up new autonomous spaces for schools. In this context, the School Autonomy Regulations (Legislative Decree 275/99) strongly emphasised the possibility of schools establishing networks with other schools and public or private actors in pursuit of their educational aims. The role of headteachers decisively changed, too, according to the New Public Management paradigm, with emphasis on the managerial aspects of headship: responsibility for the results obtained; efficiency and effectiveness in the management of resources (whether financial or human); and entrepreneurship. Professional issues simply disappeared (Barzanò 2011). The new headteacher had the potential to become an "entrepreneur" with several imperatives. However, this managerialism encountered strong opposition. Bureaucratic path dependencies and the hostility of the main professional unions and groups, as well as the relative weakness of the managerial discourse, resulted in a messy situation where contrasting evidence led to the enactment of changes in different directions.

The most recent reform, which is referred to as *The Good School* has been delivered in July 2015, but its implementation is still ongoing. School autonomy has increased: school principals now have greater autonomy in the management of human, technological, and financial resources. On the other hand, they have been subject to annual external evaluation. Merit-based components have been introduced in teachers' salaries too: the best-performing teachers in each school have received a one-off bonus. However, this incentive might have only a limited impact on motivation and on the attractiveness of the profession as the career system has not changed. A teacher does not have, in fact, a real possibility of career unless (s)he decides to become a headteacher. However, new managerial roles were introduced, the so-called *funzioni strumentali*, a sort of middle managers in the school hierarchy, which can be considered a first attempt to differentiate and stratify the careers.

Another important aspect of the reform is the provision of the National Teachers Training Plan, which introduces compulsory continuous professional development for all teachers, according to nine national priorities: foreign languages, digital skills and new learning environments; school and work; didactic and organisational autonomy; assessment and improvement; competency-based education and methodological innovation; integration; citizenship and global citizenship; inclusion and disability; and social cohesion and prevention of juvenile discomfort. Customised paths for each teacher have been devised; in addition, they have received a personal Teachers' Card to the value of 500 euro, with which they could freely purchase training content (music, books, theatre performances, or proper training courses). In the future, each teacher will have his/her own Individual Training Plan that will form part of a digital portfolio containing his/her training and professional history. These individual training needs will be gathered together in the plan of each school. *The Good School* law also set out a plan for recruitment: approximately 90,000 teachers who had been employed on short-term contracts were recruited on a permanent basis in 2015-2016. While around 45 per cent of these filled existing positions, the remainder entered new posts, in order to strengthen the educational programme of each school, in accordance with the three-year school development plan. These additional teachers allow for enhanced educational and organisational flexibility in line with school autonomy. For example, they could facilitate the organisation of additional school activities and initiatives targeted at students and families, beyond the statutory timetable. In future, new recruitment and in-service development plans will be implemented: a new open competition to recruit around 64,000 teachers on a permanent basis has already taken place during the summer term of 2016.

4. METHODOLOGY

In the light of the theoretical framework presented in the second paragraph, we conducted an exploratory research on a specific case study involving a local network of schools in the city of Ancona (Marche Region). This network consists of three primary schools, two lower secondary schools and one upper secondary school. According to Stake's (2005) and Thomas' typology (2011), it is an instrumental case study comprising *explorative* elements, the approach being *theory-testing*. The selection of the subject was due to the «researchers' familiarity with it» (that is, a *local knowledge case*) (ibid.: 514). The aforementioned network of schools indeed requested help with their improvement plan, and the researchers thus decided to investigate the changes occurring in the profession.

The empirical research has been articulated in three steps, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods. Firstly, we organised a focus group involving 14 teachers (4 primary schools teachers, 6 lower secondary, and 4 upper secondary schools). The participants were selected by the headteachers following the researchers' request to have both younger and older teachers, as well as those more involved in the process of change and those resistant to it. The aim of this focus group was to investigate the principal changes (if any) that have occurred in teaching and in the professional identity. A questionnaire was then developed based on the most interesting findings of the focus group, the literature review, and on similar surveys. The main aim of this questionnaire was to analyse teachers' professional experience and the main changes that have occurred in teaching, in school organisation, in teacher-family relationships, in teacher-territory relationships, training needs and professional identity. The self-administered questionnaire was distributed to the teachers participating in a training event, which was provided in

the improvement plan of the schools involved and was addressed to anyone interested. In total, 82 questionnaires were completed by 52 primary school teachers, 17 lower secondary school teachers and 11 upper secondary school teachers[2]. This sample, which is not a random one, cannot be considered representative of the teaching staff population; moreover, the choice to attend the training event represents a strong bias if one takes into consideration the propensity towards change and the interest in new teaching methods of the attendees. Even if the results cannot be generalised, they shed light on an under-explored issue.

The third phase aimed to provide a deeper understanding of some topics through in-depth interviews. 15 teachers, selected by school managers were involved: 5 teachers were selected from each grade of school, and they had different characteristics, both in terms of gender (8 females and 7 males) and seniority. In the following section, we will present the main findings of the empirical research, according to the dimensions of analysis previously identified in Table 1, above. As we have already said, our research findings cannot be generalised. However, our main aim was to build an analytical framework to be tested subsequently and also the empirical research served to this goal.

5. MAIN RESULTS

In order to assess which phase/model the teachers involved in this research could be placed within, the dimensions presented in Table 1 were considered. For the purposes of the analysis, a distinction was drawn between a macro (changing context), meso (changing organisation), and micro-analytical perspective (changing roles), as will be explained in the following paragraphs.

5.1. Changing contexts

From a macro perspective, as far as the so-called "social contract" is concerned – that is, the acknowledgement of the important social function that teachers perform as the basis for the trust placed in them and for the legitimation of a higher status – according to the participants to the research, currently the "discourse of derision" (Ball 1990) prevail, together with a lower status. Public trust is at stake, thus reflecting a key dimension of "controlled"/"post" professionalism. When asked to use a metaphor to describe their figure, the images recalled by respondents highlight the undervaluation of teachers in public opinion: «a trampled flower», «a mule: he works like a donkey and never rises to the dignity of a horse». Disappointingly, the interviewees produced a long list of negative characteristics generally attributed to teachers, in line with the results of other studies (Bonetto 2011). According to Argentin (2018), the crisis of teachers and teaching is a persistent character at least in Italy, but interviewees stressed the worsening of the situation in the last few years. In the in-depth interviews, this delegitimisation was mainly connected to the widespread perception, outside the profession, of reduced working hours (18 teaching hours per week, long summer holidays, etc.), and to the undervaluation of the time spent on preparatory work done at home and of teachers' personal investment in continuous training. A couple of interviewees suggested that there was a wider explanation: the minor recognition of the usefulness of the educational system and, even more broadly, the devaluation of the role of knowledge in today's society.

5.2. Changing organisations

From a meso-organisational perspective, in order to assess the eventual effects of neo-liberalisation and managerialisation on the education sector, or the emergence of an alternative "post-modern" pattern, we considered dif-

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[2] There are significant differences between primary and secondary schools when it comes to teacher professionalism, *in primis* because the former has become an "all-graduate" profession only recently. However, the results will be discussed together, as the researchers were interested in understanding if both are experiencing a transformation in their professional identity.

ferent dimensions: the organisational model and coordination mechanisms; autonomy and discretion; the relationships with colleagues; assessment and professional development; the relationships with external stakeholders.

With regard to the organisational model, the literature claims that schools have undergone a change in three stages, from being a public bureaucracy to becoming a company and, finally, developing into an inter-organisational network. Accordingly, the methods of coordination are also expected to evolve from "vertical partnerships" to "managerialism", in the first instance, and subsequently to "horizontal partnerships". In our case study, the "business model" and managerialism do not appear to be well developed among rank and file teachers. They have not been socialised towards managerial skills and they have not been given full responsibility over costs. However, the growing autonomy of schools and the managerialisation of school principals are having an impact on the work practices of front-line teachers. This has been proven by the explicit reference, made in some interviews, to the language drawn from business:

> It has become a company, if you work hard it's ok, otherwise... In other words, everyone is worried about money; there is a lot of worry about money, maybe this is autonomy: because each school is autonomous and has to manage its money. (Female, 27 years of experience, primary school)

The respondents' opinions on school autonomy are heterogeneous. Some of them stress that the too rapid pace of transition has caused schools to experience an excessive burden of new responsibilities. They fear that excessive autonomy would lead to a sort of "anarchy". For others, the supposed autonomy exists only on paper, because schools lack economic resources and cuts in public spending continue to be made at the central level. Many others, on the contrary, recognise that increasing autonomy has allowed to improve and to be more responsive to the local needs of their communities.

The further shift towards a new network-based model has even been sketched, as new horizontal partnerships are emerging. In particular, the reorganisation of primary education has brought together formerly autonomous schools and has fostered greater vertical integration, thus allowing schools to plan a wide range of activities together. On the other hand, those networks involving secondary schools are still seen as being more "institutional" ("purpose networks" as one interviewee defined them) than effective.

Professional autonomy is another central issue. As we have previously said, it is expected that this would be reduced and controlled by way of performance management in the scenario of a "controlled"/"post" professionalism or would be expressed through new forms of collective self-regulation in the "organising"/"post-modern" professionalism. According to more than six respondents to the survey out of ten, professional autonomy still characterises their profession, despite the ongoing changes. Moreover, just under half of the respondents believe that safeguarding the freedom of teaching must be a priority, even over the process of sharing decisions with colleagues.

One out of two respondents think that professional autonomy is currently threatened by external interferences; these can be both top-down (ministerial rules) and bottom-up (parental requests). However, just one third feel that they are affected by centrally-imposed learning standards or by the learning expectations of families. All in all, they do not feel to be subjected to a performativity regime. Only a few believe that the greater decision-making power attributed by the law to the headteacher limits his/her own autonomy. Nobody referred to a direct control of time and working modalities, nor to a performance management regime. However, some spaces of individual autonomy seem to have been reduced because of the introduction of interdisciplinary teaching methods, formally envisaged in the planning of class councils. This can be considered as a form of collective self-regulation and is closely connected with the changing relationship with colleagues.

The teachers involved in our research are still firmly masters of their autonomy, but they are not anchored to the traditional vision of a «privatised idiosyncratic practice» (Elmore 2008: 50). Collaborative working with colleagues is considered an inevitable part of current professional practice. However, the transition to a truly interdisciplinary way of working, even if formally professed, is not always effectively practised:

> Interdisciplinarity, which is so often discussed but not always performed, is fundamental: truly interdisciplinary work is missing: even though we compile diagrams concerning interdisciplinarity, everyone closes the door and does what he wants. (Focus group; upper secondary school teacher)

There are still difficulties, therefore, in making the collegial and cooperative model effective. Although almost all respondents are willing to confront colleagues on personal teaching practices (contents and/or methodologies), when asked «to what extent confrontations, collaboration and sharing information, materials and experiences with colleagues are practised», affirmative answers did not exceed one out of two. In any case, the interviewees do not agree with the stereotyped view that teachers work in isolation: most of them gave an affirmative answer to the question if they knew the content and teaching methods of their colleagues. However, the interactions mainly focus on the individual problems of students and on curricular objectives, while contents, materials, devices and teaching methods are discussed to a lesser extent.

In-depth interviews confirm this scenario. On the one hand, almost all of the respondents recognise the move away from the individual pattern of teaching and depict a "before" and an "after" in this regard.

> Before, the school system was individualist. It was made up of many individual teachers and each of them went his own way. Then, as a consequence of the new way of planning, innovations, and legislative decrees, it has approached a collegial model. (Male, 10 years of experience, primary school)

On the other hand, this process is not complete. It has been noted that close relationships only concern a very small number of colleagues, and they are often based more on personal affinities than on formalised modes of collaboration.

The differences in the perspectives on this topic also reflect a generational gap, contrasting the youngest participants, who had been socialised to a collegial model during their education, and those of greater seniority, who are more used to individualistic, rather than shared, practices. In summary, these elements emerging from the empirical research seem to place the participants in a phase of transition between "autonomous" and "collegial" professional models, as defined by Hargreaves.

Moreover, some features of the "forced cooperation" that characterises the "post-professional"/"controlled" scenario have also emerged, as teamwork and collaborative planning have been imposed within a logic of further exploitation and enslavement, rather than "acted".

> [*Interviewer:* is school currently more open towards comparison among colleagues?]
> Very. In the sense that we meet each other at 4:00 pm. It's all formal. [...] a fortnight ago, a younger colleague told me: «I would be so happy if you could see my stuff, because I would like to hear your opinion». Do you want to know how these things go? That we are so overburdened with formalities and paperwork that I couldn't find five minutes to talk with her. And I'm so sorry for this. But you have to do the "vertical departments", to do... a bunch of things. (Female, 40 years of experience, primary school)

Evaluation is another area that is expected to be deeply affected by the transition between "pure" professionalism (based on self-assessment), "controlled"/"post" professionalism (dominated by a pervasive external evaluation system), and "organising"/"post-modern" professionalism (strongly oriented towards continuous improvement and internal evaluation). In this regard, more than seven out of ten respondents to the survey agree with the statement that «continuous improvement and its inter-professional and inter-professional evaluation characterise the teaching profession today». Furthermore, seven out of ten respondents believe that the process of school self-assessment is important for improvement and think that peer-review and peer-learning are useful. However, only four out of ten agree that teaching is characterised by the external control of the quality.

Nevertheless, the qualitative analysis shows that there are some limitations of the current evaluation system. Moreover, some interviewees assert that the evaluation should concern the teaching that is carried out in the classroom, which, by its nature, evades such a possibility:

> The school must evaluate what the teacher does. And this almost never happens. In the sense that we are not evaluated on how we work.
> [*Interviewer:* not even now that evaluation is much discussed?]
> Absolutely not. We are evaluated on the basis of generic indicators: the quantity of the activities we perform, the projects we adhere to, or of which we are promoters. But not on what we actually produce, didactically. An evaluation that also implies the attention to all the components of the didactic. (Secondary school, male, more than 25 years of experience)

As far as professional development is concerned, a certain disappointment emerges. The interviewees, especially those who had been teaching for many years, express their frustration about the concrete possibilities for professional development. They complain about the inadequate economic reward and about the lack of recognition of the work that they do in preparing lessons and organising activities and projects. Interestingly, in several interviews, professional development was linked to proposals for reorganising teaching: laboratory activities, new teaching patterns that go beyond the idea of the unity of the class, classes with fewer students, and even open classrooms have been suggested. This is in line with other initiatives emerging in the international debate (Parding *et alii* 2012) on how to transform the traditional individual structure of teaching. However, the openness to change is not unconditional, as many respondents expressed strong concern regarding the need to verify that the proposed changes do, in fact, bring about effective improvements. In other words, resistance to change, which does not appear to be attributable to generational differences, is presented as a demand for evidence-based educational models.

The need for lifelong learning has also been recognised. In conjunction with training methodologies that are more traditional, new training activities, based on peer comparisons, are spreading. In the context of upper secondary schools, the Erasmus experience in which some teachers had participated was highly appreciated, especially because it allowed them to gain direct experience of how didactics work abroad and to participate directly in classroom activities. With regard to the limits of professional development offered thus far, respondents complain that it has been left, for the most part, to individual initiative, without a common school plan being in place. Initiatives for professional development are poorly designed and are not formally shared with colleagues, not even within the same discipline.

To conclude, a key aspect of Hargreaves' perspective of a post-modern profession is the openness to the local and global context. As we have already said, post-modern professionals are called upon to engage in dialogue with the surrounding context, to recognise its needs and its resources, and to "absorb" social variability. In this regard, the empirical research gives the impression of a generational difference between those who would like the school able to withstand environmental turbulence, and those who wish for greater openness:

> Schools that want to develop over time must try to make partnerships with the community as much as possible. (...) For example, soon after explaining the circulatory system, I organise a first aid course with the Red Cross. (Male, 10 years of experience, lower secondary school)

Overall, however, the positions expressed with respect to the dialogue with other interlocutors of the community are very tepid. Less than one out four among survey participants would consider it useful to participate in initiatives with neighbourhood associations, only one-third thought it would be useful to dialogue with migrant associations, and a little more with parents' associations. Teachers are more interested, instead, in initiatives with cultural associations (one out two respondents) and professional associations (two-thirds).

The main perceived limitation of those initiatives that have been actually activated within the community stems from the fact that these projects are mostly implemented from the top down. There is no real possibility for rank and file teachers to have an impact from the bottom up, and to choose those projects that they deem to be most appropriate. The perceived risk is that these partnerships fall within the scope of "institutional marketing", in line with the "managerial" turnaround, rather than being an effective co-production of certain training paths with local stakeholders.

Upper secondary schools are also developing a new relationship with the labour market, due to the introduction of the so-called *Alternanza Scuola Lavoro* (ASL) (learning and working) and guidance activities. However, even in this case, the teachers involved expressed concern regarding the effectiveness of ASL, which, it seemed to them, was not formative as in many cases students were asked to perform very simple tasks.

5.3. Changing roles

The changes that are taking place at the macro- and meso-level are reflected in professional identity and the way in which teachers interpret their role, as well as in the representation of the role of students and families. In

their answers to the first question of the focus group, «What does it mean for you to be a teacher?», a strong perception of change by teachers didn't emerge, where all participants defined "being teachers" in terms of professional practice and, in particular, the relationship with the students. Their professional identity seems mainly, if not exclusively, to be played out in the educational relationship. In this regard, the survey confirms that is the teaching practice and the relationship with the students that make the respondents feel "teachers". Participation in the life and in the management of the school was mentioned significantly less often.

With regard to the way in which teachers perceive the increasing organisational functions attributed to them, two thirds of interviewees think that they can make a real contribution to the improvement of school organisation, although less than four out ten respondents believe that they have adequate knowledge about the organisational functions of the school. Nonetheless, only one third agrees with the "traditional" vision that limits their role to issues that concern their own class, and which assigns to others the responsibility for the organisation of the school. On the other hand, eight out ten believe that, in recent years, they have experienced an expansion of their role and of their duties, without a clear limitation of their involvement and their responsibilities. The in-depth interviews confirm the concern that this would lead to teaching being overshadowed and sacrificed:

> Everything has a limit and now the requests that are made to us are exceeding this limit, requests that very often are not aimed at achieving something positive, but only bureaucratic things that do not lead to anything (...) considering that we have to compete with other schools, considering that we have to catch the students and make the guidance, our time is taken up by a thousand activities that there weren't before (...) it was only a burden of work without a real possibility of... what can we do to change the school? We cannot do anything. In my opinion, the work you do in the classroom is worthwhile. (Female teacher, more than 25 years of experience, secondary school)

Hence, strongly critical positions emerge toward this increase in tasks that respondents, individually, try to resist.

Even those involved in new managerial roles, i.e. the *funzioni strumentali*, responsible for organising and coordinating school projects and resources, expressed their concern, defining these tasks as a burden that takes time away from working in the classroom, in return for only a modest economic reward.

Finally, an evolution of the role of the "teacher as researcher" (Elliott 2009; 2012) was only evident in one case, while the survey confirms that the teachers are not very involved in research activities: fewer than half of the respondents said they were involved, often or sometimes (individually and/or collectively), in research activities on didactics.

If, therefore, the reference is to the primary role of teaching, the ways in which the educational role and the relationship with the students are interpreted have been modified and expanded. The term of comparison is the representation of the teacher as a mere transmitter of knowledge, which is now considered outdated (Fischer 2010). Participants in the focus group described themselves as "facilitators", "mediators", "ferrymen" in a process of education that is not limited to the didactic-disciplinary content but embraces the personal growth of students (the pedagogue model, see Hirschorn 1993).

> He is a facilitator. He has the role of facilitating students and of accompanying them towards an education that concerns not so much content, but the education of the person, a ferryman, a mediator with everything to which children are exposed daily. (Focus group; primary school teacher)

The survey confirms that this innovative view of the role of the teacher coexists together with more traditional positions. Some metaphors used to describe the teachers of today – "commander of a ship", "expert helmsman", "pilot indicating the route" – continue to confine them to a position of solitary protagonist hierarchically over-ordered. However, alternative images to portray the ongoing changes were also proposed: a "compass", a "radar", a "chalk that every student can choose to handle". The reference to their "enabling" role, in other words the idea of being instrumental, rather than central, was thus frequent. Furthermore, the concept of reciprocal learning was also very present, for example, «a director who predisposes the learning environment and learns with the students».

Many respondents made it clear that, in order for this re-definition to occur, an empathic relationship of mutual trust must be created: eight out ten of survey participants indicated that empathy towards the students and the relationship of mutual respect were elements characterising the profession. Staying in this relationship of reciprocity, however, is not always simple, especially for younger teachers who are still learning to strike the necessary balance between emotional closeness and authority.

In any case, the empirical research testifies that an evolution had occurred from the age of the autonomous professional, when students were conceived as passive users, to the phase of the post-modern professional. In particular, the in-depth interviews underline the importance of collaborative and reciprocal learning, with some reference made to the idea of co-production. However, the survey shows that the construction of educational situations that are inspired by problem solving or that require a shared and cooperative construction of knowledge, even those that rely on peer learning, happen "sufficiently" but not "very" frequently. Just one out of two respondents answered affirmatively to the question «Do you usually activate educational situations involving students presenting challenges of knowledge or problem solving?», and even less «plan and manage situations where students are engaged in building knowledge through collaborative and cooperative processes, including mutual teaching activities».

Furthermore, there is no real reflection on which kind of knowledge is useful to meet the demands of the economic and social system, or of the local context. Only one teacher expressed his concern about:

> Poor connection with the labour market. We live in Italy, in a society, in Europe, where the individual establishes himself through work (...) but do we prepare young people for the labour market? (Female, 27 years of experience, lower secondary school)

To conclude, teachers' conception of the role of families appears full of ambivalences. Only a few participants (considering both the focus group and the in-depth interviews), especially among the youngest, stressed the importance of intensifying the dialogue with families and of building a relationship of mutual trust and sharing with them the choices made:

> I like that there is transparency and clarity so that they understand what we are doing. Otherwise, when meetings with the teachers take place, should I simply communicate the grades? Or should I explain the context of our work that we must know together? (Female, 27 years of experience, lower secondary school)

The interviewee above seems to be an outside voice: the majority of participants, despite recognising that families are potential resources to be activated alongside professionals, tend to point out the perceived deterioration of the relationship with families and their lesser willingness to be involved.

> This drift, this decline, began a decade ago (...) and it has progressed very quickly in recent years, very quickly (...) parents are not able to be parents today. Can I say it? They cannot be parents; they do not feel parental responsibility. I would like a class of orphans (...) today parents mostly want to be left alone. (Female, 40 years of experience, primary school)

The most frequently recurring representations were those of families who are "distrustful" or "in trouble" and in need of help. The possibility that families could be partners, bearing resources as well as problems, does not really seem to be fully recognised.

The relationship with families, therefore, appears to be contradictory: seven out ten respondents argue that parents should respect the school's role and refrain from interfering with the choices made, and only just under a fifth think that parents should be more involved in school life.

As has previously been mentioned, teachers also highlight the risks of customisation of the relationship with families as they begin to be considered "clients" to be first grabbed and then satisfied, rather than partners.

> To me, the school seems to be very cautious [towards families], sometimes even too much, in some ways... the risk is that you want... to please them (...) This opening to families, I imagine, represents an aspect of that focus on... perhaps, in business language, we would say focusing on users. (male, 14 years of experience, secondary school)

6. CONCLUSIONS

In our article, we have attempted to give an original reading of the professionalism of Italian teachers, using both the theoretical frame proposed by Hargreaves (2000) and that of Noordegraaf (2015). The picture that emerges is that of a profession involved in a process of change and extensive modification. However, while new and innovative features allow the profession to face the current challenges from "above" and "below", some traditional characteristics still survive. Moreover, the previous analysis shows that a different phase/model seems to prevail according to the dimensions one uses.

In the light of the latest debate on the new professionalism, our main results outline that typical traits of distinct forms of professionalism are simultaneously at play (Hendrikx, van Gestel 2016), revealing how different ways of understanding and practising the profession coexist within the profession itself. Some of the more traditional features of the pure professionalism model, even in the form of the autonomous professional depicted by Hargreaves, persist, such as the sense of individual responsibility toward users, professional autonomy, resistance toward external intrusions, and traditional patterns of professional development.

Other dimensions seem to place the participants in a transitional phase between the autonomous and collegial professional. In fact, the increase in educational work, the need for more personalised and inclusive teaching, and greater collaboration with colleagues have repeatedly been emphasised. However, this transition appears to be currently incomplete, and full collegiality is still at stake.

The typical features of post-professionalism or controlled professionalism appear to be less characterising. Nonetheless, the intensification and bureaucratisation of work and "managerial impulses" (Apple 2009) were also evident. Teachers complain about the surrounding climate of distrust, as well as the expansion of their role and in particular the burden of form-filling activities that take time away from teaching. Professional development is more market-driven than in the past, and team working is often perceived as more formal than substantial. However, external assessment is still weak and managerial elements are not so strongly present.

The exemplary aspects of post-modern professionalism or organising professionalism have also been highlighted: the importance attributed by the respondents to the relationship with users (no longer based on an asymmetry between the two parts), as well as the importance of undergoing continuous improvement through inter- and intra-professional evaluation processes, and the emphasis on connections with the societal environment. However, only younger teachers seem to have a truly open perspective regarding the involvement of families and the community in the effective co-production of teaching activities. Lastly, in light of the debate on globalisation involving other professions, it should be noted that, in the case of teachers, precariousness does not appear to be an element of novelty, as traces of it are very much recognisable in the stories of older teachers.

To conclude, neither of the proposed models of professionalism seems dominant and the current phase appears to be blurred. This article is in agreement with those arguing that hybridity and the intertwining of different principles prevail: in particular, the expected participation of end users and external stakeholders goes hand in hand with centralised standardisation of output (Hendrikx, van Gestel 2016). This sometimes causes professionals to feel subjected to contradictory roles and actions; however, perhaps, as argued by Noordegraaf, this is precisely what the new professionalism consists of.

It is necessary to note that our analysis is based on a single, local, case study. Therefore, its outcomes cannot be extended to the wider teaching population. More in-depth research through a survey on a representative sample is needed in order to validate or refute what, at least for the moment, remains a research hypothesis.

This small-scale study, however, was very useful, because it paved the way for experimentation based on the integration of two different analytical approaches, allowing the researchers to study this profession in an original way. It provides food for thought that would not otherwise have emerged, first of all regarding the importance of path dependency in shaping, containing, and hybridising the application of NPM principles to the Italian context.

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