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Teachers' Wellbeing/Malaise: Which Resources And Efforts At Individual, Group And Organizational Levels?

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Abstract

The social productive environment has changed rapidly generating new opportunities and challenges for individuals, groups, and organizations. The school-world is affected by these general changes and also subject to constant specific pressure (e.g. reforms, resources reallocation, precariousness, increasingly complex demands). In this scenario teachers play a crucial role. The research aims at investigating which are resources and efforts perceived by teachers and how these influence their wellbeing or malaise. We explored teachers' professional histories and their perception of their work group and work context(s). A phenomenological approach was adopted; 50 high-school teachers were involved; semi-structured interviews and the "Professional Life-Space Drawing" were used; content analysis and a descriptive-phenomenological analysis of Drawings were conducted. Results permit the description of different professional situations.

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1. Introduction

The school world is affected by the general social and productive change (Bauman, 2000), as well as being constantly urged by specific reforms, re-organizations, precariousness, resource reallocation, and subjected to both internal (from various organizational levels within the school) and external (e.g. students, families) demands or requests which are more and more complex and challenging (Gozzoli & Cattaneo, 2011). In this scenario teachers play a central, complex and crucial role.

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In contemporary discussions of teachers' wellbeing or malaise the construct most often referred to is burnout, in particular the conceptualization of Maslach and colleagues (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Research interest in the burnout phenomenon has concerned not only the direct impact that this syndrome has on teachers' health, but also its impact on the learning processes of students (for a meta-analysis see Montgomery & Rupp, 2005), and more broadly the cost to schools measured in terms of absenteeism, staff turnover, career change, mental health and medical claims, deteriorating performance and early retirement (Burke, Greenglass, & Schwarzer, 1996; Leithwood, Menzies, Jantzi, & Leithwood, 1999). For these reasons we believe that the study of wellbeing and malaise in a profession such as that of teaching is essential and that it can produce useful knowledge for the management of the "school system" at different levels.

2. Literature Review

Analysing the literature on the teachers' wellbeing and malaise it emerged that it is mainly focused on the phenomenon of teacher burnout (e.g. Vardenberghé & Huberman, 1999; Carson, 2006) and that numerous studies and reviews carried out on this specific issue (e.g. Vardenberghé & Huberman, 1999; Carson, 2006). It also emerged that these studies mostly used quantitative research designs, and focused on identifying potential antecedents of burnout syndrome (e.g. demographic variables, personality, contextual factors) and the psychological consequences - for example the impact on self-esteem, self-efficacy, job satisfaction - of situations in which teachers feel discomfort. Recent research informed by the work of Bronfenbrenner (1993) has highlighted the role of context and school environmental issues in triggering burnout reactions in teachers, either by facilitating or inhibiting emotional responses or attitudinal characteristics (Cano-Garcia, Padilla-Munoz, & Carrasco-Ortiz, 2005; Pietarinen, Pyhältö, Soini, & Salmela-Aro, 2013). Relevant environmental dimensions include the physical structure and specific organizational culture (more or less rigid in procedures or flexible in the management, with greater or lesser emphasis on collegiality as a working tool both with colleagues and with pupils; Grayson & Alvarez, 2008), of the specific school; the bureaucracy (autonomy, diversification of roles, production reporting, etc.) and social relationships (with the students, colleagues, leadership and family) (Carson, 2006). The social and contextual variables most frequently investigated are those relating to student behavioural problems (Chang & Davis, 2009); the need for professional recognition or prestige; level of specialization and lack of resources (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Dick & Wagner, 2001). This study was based on the Social Ecological Model (Stokols, 2000) which emphasized the importance of including factors at multiple levels, i.e. school environmental variables as well as individual variables such as motivation (Pelletier, Séguin-Lévesque, & Legault, 2002).

3. The methodological features of the research

The aim of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of professional malaise in teachers in the Italian context adopting a broad perspective and analysing different levels and dimensions (individual, group; organizational, institutional) and their intertwinement. A qualitative research design was used to investigate which are resources and efforts perceived by teachers and how these influence their wellbeing or malaise. At the individual level we explored teachers' professional histories and motivations; at the group and organizational level, teachers' perception of the quality of their relationships with students, colleagues and school manager; and at the social and institutional level, teachers' perceptions of their social mandate and relationship with the Ministry of Education. To achieve our knowledge objectives we carried out qualitative research, adopting a phenomenological approach (Richards & Morse, 2007) to allow us to explore individual teachers' lived experience and how they attribute meaning to those experiences. This methodological choice was also aimed at considering a broader range of variables and constructs and at deepening qualitative features (e.g. the teachers' life histories) that are less treated in the literature. Different tools were used for collecting data. Firstly, we conducted semi-structured interviews to provide rich data on different variables (e.g. motivation, representation of their professional role, various professional relationships); secondly, during the interviews, we asked participants to complete the Professional Life-Space Drawing; this is a semi-projective tool adapted from the Family Life Space (Mowstin, 1980; Gozzoli & Tamanza, 2008). Subjects completed two versions: one referred to the actual professional life-space, one referred to the future (in 5/6 years) professional life-space. Detailed analyses and examples of Drawings are not presented here, but it is emphasized that they

enabled us to understand better the participating teachers' experiences and points of view. Fifty Italian high-school teachers working in Lombardy participated in this research. They were selected through a purposeful sampling to select subjects with diversified experiences (e.g. age, type of high-school, subject specialism). Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were made and content analysis was carried out with the support of the software ATLAS.ti; in addition the Professional Life Space Drawings were analysed at a descriptive-phenomenological level.

4. Selected results

The results were various; we present only selected findings in order to illustrate teachers' perspectives at the different levels of analysis (individual, group and organizational/institutional) and their intertwinement. From the following description of the results it is clear that factors at every level contribute to wellbeing or malaise and the effect of each factor depends on the way it is represented, perceived and experienced by the teacher. Below we present the main results, firstly for variables at the individual level, then group and organizational/institutional level variables.

- *Past and current motivation*: from the data we identified three types of motivation at work: A) idealized or 'crystallized' motivation: it supported and continues to support the teacher, but seems to be detached from the everyday professional life; it seems to be fix and relatively unchangeable; B) 'mortified' or absent motivation: where professional motivation had decreased or was already low and utilitarian at the beginning of the teacher's career; C) 'renewed' motivation: over time the teacher succeeded in giving a renewed meaning/sense to her/his work in particular thank to the relationship with the students; this internal process allowed the teacher to sustain her/his motivation.
- *Representation of social mandate*: this issue concerns the perception of the social mandate that the teachers consider to have and that the school attributes to them. We identified various features: A) a rigid representation of the social mandate which mainly reflected the primary aim of the school; B) a confused representation of the social mandate where teachers feel that different agencies make them different, sometimes unclear and inconsistent, requests; C) a generative representation of the social mandate which is more flexible, creative and open, resulting in more interchange between the teachers and the various actors and agencies they have to deal with.
- *Teachers' representation of the value of their professional role*: three main patterns emerged from the data: A) an abstract representation which is idealized and disconnected from daily work; B) teaching is seen as having a reduced value; this representation was based on strong perceptions of the amount of effort required on a day-to-day basis and the frequently negative societal evaluation of the role; C) a realistic representation in which both the challenging or negative aspects of the role (e.g. the effort required) and the positive aspects (e.g. resources available) are acknowledged.
- *Necessary professional skills and the perceived training needs*: firstly, 'didactic-technical' skills were most often cited by participants; these are perceived as 'core competences' and training in these skills is perceived to be adequate. Secondly, participants cited relational competences, related to management of relationships with students, colleagues, parents, etc. These skills were defined as crucial; training in them was recognized as important and desirable, but was less frequently attended by the teachers although many participants emphasized that much of the effort, and the routine difficulties of their role were connected to the management of relationships. Finally, participants described the bureaucratic, technological and linguistic skills (e.g. knowledge of the English language) that they felt were increasingly demanded by the Ministry of Education and by the managers of their schools. Although these skills do not represent the core competences of the teacher's role it is important to develop them, because otherwise teaching in the current environment becomes effortful and frustrating due to, for example loss of time or the perceived impossibility of carrying out work requested by the Ministry of Education.
- *Representation of the relationship with students*: relationships with students, which have both positive and critical aspects, were perceived by almost all the participating teachers as the central feature of their job and as the aspect that gives meaning to their work.

- *Representation of the relationship with the colleagues*: in some cases these were characterized by indifference, in others by a non-constructive conflict, and in others as relationships based on trust, dialogue, and confrontation. If we consider a group of teachers managing single class, it becomes evident that the specific/contextual mix of relationships that is established determines whether the teachers involved feel supported and perceive the possibility to develop shared objectives and a group project on the class. It is interesting to note that many of the participants highlighted that peers teaching the same subject were an important source of professional support. A point often stressed by participants was that opportunities for group work were often dominated by bureaucratic issues and thus their potential value for teamwork and mutual support was often lost.
- *Representation of the relationship with the school manager*: the relationship with the school manager is sometimes perceived as a positive and collaborative; sometimes as difficult.
- *Representation of the relationship with the Ministry of Education*: mainly characterized as distant, negative and a source of dissatisfaction and fatigue. Reforms and demands thought to come from ‘above’ and perceived as being inconsistent with the everyday challenges many teachers face (e.g. precariousness) contributed to this representation.

5. Discussion

By reevaluating the content analysis of teachers’ stories in terms of concepts of wellbeing or malaise we were able to identify three possible situations. We identified these situations by crossing the variables analysed above. The first situation outlined is that of a ‘manifested malaise’ (27% of the sample). This is the situation in which teachers express ‘crystallized motivation’, devaluation of the professional role of teacher, a perception of a lack of organizational support, not feeling that one’s colleagues were a source of support or a ‘resource’ and a perception that the Ministry of Education is distant. The second one is a ‘defensive or ‘in retreat’ situation (41% of the sample). This is the situation perceived by teachers that express weak motivation, an abstract representation of the value of the professional role (albeit its value is recognized), perceived loneliness in the organizational context combined with some good interpersonal ties, for example with students or a subgroup of colleagues; this ensemble of meaningful bonds was perceived as positive and a resource that allowed them to ‘keep going’ in the daily work. Finally, the ‘generative’ situation (32% of the sample). This is the situation in which teachers express renewed motivation, realistic attribution of value to the professional role and good interpersonal bonds (both positive/resource, and critical aspects of these relationships are recognized). Figures in the organizational context - including the Ministry of Education - and social context were perceived as possible interlocutors. This approach allows teachers to feel the support and the possibility to make plans at the individual and group levels.

6. Conclusion

The professional situations identified in this study are a first attempt to pull together a considerable amount of data collected from encounters with many high school teachers in the Italian context over the past few years. The qualitative methodology allowed us to capture the depth and complexity of individual stories and relate them to the organizational contexts. This has provided useful insights into design for future research studies and suggested possible interventions to support these professionals who are so central to the educational system, namely training courses, career counselling programmes for groups of teachers in specific contexts, etc.

As with any study of this nature, a number of limitations have to be pointed out. The use of qualitative methodology did not allow us to extend the survey to a larger sample; it might also be interesting to extend the investigation to teachers of other grades.

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