

# Community of Practice and Teacher's Professional Development: An Explorative Survey\*

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## COMUNITÀ DI PRATICA E SVILUPPO PROFESSIONALE DEL DOCENTE: UN'INDAGINE ESPLORATIVA

### ABSTRACT

*The article shows the outcomes of an explorative survey employing interviews, case analysis and focus groups on a sample of newly employed teachers in Rome in 2012. The hypothesis leading the research is that, within the Italian context of school autonomy, the school management that is able to promote a distributed leadership (Spillane, 2005) finds ways to recognize, support and develop the communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). It is expected that promoting a distributed leadership through the community of practice both assists the teacher's professional development and produces a positive effect in the learning processes. The research also investigates the way in which the experienced teachers and the whole institute support the newly employed teachers. Results indicate that the process with which the new teachers enter into school is critical. Results also point out: the fragile role of the teacher tutoring the newcomer; the influence of the experienced teachers who know the context better; the strategic role of the school principals, but also the principals unawareness of the informal local practices of learning. The article points out diverse interesting points of the Italian school system that is about to employ permanently a number of teachers.*

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*Keywords:* Community of practice, Distributed leadership, Newly employed teachers, Professional development, Tutorship.

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1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:  
THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE APPROACH  
THAT IS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

The community of practice (CoP) are social interaction processes identified and studied for the first time by Lave and Wenger (1991) at the end of the '80s. It is a situated and social theory of learning that Wenger (1998) developed by deepening the theoretical topics that make explicit the concept of community, and by making comparisons with data taken from field research. The authors found that learning mechanisms depend on the interaction between experts and novices, and are connected to the participation in the social practices of the newcomer, and shared with the other actors in the context. Learning is not the passive acquisition of abstract and formal notions transmitted by others, but a social process realized through the mechanism of the «legitimate peripheral participation»<sup>1</sup>. This is a key concept of the learning theory put forward by Lave and Wenger. It is the «analytical perspective», the «characterizing process of learning», which is defined as situated activity, a modality through which a person eventually fully participates in a socio-cultural practice, thus developing his/her identity and belonging to the community.

This learning theory entails a new general theoretical conception of learning as social practice emphasizing: the relational features of knowledge, the comprehension and learning; the negotiated construction of meaning; the focused learning activity from a cultural and socio-historical perspective. Wenger lists three dimension characterizing CoPs:

- a. *Reciprocal commitment*, an interaction within the community takes place with discussions, common activities and reciprocal help.
- b. *Common endeavours*, an identity coming from the sharing of interests, commitment and loyalty of its participants. Under these conditions the community gains a collective competence, and its members learn from each other.

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<sup>1</sup> A process through which the peripheral members of the group, the less expert ones, are fully legitimate to belong to the community to share resources and experiences, participate in discussions, interact as peers with the most expert colleagues, thus realizing a real cognitive apprenticeship (Alessandrini, 2007).

c. *Shared praxis or common repertoire.* These are resources and shared practices, which result from the informal and continuous interaction and discussion of the personal experiences dialectics shared with the community.

How can schools improve the collaborative practices? How can they promote collaborative learning processes? How can schools facilitate the entrance and belonging of newly employed teachers, thus making them part of daily life of the school?

A research conducted on newly employed teachers in Italy by the Giovanni Agnelli Foundation (2009 and 2010) shows that newcomers have a positive and satisfying relational attitude within schools; they also entertain positive relationships with their colleagues, the other school personnel and the school principal. However, the research also shows a criticality: the personal relationships are more satisfying when they are freed from «the burden of collegiality». The newly employed teachers seem to underestimate the «new competencies required from them by the school autonomy, the competencies allowing them to take more responsibilities and participating in the school management» (Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 2009, p. 149). Since a special sensitiveness in the school world has always characterized the educational community and the sharing of the choices made, it seems that there is a good ground to develop communities of practice in school. This could entail a community of teachers in didactics and another community for the administrative and technical personnel. Hearing the voice of newcomers is of interest, as they are the people who will manage the school in the near future.

## 2. CONTEXT AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

The research has been conducted by the Department of Educational Sciences of Roma Tre University from 2010 to 2012, and aimed at detecting the professional representations and beliefs of a sample of permanently newly employed teachers. The hypothesis leading the research is the following: «[...] within the Italian context of school autonomy, the school management able to promote a distributed leadership [Spillane, 2005; Domenici & Moretti, 2011; Serpieri, 2012; Gunter, Hall, & Bragg, 2013] finds ways to recognize, support and develop the communities of practice [Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Alessandrini, 2005 and 2007]».

Putting into place such learning environments can ensure better sharing conditions within school organizations. It is expected that promoting a distributed leadership through the community of practice both backs the

teacher's professional development and produces an indirect effect in the learning processes in the school (Alessandrini, 2007; Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2008; Costa, 2011; Lipari & Valentini, 2013). The research also investigates the way expert teachers and the whole school supports the newly arrived teachers. The research also seeks to investigate:

- a. the inclusion processes that school and teachers put into place to assist the integration of the newly employed teachers;
- b. to what extent the communities of practice improve the efficacy and support the motivation of the school personnel;
- c. the role of tutoring and mentoring (Bubb & Earley, 2010) when the experienced teachers learn new practices from their newly employed counterparts;
- d. the influence of the school principal's leadership style on the teachers' sharing processes.

Reflecting on the data gathered will make it possible to focus on the conditions allowing for the development of the communities of practice in the school as well as the possible limitations of the communities of practice.

### 3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA TREATMENT

The research was observational and explorative, hence mainly qualitative, and involved nineteen newly employed teachers coming from eleven schools of Rome, and four newly employed teachers of a school in the province of Rome followed through case study technique. The research was conducted through in-depth interviews<sup>2</sup>, a case study and a focus group. During in-depth interviews some questions were used flexibly, that is summarized or rephrased according to the specific situation and context. These questions leading the conversation referred to six areas of interest for the research: (1) analysis of the context; (2) interactions; (3) places, physical spaces and timing of the interactions and the sharing; (4) boundaries and inter organizational interactions; (5) meetings and other formal happenings; (6) reflections on the overall experience.

The in-depth interviews were carried out from January to November 2012, the average was one hour long, with a minimum of forty-five minutes and a maximum of two hours. The interviews were conducted in the school where the teachers were undertaking their service, but out of their working hours. In order to guarantee homogeneity, the interviews were conducted

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<sup>2</sup> The questions can be retrieved at: <http://lme.crisfad.uniroma3.it/latinleadership/>.

by the same researcher who followed a protocol discussed with the research group. The researcher in charge of the study took part to the focus group as observer to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions.

The researchers contacted the teachers via telephone to arrange the interview. Sometimes it was necessary to ask for permission to the school principal. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, then underwent a text analysis with NVivo 10.0 software (Pacifico & Coppola, 2010; Coppola, 2011). Before proceeding with the analysis of the interviews, a focus group was organized in relation to the community of practice and the way novices learn in the school context. The focus group was chaired by a member of the research team<sup>3</sup>. The other research group members taking part in the focus group were the two researchers who recorded and transcribed the interviews, and another three researchers who had read the transcriptions. The focus group was audio recorded and then transcribed, and these outcomes were discussed during another meeting of the research group with the aim to proceed to data analysis with a shared perspective.

#### 4. FEATURES OF THE INTERVIEWED NEWLY ARRIVED TEACHERS

The following criteria were adopted when looking for the research subjects to be interviewed:

- a. teachers who carried out their year's training in a school within Rome, and that, having filled out mandatory request to be transferred to the school of destination for their permanent job, chose to stay in the school where they had been trained;
- b. teachers representative of the formative system of Rome city, especially referring to the «schools of the city centre» and «schools of the periphery»;
- c. teachers representative of every school level (primary, middle and high schools);
- d. ensuring for every school level the participation of at least a male subject.

Twenty-three teachers were interviewed in the research (three of which males): five from primary school, twelve from middle school and three from high school settings. The average age of the sample was forty-one years and seven months with a minimum age of 24 years and a maximum age of sixty-six years. In regard to their experience, there was no teacher who was a beginner, as before obtaining their permanent position, every subject had

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<sup>3</sup> The research members of this team were: Domenico Lipari, Piero Valentini, Claudio Pignalberi, Martina Lippolis.

at least one year's experience. Among the most telling examples, there were teachers who were taken on after twenty-three years' casual work, and others who, after thirteen years' temporary work, were hired permanently and still felt incompetent. Concerning the type of job, 43% worked as special needs teacher, which represents a preferential path to be employed permanently (Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 2009 and 2010). Most of the interviewees (13 out of 23, 56.5%) worked as class teachers (hence not as special needs teachers) in the following subjects: literature, maths, foreign languages, arts and physical education.

## 5. RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEWS

The transcribed interviews underwent text analysis through NVivo software. The text was codified through the instrument «nodes» referring to the six topics characterizing the interviews (context; interactions; places; physical spaces and timing of the interactions and sharing; boundaries and inter-organizational interactions; meetings and other formal happenings; reflections on the overall experience).

Another analysis was the construction of a vocabulary of 500 most used words. Through this query it was possible to find relationships between the most significant words emerged during the interviews and the nodes. Table 1 illustrates the most interesting 17 nodes selected among 47 found, and, for each node, it shows the number of interviews where the node was found (source), as well as the overall number of times the node was found (references).

From the content analysis of the interviews the main emerging topics were the formal and informal interactions, and the relationship that every teacher establishes with his/her colleagues. Other important nodes were the projects that every school develops according to their specific formative offer, the experience cumulated by the teachers, and the years' teaching before being hired. Other interesting topics were the following: cooperation and comparison, the collegial bodies, the role of the school principal, and the vision about their profession.

This article considers only few nodes; however, also the entire set of text referring to the diverse sources and references was taken into consideration during the interpretation of data.

*Table 1. – Nodes, sources e references.*

NODES	SOURCES	REFERENCES
Formal and informal interactions	23	147
Relations with the colleagues	21	137
Project	20	79
Experience	18	75
Years of teaching before being hired	23	66
Collaboration	22	64
Role of the school principal	21	57
Collegial bodies	19	55
Comparison	18	49
Vision on their own profession	18	45
Year of training	16	42
Good practices	15	42
Communication	19	42
Relationship with bureaucracy	20	39
Welcome	16	36
School referent	12	35
Suggestions to a hypothetical newcomer	19	33

### 5.1. *In-service training of newly employed teachers*

There is a consistent body of studies indicating that newly employed teachers think they lack knowledge and that their initial training was inadequate (Cavalli & Argentin, 2010; Gianferrari & Agnelli, 2010; De Simone & Molina, 2012). However, not much it is known about what new teachers think about the mandatory training accompanying the transition into permanent employment. It is thus interesting to reflect on this year's training, given that it also obtained consideration by the interviewees (26 *sources* and 42 *references*), and is referred to during online training and lectures<sup>4</sup>.

Four classes were found with text analysis dealing with the training activity considered as: formal fulfilment (42.8%), useless (26.2%) or inadequate and to be changed (14.4%); only 16.6% of the references consider the ANSAS's training activity useful or interesting. Among the most important

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<sup>4</sup> This mandatory course is organized by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR, Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca) through the National Agency for the Development of School Autonomy (ANSAS, Agenzia Nazionale per lo Sviluppo dell'Autonomia Scolastica).

drawbacks of such training, there is that it does not take into consideration the previous teacher's field work experience, which is often carried out in diverse educational settings. Teachers call for an in-service training focusing on the didactics connected to the features of the local context and POF, the formative offer of the school.

### 5.2. *Results concerning the context analysis*

The newly employed teachers worked in a school context that was peculiar because of: the individual differences of students; the whole class; the colleagues; the school principal; the families; the habits of the school; the relationships built over the time with the territory; the atmosphere. This study aims at understanding the strategies that teachers put into place to understand better the climate, the functioning of their specific class and the school in general. Results suggests that:

- a. There are differences between different school levels when referring to the choice, the school consideration and the school climate. Teachers tend to work as close as possible from their home. Only at a later stage does the teacher desire to know the history of his/her school and the relationships with the territory. Only in one case (detected in a high school) the choice depended on the appreciation of the way with which the school was managed. Referring to the school climate, both in primary and infant school, senior teachers take care of the newly employed teachers and facilitate their integration.
- b. The newly employed teachers say they were welcomed positively from their colleagues, the school principal and the vice school principal. Only in two cases the newcomer said they found it difficult to adjust to the school rules and habits. Among the categories of welcome, trust and personal value are particularly appreciated by the newcomers. However, these are also considered excessive and risky when they are accompanied with premature appointment of coordinating functions or other roles entailing responsibility. A teacher said for example: «I find a very relaxing context, even too much, as they gave me many things to do which I was not ready for! They encouraged me by saying that in case they would help me» (14/D1).

Welcome consists of being accepted by colleagues from a relational and non verbal communication point of view – the so called welcome gestures (Balduzzi, 2011), as well as the possibility to participate in formal and informal meetings where the newly employed teachers learns how school works, and he or she is made aware of the most cogent issues the school is facing.



The disciplinary department<sup>5</sup> and the class council<sup>6</sup> are seen as learning situations useful to know and to share the work practices. During the process of integration the newly employed teachers rarely take the initiative, more frequently they avoid responsibilities and hide themselves in order not to take risks or have arguments with colleagues, students, especially families.

### 5.3. *Analysis of the interactions*

The node «interactions» refers to confrontation, help, request for an opinion or suggestions, and conversations between teachers or teachers and other actors. It is considered very important for the interviewees (23 sources and 147 references). The node analysis emphasises the elements connected to formal interactions (9 sources and 14 references)<sup>7</sup> and, even more importantly, to informal interactions (16 sources and 54 references)<sup>8</sup>. Overall, the formal and informal interactions about personal experience (Mezirow, 1991; Mortari, 2003) help the newly employed teachers to become expert. A teacher stated:

I had to arrange a work group for special needs teachers, I did not know anything about it, so I was helped: «look, you have to start from here» ... slowly I found my way ... they helped me as I was helpless, I had never done this before. Even though I had worked for years in the school, I never acted as special needs teachers' coordinator. (1/D1)

The interactions have an only one direction, from the experts to the novices. When faced with problems or in critical moments, newly employed teachers utilize every type of interaction – formal or informal – or integrated forms if necessary. In any case, they tend to prefer informal interactions for their flexibility, immediacy and horizontal relationships (Eraut, 2004 and 2008; Lom & Sullenger, 2011; Salatin, 2012), since they can tackle more rapidly work problems and challenges. Among the challenges there are the relations with the families or problems triggered by students considered difficult, or students with learning disabilities.

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<sup>5</sup> In a school, the body of teachers who teach the same subject.

<sup>6</sup> The body of teachers who teach in the same class.

<sup>7</sup> The formal interactions include the interaction of information, knowledge, suggestions, materials that teachers make referring to time and spaces, in prearranged and programmed ways: meetings of the collegial bodies, class councils, department councils, work groups for special needs teachers, etcetera.

<sup>8</sup> The formal interactions comprehend the interaction of information, knowledge, suggestions, materials that teachers make spontaneously in corridors, the teachers room, the garden, etcetera.

When the new teachers meet or try to prevent problems, being aware of the risks of their work environment, they ask for help to: their colleagues with more experience or older teachers (40.2%); a specific class colleague (17.1%); the team of teachers or the class council (15.9%), the colleagues teaching the same topic (8.5%).

### 5.3.1. The interactions between the tutor and the newcomer

The interaction between the new teacher and his/her tutor is limited, and deal mostly with the arrangement of meetings for discussion. The new teachers believe that their tutor is not of help to meet the challenges they are facing. The following are telling examples:

In order to talk with my tutor, I have to chase her in between the lessons or when I have an hour when I don't teach. (1C/P1)

I talk to my class colleague because if you ask the tutor for advice she helps you and give suggestions. However, when I work in the class, it is with my class colleagues that I have to get along with. (1A/AN1)

In any case, the analysis of the node «tutor» (13 *sources*, 29 *references*) reveals that when the tutor is available and competent is considered of value by the newcomer, as from the examples below:

[...] we do not have many people we can refer to, they are all busy. Hence, having a tutor who is able to follow you is important. (22/R3)

I have received support and cooperation from a colleague of mine and tutor. She had so much experience with disabled children to advise me on the best didactics to work with. (22/C1)

The tutor is appointed by the school principal, but his/her name can be proposed by the newly employed teachers. The knowledge of the context and the length of service in that school are the most important factors to master the role, which has been designed to accompany the newly employed teachers through the process of acquisition of the necessary competencies to become a professional (Perrenoud, 1997; Pontecorvo, Ajello, & Zuccherma-glio, 2004; Marconi, 2008). The interviewees also contend that they seldom interact with their tutors on didactics, the school and the class projects, nor the evaluation and self-evaluation practices. This represents an issue as, to be effective, a monitoring system should support both the general topics of teaching and learning and the specific aspects of disciplinary didactics (Costa, 2011).

### 5.3.2. The interactions with the school principal

The analysis of the node called «role of the school principal» (21 *sources* and 55 *references*) shows that the school principal is considered a fundamental landmark. He or she is considered: always present (36.9%), very experienced and competent (17.5%); «sensitive and ready to listen», able to address both human and professional issues (15.8%). These qualities represent for some newly employed teachers the main reason to stay in the working place where they undertook the year's practice. However, 17.5% of the newcomers complain that the school principal is too formal, or can only be seen during the teachers council<sup>9</sup> (12.3%). The interviewees wish that newly arrived school principals can stay for longer in the school. This permanence is valued positively, as teachers feel protected and encouraged in the process of construction of a shared professional identity (Swennen, Jones, & Volman, 2010) and, when asked to do so, they feel free to act innovatively, which might not be appreciated otherwise. The following conversations are a proof.

I feel protected by the school principal when my «old colleagues» claimed that they had always done it in this way, and the school principal said it was not the right way, and explained the right way. I believe that the school principal is an important role, because every initiative starts from him. I hope that he will stay in this school for long. (8/R2)

We were able to define our identity where there is not the primacy of one person (the leader), and the school principal's support has been very important. (8/CH1)

Teachers appreciate the possibility to meet directly with their school principal with face to face meetings in order to be listened and explain their school or class issues, which most of the times are relational, but can also be connected to their job or didactics. If the role of school principal is carried out in a formal and bureaucratic fashion, for example when the teacher has to wait or arrange the meeting in advance, the relationship is considered rather unsatisfactory, as from the example below.

Last year, when you had a problem and wanted to talk to the school principal, you had just to knock at his door. By way of contrast, with this school principal you have to ask for a meeting. This already makes you understand the different climate. (8/P3)

When engaged in a discussion with the school principal, didactics is seldom mentioned. The school principal's competence and ability to listen mostly

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<sup>9</sup> In a school, the entire body of teachers.

refers to the availability and affinity experienced by the new teachers when having troubles. Most of the new teachers think that their school principal has sufficient sensitiveness to promote work or study groups among the teachers.

#### 5.4. *Places, physical spaces and times of the interactions and sharing*

In accordance with recent studies and empirical evidences (De Sanctis, 2010; Vieluf, Kaplan, Klieme, & Bayer, 2012) the hypothesis leading the research claims that the presence in the school of multiple places able to promote interactions, sharing of experience and work practices are consistent with distributed leadership. Such leadership involves the school principal, as well as a plurality of actors, resources and technical devices (Spillane, 2005; Domenici & Moretti, 2011; Serpieri, 2012). During their work, the interviewees contend that they could make use of many stimuli, spaces and times to initiate interactions, and had diverse possibility to share their practices. The Table 2 shows the spaces and instruments in order of importance used by newly employed teachers during informal interactions in the school context. The Table 2 also keeps into account the references to the nodes and the basic vocabulary.

*Table 2. – Spaces, times and instruments of the informal interactions.*

SPACES AND INSTRUMENTS	TIMES	REFERENCES %
Corridor, «on the doorstep»	Before the beginning of the lesson; at the end of the day; during the exit; during breaks and recesses.	35.9
Teacher's room	Before the beginning of the lesson; when the teacher is at school and does not teach; during long breaks.	20.5
Coffee corner; bar, in school and out school eating places	During breaks in school hours; outside school hours; at home; in the evening.	17.9
Telephone	Outside school hours; at home; in the afternoon and in the evening. Sometimes in the morning.	10.3
Class	Team teaching; when students are doing in-class assignments.	5.1
Other (workshops, courtyard, etc.)	Team teaching; breaks and recesses; shift change.	10.3
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>100.0</b>

According to all the interviewees, the most used space is the corridor. Within the corridor there is another specific space called «doorstep» indicating the boundary separating the corridor with the class and the start of the teaching activities. The exchanges between teachers in the corridor are continuous: before the beginning of the lesson, during the shift change; during breaks and recesses, at the end of the school day and during the exit from the school, as from the examples below.

[...] then there are interactions on the door step when we shift: «did you notice what he did! Generally he would act like this, but today he did differently [...]» Hence, during shift change, but in the corridor. (1C/T7)

[...] it is important to keep the student's portfolio, by so doing we would save stops in the corridor, since the corridor is the place where we talk most. The class council lasts one hour, and this time is not enough. (1C/L1)

The teachers' room is used frequently to interact, but such space is less flexible because it requires the availability of specific and longer free time from teaching, spare time that teachers are progressively losing. The coffee break is also useful to interact with colleagues, as well as eating together both during work breaks and after work. During these informal moments teachers talk to each other about everything, they feel freer to express and not as bound as during formal meetings. The corridor, bar, classes, telephone, etcetera are spaces and tools allowing teachers to set relationships, exchanges, and ties with their colleagues, but not with their tutor or other teachers appointed with specific roles.

### *5.5. Boundaries and inter organizational interactions*

The interviewees seldom refer to the macrosystem level or talk about the positive or adverse effects of reforms on their school context. The newly employed teachers seem being monopolized by the daily issues and challenges posed by their microsystem level, that is the class. All the interviewees are aware they are part of a mesosystem, but say they are particularly busy, as «novices», to understand their activity: internal and external boundaries, features, binds and possibilities of personal initiative.

Only for a few newly employed teachers the mesosystem level, that is the school institution with its articulations and the network of schools, is considered as a resource able to promote their participation to further experiences and innovative processes useful for their personal professional development. The analysis of the interviews displays the need for the newly employed teachers to reflect upon their professional practice and strengthen

the social interaction processes with the various actors operating within the school context. However, the need felt by the interviewees to favour the cooperative construction of knowledge through the collaboration with the colleagues, and the need to activate «learning alliances» between diverse professionals, although with few exceptions, does not seem to produce tangible effects in terms of request for devices, spaces and dedicated times.

Novices show special attention to the internal dimension of the school (62%), whereas only 38% of them contend to have interactions with the teachers of other schools or network of schools. Most of the times these interactions are carried out through informal, friendly and casual modalities.

The internal inter organizational interactions are frequently initiated by the single person (23%), and concern exchange of didactic materials (8%) or exchange of information on the solutions given to problematic situations encountered (8%). Only part of the inter organizational interactions concerns internal activities directly connected to projects made within the school POF (23%).

When active, the participation of newcomers in the network of schools operating in the same territory facilitates the comparison with the other teachers, who are sometimes working in different school levels. These projects are sometimes characterized by innovative practices of distributed leadership, as from the example below:

[...] at the beginning I decided to be supported by a female teacher, then slowly she delegated some tasks such as: meeting the teachers, correcting the assignments, preparing the Power Point presentation to introduce our work to the other schools. (1A/C7)

Belonging to a comprehensive institute<sup>10</sup> is perceived as an opportunity to promote the informal interactions and word of mouth between teachers of the same institute who operate at different school levels. This happens especially when a teacher works in a class bridging two school levels, for example in the shift from infant school to primary school, and from primary school to lower middle school.

### 5.6. *Suggestions to the young newly employed teachers*

The last question of the interview concerns the request of suggestions to newly employed teachers. Basing on the experiences they have matured, the

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<sup>10</sup> Recently established in Italy, comprehensive institutes are schools embedding more school levels.

interviewees should advise possible future teachers about their entrance in the school world. This should enable the understanding of the interviewees' personal vision of their profession. The data analysis of the node called «suggestions to a hypothetical newcomer» (19 sources, 32 references) affirms the importance attributed by the newly employed teachers in respect of the implicit and explicit rules about the school functioning where they work. It is also considered of importance conforming to routines, thus carrying out the didactic practices as developed in the school's tradition. This is the reason why the interviewees suggest to be modest with the other actors of the school, and display a listening attitude towards senior teachers or colleagues more experienced of the context (53.1%). Such respectful and listening attitude is connected both to transformative processes of reflection and negotiation of the professional practices, and to adaptation processes (Caroni & Iori, 1989; Balduzzi, 2011). The process of adaptation is sometimes led by the necessity to seize some practices that they observed or suggested by the colleagues. Most of the times, however, this serves the need to avoid visibility and the assumption of responsibilities in order to prevent possible problems or conflicts. The comments below replicate the opinions of many others:

The relationship with the colleagues is fundamental. One has to try to be accommodating because the newcomers cannot expect to lay down the law. First, one has to listen and learn, and only then say his or her thoughts. I would suggest to listen a lot. (17/I1)

Entering on «tiptoe», in a rather respectful and silent fashion, but also assert him/herself for what one believes, and not subject to all that is presented. (17/C1)

Not being too pretentious, approaching the job with caution, being as modest as possible, since in this work you have to listen the others, and being willing without being arrogant. (17/MP1)

The advice to be careful about the context can also be found in the answers where the professional path to start the teaching career is essentially seen as an individual path (18.8%). It is better to «look around», be interested and settle in not to find resources able to improve one's teaching action, and avoid to seek for problems.

Although in a contained measure, the interviewees also offer advice connected to the professional aspects. They suggest a hypothetical new teacher to keep continuously updating his/her skills, to seek training and feedback from their tutor, and to keep these habits for the whole of his/her working life (15.6%). Part of the suggestions (12.5%) encourage the new teachers to «look inside to check one's own predisposition to teaching, and keep the passion alive», which, most of the times, tend to focus on the relationship with

students and exclude the school and the colleagues. Overall, the suggestions display a cautious attitude of openness to novelties, and a commitment to learn in a lifelong learning perspective through discussion with the senior colleagues, asking them suggestions on the professional practices.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The research affirms the usefulness of the theoretical approach of the community of practice to observe professional learning as social practice in the field (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Alessandrini, 2007; Lipari & Valentini, 2013). The study also confirms the newcomers as privileged witnesses and relatively original informational source to detect detailed and objective evaluations concerning quality and suitability of the initial training (De Simone & Molina, 2012), but also in-service training and quality of welcome. The analysis of the interviews allowed to detect some useful elements of knowledge, and to deepen the registry, cultural and professional profile of newly employed teachers in the following areas:

- a. the strong motivation for their work;
- b. the exchange and sharing of meaningful experiences and work practices;
- c. the use of informal circumstances to discuss their professional practice;
- d. the existence of formal «communities» particularly appreciated by teachers (class councils and disciplinary departments).

Furthermore, results of this explorative survey demonstrate the criticalities connected to the new teachers' entrance process into the school organization. Among the many issues the following emerge:

- a. the absence of exchanges and relationships that make a community of practice;
- b. the weak and scarcely effective role of teachers who act as tutors;
- c. the importance of teachers experienced of the context, sometimes they are the ones with more length of service;
- d. the strategic role of the school principal as a point of reference, but, at the same time, his or her distance to the local practices of learning, which are often informal.

These points frame a situation where the newly employed teachers are not encouraged to interact and discuss. This is especially due to the lack of spaces and times aimed at nurturing their professionalism. A fragmented context emerges which does not often favour the integration of the newcomers, and risks to leave them alone when faced with problems.



Since real communities of practice cannot be found in schools, it depends on the school principal to put into place the preconditions to favour interactions and nurture the communities of practice. They can be a resource not just to cope with the urgencies, but to reflect on the most relevant aspects of the teaching profession. The newly employed teachers have a scarce awareness of the need to build their professionalism characterized with «multiple» competences, essential to ensure an educational effective action in ever more changeable and heterogeneous contexts (Eurydice, 2008; Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 2009 and 2010).

The outcomes of the study suggest to support the newly employed teachers with the aim to connect their attitude of respect and listening to the processes of transformation, reflection and negotiation of the professional practices, rather than to trigger processes of adaptation, or passive respect of the tradition and the suggestions given by the senior teachers (Caroni & Iori, 1989; Balduzzi, 2011). Besides being beneficial, supporting teachers seems possible since the research outcomes are in line with other previous studies (Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 2009, p. 160) concerning the presence among teachers of «active» attitudes that can be brought back to the capability to learn in the field, get involved, nurture their own cognitive, motivational and affective resources. This is why during in-service training it may be useful to encourage the newcomers to utilize devices such as a portfolio to reflect on the professional practices (Rondanini, 2011), a story-telling technique to «put together the public data which is often fragmented and dispersed, and escape to a whole interpretation» (Barzanò & Grimaldi, 2013, p. 183). The analysis of the interactions illustrates that the level of interactions between the school members is characterized by the high level of trust between the individuals and the groups. These interactions should be extended and valued to enhance the teachers' capability to learn in the field making ready: «Multiple opportunities to learn and apply information. To make significant changes to their practice, teachers need multiple opportunities to learn new information and understand its implications for practice. Furthermore, they need to encounter these opportunities in environments that offer both trust and challenge» (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2008, p. 15). A cooperative school environment where the rules are perceived as clear could favour the teachers' willingness to learn rather than an individualistic climate of isolation (Rosenholtz, Bassler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 1986). Besides enhancing the horizontal dimension of the peer to peer exchange, it would be important to promote the development of a widespread formative culture, in a diachronic and processual perspective, that goes beyond the mere disciplinary vision, thus coming to a wider approach that sees as fundamental the development of a cohesive and aware community (Sergiovanni, 1994; Moretti, 2003).

In synthesis, this study highlights useful contents and trajectories to orient the necessary extension of the observations: referring especially to:

- the specific conditions promoting in the school context the development of the CoPs, having considered the lack of spaces and times specifically dedicated for the exchange and the discussion between teachers, with a special emphasis on the professional and ethical matters;
- the ways with which a school principal can exercise his or her distributed leadership, and carry out effectively his or her strategic role to favour the preconditions for the development of the CoPs, legitimating their importance in the school;
- the ways with which schools can endorse among the teachers with more length of service or more experience of the context the ones who can act as leader of newly employed teachers, thus promoting the newcomers' active and aware participation;
- the necessity to rethink deeply teachers' in-service training by anchoring it as much as possible to daily practice and activity carried out in one's own working context.

The research outcomes affirm the need to «motivate teachers, and involve them directly and fully in innovation processes, thus investing on in-service training and professional development, elements that today are quite lacking» (Moretti, 2012, p. 125). These elements are decisive for the Italian school system which is about to end teachers' precariousness, permanently employing a substantial number of new teachers. This study eventually affirms the importance of educational empirical research aimed at understanding thinking-in-situation of teachers, the so called «teaching culture» (Vannini, 2012), which is mostly latent, hidden by the didactic practices, and therefore cannot be observed directly. The teaching culture deals with cognitive aspects related to the teaching profession but also perceptions, motivations, attitudes and beliefs which are important to study since they contribute to shape the school climate and the direction of the processes of change and innovation in the school institutions.

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## RIASSUNTO

*Il contributo presenta gli esiti di una ricerca esplorativa svolta su un campione di insegnanti neoassunti realizzata con interviste in profondità, analisi di caso e focus group nell'anno 2012 a Roma in Italia. L'ipotesi operativa che ha guidato la ricerca è così definita: nel contesto della scuola autonoma, la dirigenza scolastica che orienta la propria azione promuovendo la leadership distribuita (Spillane, 2005) consente di individuare spazi e tempi funzionali al riconoscimento, al supporto e allo sviluppo delle comunità di pratica (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Ci si attende che la promozione della leadership distribuita, attraverso le comunità di pratica, possa promuovere lo sviluppo professionale e, indirettamente, produca un effetto positivo sui processi di apprendimento nella scuola. Si indaga in che modo gli insegnanti neoassunti sono accolti dai cosiddetti insegnanti-esperti e dall'Istituto scolastico in cui prestano servizio. I risultati testimoniano le criticità del processo di ingresso degli insegnanti nell'organizzazione scolastica: il ruolo debole e poco efficace dei docenti tutor; il peso notevole dei docenti con più esperienza del e sul contesto e talvolta con più anni di servizio; il ruolo strategico dei dirigenti scolastici, ma anche la loro distanza rispetto alle pratiche locali di apprendimento spesso informali. L'articolo individua elementi di indubbio interesse per il sistema scolastico italiano che si appresta a porre fine al precariato e a immettere in ruolo un numero considerevole di nuovi insegnanti.*

*Parole chiave:* Comunità di pratica, Insegnanti neoassunti, Leadership distribuita, Sviluppo professionale, Tutorship.