Turnover and School Management: Effects on the Organizational Climate

Francesca Dello Preite

Università degli Studi di Firenze (Italy)

francesca.dellopreite@unifi.it

TURNOVER E GESTIONE SCOLASTICA: EFFETTI SUL CLIMA ORGANIZZATIVO

Abstract

This article analyzes the possible effects that continuous head teacher turnover can have on school organizational climate. The article first presents the transformations that the Italian school system has experienced in the last fifteen years since the introduction of the autonomy law, and then provides a brief overview of the main theories regarding the organizational climate making a comparison among them, followed by the presentation of methodologies and tools to study the organizational climate. Finally, it presents a case study illustrating the difficulties faced by leaders and teachers of an Italian school that has experienced management turnover for years. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis has been performed comparing two schools located in the same area. Some diagrams show results obtained by the questionnaire filled in by teachers. Some extracts from head teacher interviews help us to understand the main issues they face when they take up their appointment in a school with a high turnover rate.

Keywords: Head teacher, Organizational climate, School, Teacher, Turnover.

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1. School and organizational complexity

The great transformations affecting the whole of society over the last few decades have also generated changes in society institutions including school, which is the place accredited for the education and development of future

generations. In this process, the Italian school system – following logics of decision-making and administrative power decentralisation – has proceeded from a top-down structure to a bottom-up organization in which the principles of didactic, organizational, research, experimental and enhanced autonomy have become the basic factors in order to implement the restructuring plan required by law (Ulivieri, 2005).

As several sector studies have highlighted, the transition from the old centralized school system to the autonomous one is not an outcome free from complications; actually, it took a broad set of problems that head teachers, teachers and administrative personnel have had to face often devoid of competences, resources and instruments suitable to their needs and to the rising critical situations (Domenici & Moretti, 2011).

One of the variables making the procedure of school autonomy all the more puzzling, concerns the reduction of job roles reserved to head teachers – a situation that has created a gap between the number of schools to run and the tenured head teachers in service. This has led to an unprecedented fact in the Italian school system: school management turnover. This has become more a complication than a means to take advantage of, with a view to change and innovation.

By starting from a consideration of the importance of organizational climate within different organizational backgrounds (Quaglino & Mander, 1987), the present study aims to identify and analyse the effects and consequences that management turnover – if it continues over time – could have on school climate.

The people who made this study possible are the teachers and head teachers who have experienced school management turnover directly, and they are compared to the personnel of a school that has instead kept its staff constant for years.

The teachers were asked to state how, in their opinion, this occurrence affects the organizational functioning in its different aspects (programs, aims, strategies, activities, communications, resources …) and their own psycho-physical well-being (feeling involved, motivated, satisfied, free to express opinions and make decisions …). Instead, when examining head teachers, the focus was based on the kind of leadership and management they were able to acquire in a short time during their stay in the school, and on the strengths and weaknesses their management generated in the school governance.

2. The organizational climate: approaches and theories in comparison

Studies on organizational climate began to be important with regard to organizational aspects especially after the studies made by psychologist Kurt Lewin when developing the «field theory» (Lewin, 1951). On this occasion he affirmed that the person and the environment have to be considered as interdepended factors. This interdependence generates a «dynamic entirety», a system that is not made up only of the number of individual parts. To analyse these interdependences, in Lewin's opinion, it is necessary to read social circumstances going beyond the perception that comes with immediate effect. It is necessary to also conduct a careful and appropriate description of the social atmosphere or of a broader set of activities in which individual social actions occur (Bolognini, 2006). Actions, which arise from interactions among people, are never equivalent to anybody's plans exactly, but undergo a group influence. Consequently, single behaviours are the result of interactions and adjustments.

These prerequisites help to better understand group functioning and organizations. Lewin suggests looking at events that happen inside the group as «nearly constant» trials. In fact, these events usually appear in conditions of relative stability, due to social powers that push in a direction, while there are others pushing in the opposite one. The concept of organizational climate has grown over time and is based on four theoretical approaches: the *structural approach*; the *perceptual approach*; the *interactive approach*; the *cultural approach*.

The *structural approach* evaluates organizational climate as a feature (or an objective quality) that comes from objective characters of the organization, which exists apart from the individuals and their perceptions (Majer & Marocci, 2003). It comes from features like: number of employees, centralization level of decisions, the number of hierarchical classes, the technologies used, and outward regulation degrees. Therefore, it is the «organizational structure» which goes to create the climate, which is perceived by its members, so it could be considered as an objective demonstration of the structure.

Against this perspective, an objection arises: if structural features are shared by the whole organization, then studies showing different climates inside the same organization are not clear.

Another criticism is that there must be a substantial link between organizational climate and its structural features, but, according to studies found in the literature, this connection is not always valid.

Instead, the *perceptual approach*, identified also as the *perceptual/psychological approach*, ascribes the origin of climate directly to the person, in his

or her interior sphere. Academics who study this approach state that each member of the organization, through his/her own cognitive process, interprets the situation s/he is experiencing and thereby guesses the organizational climate. Certainly, in this case, individual features (cognitive, emotional, affective, relationship-wise features) acquire great importance. The psychological tendency appears even to be hesitant about the existence of climate as an organizational attribute. Assuming it as an individual prerogative, there is the risk of losing the opportunity of describing the «organizational software», since everyone brings his/her own one. In actual fact, this risk was avoided also by the most indefatigable supporters of this thesis by assuming that it is proper to talk about climate only when there is sufficient agreement among people inside the same organization (Bolognini, 2006). It is quite easy to understand the limits of this perspective, which concern the restriction of having a climate definition based on a single person, precluding the possibility of giving a broader theory.

The third approach, an *interactive* one, could be viewed as deriving from a summary of the previous ones, even if it is different from them. The basic hypothesis is the principle that individuals, in responding to a specific situation, interact among themselves and these exchanges lead to a shared agreement which becomes the origin of climate (D'Amato & Majer, 2005). For this reason, climate appears as the result of an implicit negotiation, of pacts (sometimes reached inadvertently) on the meaning to give to facts and events. This interactive approach combines also surpasses the previous positions because it affirms that the person considers reality and knowledge to be neither objective nor subjective, but as a consequence of inter-subjectivity. Hence, on the one hand, this theory refers to interactions between people involved in the reality interpretation process and, on the other, recognizes that the inter-subjective process related to the building of meaning needs interaction between objective conditions and subjective awareness. This awareness is the great difference compared to the previous two approaches. It is always the «awareness of something» that a person experiences as a significant event. According to Ashforth, the interactive approach examines the relational aspects in depth. In interpersonal relationships and in groups, people develop a shared perception of the environment and its boundaries that has a subjective meaning and which grows in interactions among people (Ashforth, 1985).

The cultural approach, like the interactive one, places a value on the interaction between the organization members but, at the same time, underlines the crucial role that «culture» assumes in climate creation. Supporters of this approach take their inspiration from Schein (and from his way of assuming culture as an entity which is divisible into more levels, where «basic

assumptions, values and behaviours» take place), identify organizational climate as an element, which is part of culture, as a factor developing in interface between contingencies of a situation and interaction among organizational members (Schein, 1990). The limitation of this approach is to place the individual in a passive position (D'Amato & Majer, 2005).

3. Methodology and tools to study organizational climate

Many studies are of the opinion that organizational climate analysis can be a useful vehicle to better understand an organization and to constantly monitor the dynamics that take place within it.

Spaltro and De Vito Piscicelli think that organizational climate analysis concur to «capture» an organizational state from its members' point of view (Spaltro & De Vito Piscicelli, 1990). This allows us to compare different «snapshots» taken at different moments in order to better understand how the organization is going to develop. In this way, the principal aim becomes the possibility of obtaining detailed shared knowledge about employees' experiences looking at main organizational aspects.

Climate analysis is an activity involving widespread activation, a stimulus to clarify within-subjects, to rationalize problems; it is a study that can help to make any pre-existing tension «less dangerous» because it is observed and measured in practice, and is thus the subject of a precise study on analysing individual components. Climate can be studied in the following different circumstances: in a stable phase; during crisis periods; before implementing organizational changes; during changes.

Another reflection will be conducted on climate dimensions. These dimensions and their actual number have been the object of extensive debate that has also led to divergent points of view among academics. In particular, the doubts are about whether to measure organizational attributes or individual aspects (Bolognini, 2006). Current studies tend to describe both organizational features and the state of mind of those who take part in the organization's life.

The *Majer-D'Amato Organizational Questionnaire* (M_DOQ) is a representative example of climate measurement (Majer & Marocci, 2003). It is divided into thirteen indicators covering: the team and group cohesion; leadership and relationships with superiors; job involvement, i.e. the people involvement in the job and organization; autonomy and responsibility in the work organization; freedom to express feelings and opinions; coherence

between strategic orientations and their application; dynamism, understood as organizational vitality and inclination to innovation; job description that measures the clarity of roles and tasks; equity, which values social sensitivity and sense of unbiasedness; development and openness to personal and social progress; clarity in communication and information dissemination; the environment that includes everything concerning employee quality of life; merit recognition and stimulus to professional development.

These dimensions, apart from being explored through a quantitative approach, can be established through a qualitative approach using interviews with individuals or focus groups. The qualitative approach allows us to explore more subjective aspects and to grasp particular elements typical of a reality better than standardized methods (Mantovani, 1998). These two methods (quantitative and qualitative), while presenting very different features and information detection systems, should not be viewed as contrasting elements but as complementary ones. Both can be used during the same research process to come to a comparison of the data collected and to build a more complete picture about the reality in question (Baldacci & Frabboni, 2013).

4. Turnover management and organizational climate: a case study

The following study was carried out in 2009 in two schools located in the Italian region of Tuscany. Both of them operate in the same area, a few kilometres away from each other, and include a population aged between three and fourteen years, made up of 1,000 pupils, on average. The number of teachers is very similar in both schools and is around 100. The schools consist of three preschool institutes, three primary schools and a lower secondary school. The delivered education tends to have similarities both in terms of general objectives and in proposals and educational activities. Since 2000, Institute A, unlike Institute B, has been affected by a continuous management turnover that has lasted for over ten years. Many teachers there usually attribute the organizational dysfunction to continuous head teacher changes.

On the other hand, teachers from Institute B consider its leadership stability as an advantage for the management and the organizational climate of the school. Considering these elements, the study tried to assess whether teachers' opinions had any scientific evidence and if turnover, in addiction to affecting the organization, also influenced school climate.

The case study was divided into five steps. The first involved the presentation of the research project to the head teachers of the two schools. It

was essential to share the goals and the steps during the process, and the tools used for climate analysis, in particular, the questionnaire for teachers and in-depth interviews for head teachers.

The second step was necessary to collect information about how teachers considered themselves in the organization, to understand their comfort and their expectations, and to have interviews with head teachers. This qualitative survey was helpful to give meaning to the subsequent interpretation of the data collected through the questionnaire.

The third step involved two distinct phases: during the first, each school selected teachers to answer the questionnaire. The choice fell on teachers with at least five years of continuous service who witnessed the turnover of some or all head teachers. The second phase was devoted to the compiled questionnaire based on the M_DOQ. Regarding the questionnaire, it is important to underline that the structure also included a scan time (I-II and III period) in order to determine whether the answers would change in relation to turnover.

In the fourth step, the questionnaire data were tabulated and statistically analyzed. Each school and each grade of school data were processed to make subsequent comparisons. Furthermore, a *«Chi» test* was performed to validate the hypothesis: that continuous head teacher turnover can have effects on school organizational climate (Table 1).

The fifth and final step was used to give back results to teachers and head teachers, followed by a reflection on the possible processes to enable a better organizational climate of their school.

The following diagrams show a summary of the results obtained with the questionnaire on organizational climate answered by teachers of the two schools.

Table 1. – The «Chi» test.

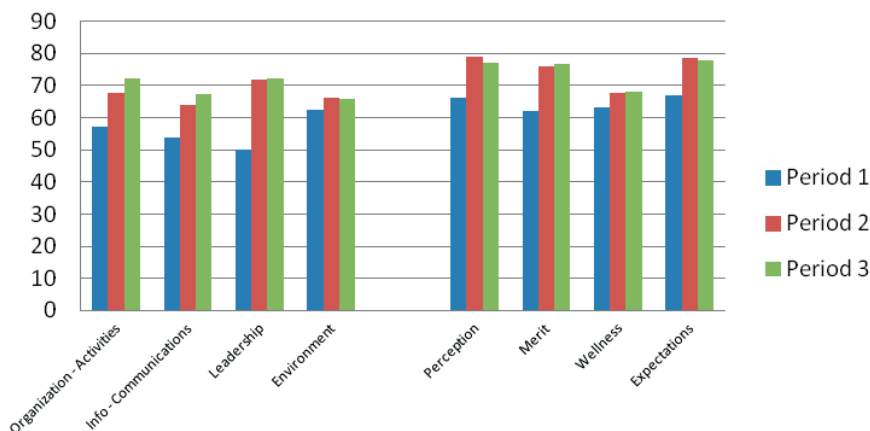|	INSTITUTE A		«CHI» test
	First period	Last period	
Satisfaction	561	836	SIGNIFICANT
No satisfaction	674	398	
	INSTITUTE B		
	I period	III period	
Satisfaction	1148	1162	NOT SIGNIFICANT
No satisfaction	160	146	

Diagram 1. – Institute A: Distribution of organizational climate factors in the three reference periods.
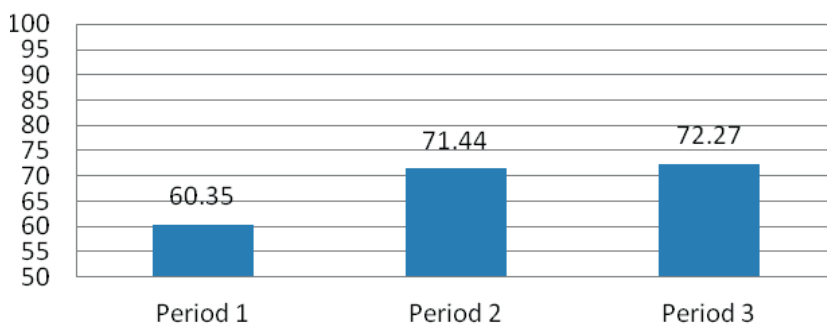

Diagram 2. – Institute A: Organizational climate in the three reference periods.

Diagram 1 «Institute A: Distribution of organizational climate factors in the three reference periods» and Diagram 2 «Institute A: Organizational climate in the three reference periods» show the organizational climate development in Institute A. One can see that in the first period, the level of teacher agreement on organizational climate was just sufficiently positive (60.3%). With the transition to the second period (71.4%) and then to the third (72.2%), the situation changes in a positive improvement compared to the initial data of about 20%. During the turnover, the factor recording the biggest change is the *leadership* one which gives a degree of initial satisfaction of about 50.5%, turning to 72.3% in the third period, and thus recording an increase of 43%.
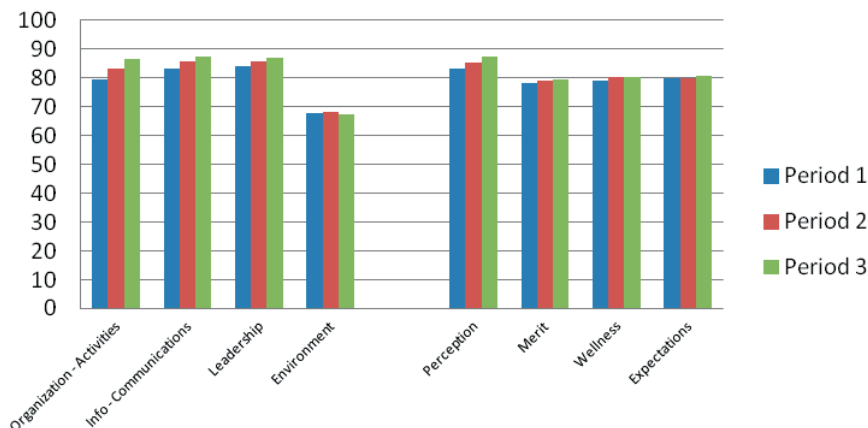
Diagram 3. – Institute B: Distribution of organizational climate factors in the three reference periods.
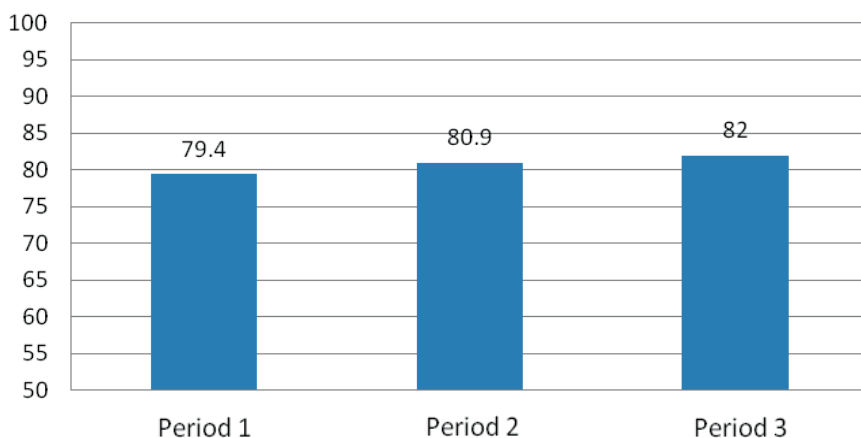

Diagram 4. – Institute B: Organizational climate in the three reference periods.

Diagram 3 «Institute B: Distribution of organizational climate factors in the three reference periods» and Diagram 4 «Institute B: Organizational climate in the three reference periods» provide an overview of the organizational climate recorded in the three reference periods at Institute B. Since the early years of the management, the level of agreement expressed by teachers is more than good and grows, even if slightly, over time, showing a variation

from the initial data of 3.2%, on average. The degree of satisfaction with regard to *leadership* changes slightly too. From an initial agreement level of 84%, it rises to 87.1% at the end of the three periods, recording a change of 3.6%.

Diagram 5 «Institutes A and B: Comparison of the organizational climate in the three reference periods» shows the data of the two schools in comparison and highlights that, while the organizational climate of Institute A (affected by turnover) changes in the three periods, the organizational climate of Institute B (with stable leadership) is almost stable. Therefore, this evaluation suggests that turnover may represent an occurrence that affects the stability/variability of school organizational climate. To obtain a more reliable validation with respect to this statement, it would be necessary to extend the research to a larger cross-section than the one analysed in this case study.
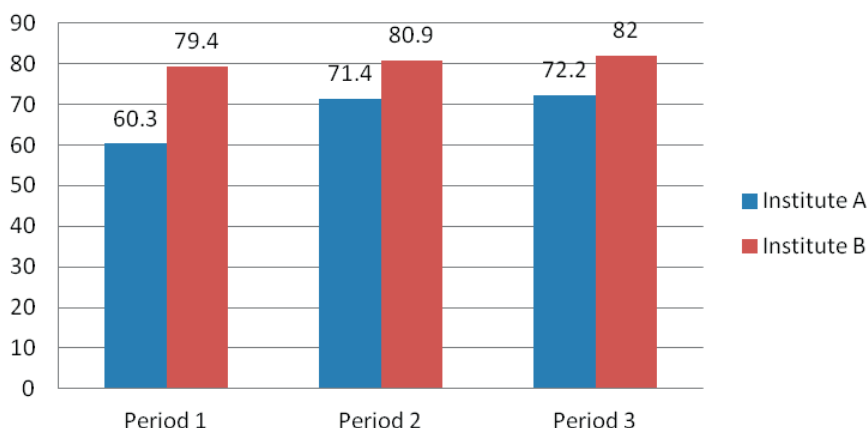

Diagram 5. – Institutes A and B: Comparison of the organizational climate in the three reference periods.

5. Head teachers' interviews: research qualitative features

The quantitative data analyzed above can also be discussed by looking at the head teachers' interviews collected in the second phase of the study. This part contains significant reflections on the dynamics that appear in schools when the leadership constantly changes. The head teachers expressed the difficulties and critical situation they observed, underlining that every day admin-

istrative goals and commitments absorb most of their time, taking away attention from less tangible, but fundamental, aspects such as organizational climate and relationships with people.

Here are some example extracts taken from the interviews.

Head teacher 1: «[…] When I went to the Institute (A) I found a different world, practices of various kinds in both economic and financial spheres, in terms of both management-organization and especially at the human level […]. In that moment, it was important to achieve some results as a new manager. Some teachers' new knowledge was pressing, a financial aspect was pressing, and regarding this I immediately saw how dangerous its management was […]. I deceived myself about improving this environment with appropriate decisions, but the environment was really degraded […]. The major concern was the financial aspect that was managed in a bad way, and the interaction with the teachers […]».

Head teacher 2: «I was asked to take the head teacher role in a period in which the climate had 'exploded' and I was told to try to patch up the different situations, as if it was easy. […] It was a heavy year for me. […] The organizational climate was affected by this whole situation. I probably made mistakes, too, because I had poor confidence in some people, keeping them as far away as possible from essential roles and from decision-making. […] Many problems I experienced (problems that continue to arise) also depend on the turnover because the lack of stable leadership and people, both employees and teachers felt they were a 'reference point', playing the head teacher role. Turnover led to giving out some organizational logics, also trivial ones; it was a 'smattering' of disconnected and improvised behaviours […]».

Head teacher 3: «When I arrived, I found a situation of terror. […] One of the goals I wanted to achieve was to create an atmosphere of serenity that had failed in the past; there was a sense of mistrust, even little desire to come to work. To be honest, in a few months there were people who showed their appreciation, recognizing that new air was in. […] I believe that, when turnover starts to become chronic, it completely disorients the whole organization of the school. The head teacher who comes just for a year has a primary need: to make sure that the financial budget is respected […]; everything else takes second place. You don't pay attention to the allocation of teachers to classes […] you can do this if you know you have continuity and not just one year».

Head teacher 4: «[…] In terms of my perception about the organizational climate, when I arrived in this institute I felt a certain willingness to accept organizational change proposals, so I felt the need to work in a better organized way; the need to move in an environment in which work is organized on time, an environment in which people are involved for the skills they have. […] Leaving the institute just after a year was a forced decision […]. To do

this job well you need a minimum of three years: one to understand, one to deal with the changes, one of adjustment. A year is too short […] so I think the institute will not accept the next head teacher turnover because they don't know whether the new leader will totally approve this way of organizing and managing things that was created during the past year […]».

6. Conclusions

Although this study does not aim to make any generalizations (also because it examines only two school situations), it does stimulate some observations. The organizational climate can change over time for several reasons, and one is head teacher turnover. Comparing a school situation affected by turnover with another one in which the leadership is stable, it turns out that the former shows an organizational climate which is subject to greater variability and it does not reach the same quality standards as the latter. On the other hand, a school with a continuous management run by the same head teacher is more likely to keep an unchanged climate over time. Another element of particular interest is the head teacher's leadership style. If leadership is exercised in a democratic and participatory way and is careful to increase empowerment in school staff, it can positively influence the general climate of the school organization, thereby creating satisfaction among staff (Marini & Mondo, 2008; Rossi, 2011 and 2012).

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Riassunto

Questo articolo analizza i possibili effetti che il cambio continuo di preside può avere sul clima organizzativo della scuola. Il primo paragrafo presenta le trasformazioni che la scuola italiana ha vissuto negli ultimi quindici anni dopo l'introduzione di un basso livello di autonomia. Dopodiché, l'articolo mostra una breve analisi delle principali teorie sul clima organizzativo facendo un confronto tra di esse, seguita dalla presentazione di metodologie e strumenti utili per studiare il clima organizzativo. Infine viene presentato un caso di studio che illustra le difficoltà incontrate da dirigenti e insegnanti di un istituto italiano che ha vissuto per anni un cambio continuo di gestione. È stata effettuata sia un'analisi quantitativa sia un'analisi qualitativa confrontando due scuole situate nella stessa zona. Alcuni diagrammi mostrano i risultati ottenuti con i dati raccolti attraverso un questionario compilato dagli insegnanti. Alcuni estratti di interviste condotte con gli insegnanti aiutano a comprendere le principali problematiche da loro vissute appena arrivati nella scuola con elevato turnover.

Parole chiave: Clima organizzativo, Dirigenti, Insegnanti, Scuola, Turnover.