

THE IMPACT OF AGENCY IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL-MANAGERIAL AND EDUCATIONAL-DIDACTIC PROCESSES OF SCHOLASTIC INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

The paper offers a reflection arising from the observations related to the first results of a survey that is being conducted in the first operational part of the PhD project, entitled *Inclusive Policies: the school as a participated community and professional development mediated by the agency*. Through this survey, which is still ongoing, we analyze the perception and attitude of the school manager and the teachers towards documents and tools used in the self-evaluation and self-improvement processes that all scholastic institution are called upon to perform. This survey references to the methods of action of the actors involved in these processes with the purpose to understand: what kind of relationship exists between the *inclusive policies* and the governance of these processes and what is the impact of teachers' ability to deal with this relationship. It also allows us to understand *if* and *how* the remarkable legislative innovations are really integrated, in the operative plan, within the specifics of the single scholastic institutions. In fact, recent laws have introduced the use of tools, within the procedures that underpin the school organization, increasingly articulated and complex that invite to rethink the mode of action of the entire school community. In particular, attention is paid to the relationship between the methods of action adopted and the self-evaluation and self-improvement processes that require co-responsibility and co-participation of all actors in the school context. This perspective shows that development of teacher agency skills is mandatory and oriented towards integration, dynamism and flexibility. Moreover, we note how favoring such mechanisms brings a potential contribute to increase agency itself not only of a single teacher but of the whole school community and to encourage a "culture" of professional, inclusive learning development.

Keywords: *Inclusive policies, middle management, community of practice, agency, professional development.*

1. Introduction

The European school policies set priority objectives to be achieved, showing a series of recommendations to the member countries of the European Union in order to standardize the orientation of school policies of each individual country. In Italy, the legislative innovations introduced, starting from the Regulations on Scholastic Autonomy, DPR 275/1999, up to Law 107/2015 and the subsequent Delegated Decrees, induced the educational institutions to rethink the school governance and to reorient the organizational-managerial and educational-didactic processes at the system organization level. In particular, through the Presidential Decree 80/2013, a series of automated procedures have been introduced relating to the self-assessment and self-improvement process of schools that require the actors of the school context (managers and teachers) to develop inclusive and co-participated agency skills in the perspective of a co-action oriented to professional learning.

1.1. The agency as a trade union between inclusive policies and the governance of scholastic institutions

In light of the innovations introduced, however, there have been many reactions by managers and teachers within the scholastic institutions, because said new procedures invite to "question" the modalities of their actions, each one in their own role, in the different implications, like planning, methodological strategies and didactic activity. In this context, the manager, first of all, assisted by the middle management must favor the conditions for developing inclusive agency modality at the level of the organizational-managerial and educational-didactic processes.

In fact, generally when one argues with regard to *inclusive policies*, reference is made, at least immediately, to the concept of inclusion associated with people, cultures and practices, while little is reflected in the dimension of the relationship between normative documents and policies that lie within the organization of the school system.

When we talk about politics, we can give the impression of talking at an abstract level, but instead they acquire proper depth if we associate them with people, their actions and context.

Discussing policies with regard to scholastic institutions means talking about all those actions, specific to the actors of the scholastic context (manager and teachers), attributable to the organizational-managerial and educational-didactic processes that characterize the quality of teaching-learning processes and consequently the educational success of the students. The adjective "inclusive" is attributed to the meaning of giving importance to the mode of action of all the professional figures who hold roles or perform functions within the school; this modality must favor the development of agency skills centered on dialogue and comparison, on co-participation and sharing, and finally on the enhancement of human resources, context and environment.

Why could *inclusive policies* be fundamental for the governance of scholastic institutions?

The theme of *inclusive policies* (Bocci, 2016, 2018) within scholastic institutions invite to reflect on the use of effective organizational, planning and educational-didactic practices aimed at enhancing the quality of governance strategies, flexibility and efficiency of school organization. In particular, they can be an important junction for self-evaluation and self-improvement processes that require a considerable commitment by all actors of school context throughout the school year. As stated, within the Italian educational landscape, legislative innovations have been introduced that started systemic procedures through the development of valuable documents such as the Self-Assessment Report -RAV- and the Program Improvement Plan -PdM-. These documents can be considered potentially strategic to the process of evaluation and reorientation of the planning of school organization but follow predefined standards and therefore can be perceived as alien to the context. It is therefore necessary to reflect on *how* to act so that in these documents the identity of the school community is really reflected as an expression of many professional experiences joint in a single core.

The *inclusive policies*, for the above mentioned configuration, would help to make school organization evolve as a learning community, in which goals, objectives and choices are shared, communication and collaboration are encouraged and continuous training is enriched with formal, non-formal and informal moments. In this perspective, scholastic institutions are defined as a community of practice (Wenger, 2006) in which the actors involved feel they are open to experiment, welcome the comparison and are available to mutual commitment through a participatory and inclusive approach that favors the development of agency (Priestly, Biesta & Robinson 2015; Calvert 2016).

This argument leads us to argue that the development of agency skills in an inclusive perspective would represent the trait-d'union between *inclusive policies* and policies that underlie the governance of the self-assessment and self-improvement processes both in organizational-managerial and educational-didactic dimensions.

Based on these premises, the focus of the first part of our research project was to identify how managers and teachers perceive documents and tools used to carry out self-evaluation and self-improvement processes in a view of agents' participation of various actors involved. The aim was to identify all types of agents involved in these refinement processes in order to locate recurring indicators useful to deepen the investigation in a subsequent research phase.

2. Design

The whole research project aims to observe and analyze the system actions implemented by the scholastic institutions to carry out inclusive processes: attention is focused on the middle management, that is to say on the professionals (eg: school manager collaborators, instrumental functions, department coordinators, tutors) involved in self-assessment and self-improvement procedures. Their function could act as an engine for the professional development of teachers, staff and students, encouraging shared and co-participatory forms of agency through which the decision-making and coordination modalities and the systematic nature of the procedures are implemented.

The research project tries to answer to the following questions:

- what are the modalities through which the self-assessment and improvement procedures involved in the inclusive governance processes are implemented?
- are the forms, through which the decision-making and coordination modalities are made explicit, really shared and co-participated?
- are the procedures put in place, systemic? Which tools and devices are used in the procedures explication?

3. Objectives

In the light of what has been said, after the acknowledgement of the fundamental importance of *inclusive policies*, the research project will develop through four objectives.

The first part of the field research aims to analyze how schools implement the self-assessment and self-improvement procedures involved in inclusive governance processes, focusing on the middle management (eg: school manager collaborators, instrumental functions, department coordinators, tutors).

Subsequently, based on the previous part's results, the objectives will be as follows:

- implement, in the schools involved, an action research project on self-assessment and improvement procedures through the Index Inclusion tool;
- implement training-research-action courses with the middle management of the schools involved, aimed at developing agency skills;
- analyze the impact of skills agency implementation on *inclusive policies* within the schools involved.

4. Methods

The first part of the research work presented here has been applied through desk analysis and research aimed at examining the existing Italian and international literature and analyzing any studies already carried out on these topics. The study also made it possible to deepen into European and Italian legislation on school policies, taking into account not only the Italian context but also that of other European education systems. This first approach contributed to determine some reflections on *inclusive policies*, especially in relation to the self-evaluation and self-improvement processes. They could be potentially strategic for the management of these processes considering: the complexity of the micro-steps of these procedures' organization; the format of the tools used; the heterogeneity of professional and cultural profiles that operate in the school; the specific peculiarities of school context. All of this confirms that we need a development of agency skills oriented to interaction, dynamism and flexibility.

The driving hypothesis is that the implementation of agency in the school context can deeply influence the educational processes by affecting cultures, policies and inclusive practices. In particular, it is hypothesized that continuous training of teachers, conducted with a view to favoring the mechanisms of agency, can contribute to the increase of agency itself, to the improvement of inclusive processes and to professional development.

Qualitative exploratory research will use mixed methods (Lucisano & Salerni, 2002; Domenici 2009; Trincherò, 2012). For this phase of the first part of the research, through the studies so far conducted, a preliminary questionnaire has been developed and submitted to educational institutions of all levels. In choosing the schools, particular attention has been paid to certain criteria, for example previous experiences in projects aimed at promoting inclusion and the degree of investment in training.

The questionnaire used in this first phase of the research has been submitted to both managers and teachers, in order to detect, as already mentioned, the perception and attitude towards the self-assessment and self-improvement processes. This survey makes it possible to identify the type of agentic behavior; some more recurring of the latter represent indicators that will be subject for further study, in subsequent investigation phase, through the use of the INDEX for inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2002) and the Critical Incident, during the conduction of the focus groups.

5. Conclusions

The report on observations related to the early results of the survey, in the first part of the field research, leads to support that: the self-evaluation and self-improvement processes require continuous and deep investigations since they are grafted onto the synergistic relationship, which involves all actors in the school context, in a co-responsible and co-participated manner, and the school context itself, which is more and more dynamic and in constant change in its specificity.

A further conclusion is that a circular process should be initiated leading to rethink spaces and times devoted to reflection on the modalities of agency and how these are practiced; to face with the feedbacks that these ways and practices highlight in order to re-orientate the agency.

In realizing these dynamics it is important to become aware of "questioning" the organizational capacity to act on an individual and collective level; this step is strongly linked to the motivation to grow as a community through a continuous development of professional learning.

Encouraging these aspects means giving voice, teacher voice, (Gerstein, 2013) to all teachers involved in these processes and dynamics.

In fact, the reciprocal relationship between *inclusive policies*-agency-governance must be nurtured and valued going to affect on the "intrinsic motivations of teachers, offering them the opportunity to build solutions to the real challenges they face in the classroom (instead of sitting in a training session that is often generalized)" (O'Brien, 2016).

In this perspective, *inclusive policies*, mediated by inclusive agency skills, can represent the hub through which start reflection paths and become aware of the importance of managing the self-evaluation and self-improvement processes based on the real needs of the school. In this way, manager and teachers, each for their function, would assume a role of active protagonist, capable of facing critical issues, collaborating in solving problems and sharing professional experiences.

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