

Chapter 14

Pedagogical leadership in Italian Early Childhood Education settings: Managing conflicts while facilitating participative decision-making

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Introduction

This chapter discusses conflict management in contexts of pedagogical planning. Conflicts and their management represent a challenge for pedagogical leadership. Collegial models of management that favour participative decision-making processes are particularly exposed to the risk of conflicts. Pedagogical leaders have the difficult responsibility of managing conflicts that arise in pedagogical planning in ways that do not contradict principles of participative decision-making.

This is the case for the two Italian Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings where the observation of pedagogical planning meetings was undertaken. Conflicts were observed in the organisation's review of learning activities and this chapter discusses the main forms of their management. The following section clarifies the chapter's theoretical approach to pedagogical planning and conflict management and what it means to study these processes as interactions. The third section introduces the methodology and the contexts of the research, whilst the fourth and the fifth sections are dedicated to the results of the research, illustrating the two main forms of conflict management emerging from the analysis of data: hierarchy-centred management and participation-centred management.

Pedagogical planning as interaction

Meetings dedicated to pedagogical planning are talk-saturated practices (Tracy & Dimock, 2004), that is, they are a form of interaction mainly dedicated to the coordination of actions. The coordination of actions leads to decision-making.

Pedagogical planning is a communication process that participants, including leaders, cannot control completely, because no participant can control how others understand communicative actions and the intentions underpinning them. However, pedagogical planning is not chaotic, because it is orientated by role performances and expectations. These can be observed in interaction through contextualization cues, that is, elements of the interactions, sometimes minimal but nevertheless significant, that 'highlight, foreground or make salient' (Gumperz, 1992: 232) the expectations that structure interaction.

This chapter lends itself as an example of the analytical opportunities offered by a focus on interactions. In particular, the chapter illustrates how focusing on interaction allows the observation of contextualisation cues for the construction of an

organisational culture in empirical social practice. The focus on interaction allows this chapter to explore the relationship between the organisational culture produced in empirical social practices and the organisational culture produced in institutionalised narratives.

Sociologists refer to the expectations that constitute the structures of communication as 'social structures'. These structures help participants to understand: 'what' is communicated, and the understanding of the motives of communication, as well as 'who' communicates. The same communication uttered by different participants will be understood differently. A useful theory to understand the implications of expectations connected with 'who' communicates is *positioning* (Harré & van Langhenove, 1999). In each social context, including meetings of pedagogical planning, individuals are positioned in a network of expectations that supports understanding of communication as well as understanding of the motives of communication. Individuals can be positioned as social roles in a network of normative expectations that concern standardised performances or they can be positioned as persons, in networks of expectations that concern personal expressions.

Collegial models of management

From a sociological perspective, the expansion of collegial models of management emphasising the agency of the members of the organisation is an expression of the primacy that society assigns the individual (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Collegial models of management position participants as *roles*, expected to deliver *performances* and as *persons* who have recognised rights of personal expression. Leaders in collegial models of management are positioned as transformational and are expected to promote personalised expressions towards participative decision-making. Participative decision-making should impact positively on the organisation's capability to adapt to changing environments because it enhances reflectivity (Schippers et al., 2008; Allen et al., 2019; Farini & Scollan, 2019).

This is reflected in Yeung's vision of transformational leaders as *facilitators* (Yeung, 2004). Facilitation of active participation in decision-making enhances professional and personal development of the members of the organisation as well as nurturing a richer organisational culture. Yeung discusses empirical cues that allow us to recognise participative decision making when observing organisational meetings: prompting, echoing, reaffirming, formulating personal expressions; proposing the gist of personal expressions to tease out their main points; probing personal expression via questions; questions and selections of speakers to extend the area of active participation. These are some of the actions that transform organisational interactions in opportunities for the exercise of *leadership that empowers* (Holmes et al., 2007; Pomerantz & Denvir, 2007).

About the research

This chapter discusses decision-making processes in two ECE settings located in the region of Emilia-Romagna in Italy. Emilia-Romagna is home of the Reggio Approach, internationally renowned for its support to young children's agency and personalised participation in their own education (Rinaldi, 2006). A strong influence on many ECE settings in the Emilia-Romagna region is the concept of *pedagogia relazionale*, a pillar of the Reggio Approach. *Pedagogia relazionale* can be translated as *educating*

through relationships. The epistemological foundation of pedagogica relazionale is that educating is only possible in relation with other people and in relation with the world (Spaggiari, 2004). Pedagogica relazionale emphasises working in a collegial manner, exchanging opinions and comparing points of view.

The two ECE settings participating in the research share a similar organisation, which is incidentally standard for State or Municipal ECE in Italy: three *sezioni omogenee* (age groups): three years old, four years old and five years old. Two *insegnanti* (teachers) work in each sezione. In each setting, a *coordinatrice* coordinates the activities. Nevertheless, the *coordinatrice* is not a setting manager but a local pedagogical leader who offers support in problem solving, organises partnerships with families, interfaces with local authorities.

The management of the ECE settings involved in the research are committed to participative decision making both ideologically and methodologically: enhancing the agency of children is indissolubly linked with enhancing the agency of practitioners towards collegial models of management.

The discussion of decision-making undertaken in this chapter is based on the analysis of audio recordings of eight pedagogical planning meetings.

Audio-recorded pedagogical meetings were transcribed using a simplified version of the transcription conventions of Conversation Analysis (Jefferson, 1978; Psathas & Anderson, 1990).

The discussion of data will use a selection of transcribed interactions, chosen because they are particularly meaningful examples of two main forms conflict management. The discussion develops around the following questions:

- How are conflict managed in meeting of pedagogical planning?
- Are conflict managed in line with the principle of collegiality?
- Are conflicts approached as a risk but also as an opportunity for personal expression?
- Is reflectivity enhanced by conflict management when personal expressions are supported?

The analysis of data through these questions leads to the identification of two main forms of conflict management. The first form (hierarchy-centred management of conflict, HCM) diverges from participative decision-making because it is characterised by a hierarchical management approach centred on roles performances, with little room for personal expressions. The second form of conflict management (participation-centred management of conflict, PCM), on the contrary, is compatible with participative decision-making and is instrumental to an organisational culture that values agency and personal expression.

Thus, a first outcome of analysis is that despite the organisational culture of both the ECE settings being founded on collegiality, HCM is not rare. Similar findings have been made in research focusing on the interactions in business meetings (Asmuss & Svennevig, 2009). However, a second outcome of the research is that participative decision-making can be enhanced by PCM, coherently with the settings' organisational culture.

Hierarchy-centred management of conflict

The general characteristic of HCM is that the setting leaders, often the coordinator but sometimes senior teachers too, position others as subordinates, putting at the centre of communication role performances rather than personal expressions. Rather than the outcome of facilitated discussion, the management of conflict is decided by leaders who present decisions to others instead. In the corpus of data, when HCM frames conflict management, leaders or senior teachers access the role of *gatekeepers* of the interaction, restricting the area of participation for others. Gatekeeping limits the possibility of participation both with regard to acceptability of participation (role performances marginalise personal expressions) and to the management of turn-taking. Gatekeepers may systematically prevent the inclusion of more participants in the discussion. The characteristic morphology of HCM consists of triplets of turns where a leader's assessment of performance triggers a teacher's justification which is then commented on by the leader. Triplets of leader-teacher-leader turn-taking generate interactive dyads that exclude participative decision-making.

HCM is characterised by interpersonal conflict; our data suggests that teachers tend to reject their positioning as subordinated. This is displayed by actions that suggest uneasiness about hierarchical relationships. HCM is not coherent with the culture of the organisations; the two excerpts presented here show HCM in action as well as its rejection from staff, with negative implications for the success of conflict management.

First, HCM is displayed through hierarchy-centred assessments of the teachers' role performances. In Extract 1, participants are T1, a senior teacher and two teachers working in the 5 years old sezione, T2 and T3. Although T1 works with young children, she is concerned about an activity that she had the opportunity to observe, albeit not for the whole duration.

Excerpt 1

1. T1: I think today was let's say complicated, it seems to me that there was not that engagement, I mean children and it seems to me as well that (T2) did not notice it and was not helping as I would have expected. To me, attention should be given not only on what is going on but also what is not, I mean let's say areas of disengagement. And it is difficult, for example for her (T3) as there is a focus on children's activity so here's you (T2) who is not leading because it was not the division of work you should be actively monitoring and this comes even before getting involved with the activity in the sense of getting involved with the children who engage well. Maybe in terms of planning group it is important to share an understanding of the range of roles but the first is not a role really it is being quick in switching the focus, exiting a frame to enter another one. And I wonder is there a need, but this is for me too, a need to check understanding of activities so that if children are not engaging it could be a quick fix to work with them to construct a meaning of the activity but there is here the need to fully understand the rationale
2. T2: yes ok but actually there is a reason and it's a misunderstanding from your side because I was working close to children who we had taken back to the activities so they were part of the group who was not engaging and this is what you see as an activity rather than a children focus but this is because you did not see the whole process developing

3. T3: maybe more detailed discussion when planning the activities would actually help to foresee problems so that it is not running after children when problems happen and we are obviously not prepared as we plan for success rather than failure and we think the children would love it and we will engage them so when they don't and they sort of break up in small groups, mad splinters ((laughs)) then it's too late to get them all back
4. T2: it's difficult but I suppose it's not because I needed to know more about the activity's rationale it's just that stuff like that happens and it takes a process to sort it out without shouting and screaming and it was actually happening with the time it needs
5. T1: and this is why it is a problem, that process is not manageable so needs prevention and quick reaction on first sign of the first disengaging

In Turn 1, T1 centres an extended narrative around role performances. The narration of non-optimal performances (*it seems to me as well that (T2) did not notice it and was not helping as I would have expected. To me, attention should be given not only on what is going on but also what is not*) is followed by the presentation to the teachers of more effective decision making (*here's you (T2) who is not leading because it was not the division of work you should be actively monitoring and this comes even before getting involved with the activity in the sense of getting involved with the children who engage well*). T1 positions herself as a leader in the context of a hierarchical relationship.

This is displayed by comments that deliver a negative evaluation of performances rather than discussing problems collegially. Hierarchical positioning is both the condition and outcome of T1's narrative where she is the "I" who decides actions that affect professional routines and identities for the 'us' group (*And I wonder is there is a need [...] a need to check understanding*), although this is mitigated by self-inclusion in the subordinate 'us', who need more work to understand activities (*but this is for me too*).

In Turn 2, a conflict arises as T2 rejects the subordinate positioning proposed by T1. Although mitigating it with a double disclaimer (*yes ok*) to avoid a direct rejection of T1's contribution, T2 defends her role performance and refuses to align to a narrative that positions her as someone in need of support. T1's hierarchical positioning escalates a conflict that diverts the focus of the interaction from pedagogical issues to be tackled cooperatively to the positioning of interactants vis-à-vis their professional identities. T2 rejects the mediation attempted by T3 in turn 3, because that still positions the two sezione teachers in a professional deficit. T2 emphasises her professional status and does that by soundly rejecting the validity of both T1 and T3 narrations (*I suppose it's not because I needed to know more about the activity's rationale it's just that stuff like that happens*). An opportunity for problem-solving is transformed into a confrontation centred around the right of positioning interlocutors. HCM finds an evident expression in turn 5: the conflict is deflagrated but T1 elects to manage it by ignoring it, imposing her interpretation of the situation (*this is why it is a problem, that process is not manageable so needs prevention and quick reaction on first sign of the first disengaging*). The interaction has now become a confrontation to defend the validity of previous contributions; this is the purpose of T1's comments. Turn 5 closes the exchange and the interaction moves to different topics. T1 accesses

the role of gatekeeper to control participation in the interaction, creating unfavourable conditions for further discussion. Apparently T1 succeeds in imposing her interpretation of the observed events because that goes unchallenged the second time she presents it; however, the decision to ignore the conflict not only prevents the interaction from returning to the activity but also prevents collegiality in favour of HCM. Extract 1 shows a further negative consequence of HCM: the inability to co-construct a positioning that is acceptable for all participants fuels the developing of inter-personal conflicts.

When HCM is made relevant as the framework of interaction, leaders claim superior epistemic rights associated with superior professional status, that is, with a hierarchy of roles. However, HCM contrasts with one of the ideological and methodological pillars of ECE practice in the Region, *pedagogia relazionale*. This This makes HCM unstable with two evident results: 1) leaders who enact HCM do not find co-operation from others to a point that they systematically have to rush the interaction to an end; 2) teachers who are re-positioned as subordinates systematically observe HCM as an aggression against their epistemic status and professional identity.

When leaders restrict teachers' spaces of personal expression and their responsibility in decision making, HCM functions as a *listening filter* (Scollan & McNeill, 2019) that silences teachers' voices. In our corpus of data, teachers do not offer compliance to HCM but reluctant alignment, or even open rejection with the emergence of difficult inter-personal conflicts.

Participation-centred management of conflict

The second form of conflict management observed in the data is PCM. PCM is produced when the interaction is framed by participative decision making; the structure of conflict management shifts from hierarchy to participation and expectations concern personal expressions rather than role performances.

Before turn 1, a discussion has developed about a problem: children are allowed to move between the room and the outdoor space during some activities; however, a few children have taken the role of gatekeepers trying to prevent others from going out, with ensuing conflicts being observed.

Excerpt 2

1. T4: so shouldn't we make clear some basic rules maybe we can use an activity and construct them with children because there is a general sharing of the expectation but an activity could work as let's say a symbolic seal. But I see the risk of getting children to do something they do not need to do
2. T3: we definitely should
3. T5: however, I see both sides of an argument here; the power of symbols but also the risk of imposing indirectly what we think is important and right whilst it is not strictly necessary
4. T2: I think we should be... we need to be carefully not to use the activity like a trojan horse to bring what we want in the children's world
5. T4: yes

6. Co: it's the teachers the team who have solid hands on this. Make your judgement if you see that the problem, that fighting, fighting that could have be a one off really, if that fighting happens systematically that yes it could be a good idea to construct this sort of bills of rights with the children just ask them
7. T4: it's us and children [and must be true cooperation
8. Co: [yes I think it is
9. T4: yes
10. T5: ok
11. T3: yes
12. CO: so:
13. T6: so let's see if there is a need and if there is it is an opportunity to work with them and find how they feel about being together, really

In turn 1, T3 presents the idea of developing an activity to co-construct with children explicit rules of behaviour. In line with dialogic management of problems, T4 formulates her proposals in a way that promotes agentic participation, creating a favourable environment for personal expressions (turns 2-4). In turn 5, T4 aligns with T5 and T2's concerns displaying engagement in the discussion and appreciation of other participants' contributions. What marks a distinction between this situation of PCM and the previously discussed examples of HCM is the intervention of the coordinatrice (Co) in turn 6. Co positions all teachers as experts (*it's the teachers who have the solid hands on this*), supporting their epistemic authority. The management of different opinions (for instance the enthusiastic approval of T3 as opposed to the more nuanced view taken by T5 and T2) is part of a narration of collegial discussion on which the coordinatrice explicitly puts her trust. The leader accesses the role of *facilitator* of personal expression, promoting participation. This is the meaning of Participation-Centred Management: management of disagreements does not rely on hierarchy but it relies on agentic participation. In the sequence of turns 6 to 9, Co and T4 develop an interweaving pattern of talk (Morgenthaler, 1990) which is characteristic of PCM. As shown by excerpt 2, PCM facilitates the discussion of pedagogical issues because the positioning of all participants as epistemic authorities in their professional field is not threatened by any interactional move. The couple of turns 10-11 displays a participative decision making leading to turn 12 where Co does not access the role of 'chair' who summarises the outcome of the discussion claiming the high authority of a *primus inter pares*. Rather, Co facilitates teachers' active role in the definition of the solution, mirroring T4's original sensitivity towards the importance of the symbolic dimension. T6 celebrates the reached consensus in turn 13, accessing the role of chair which is another cue for the participating frame of the meeting.

PCM as illustrated by excerpt 2 diverges from HCM as displayed, for example, by excerpt 2. In excerpt 3, Co and T4 co-construct a solution, creating a narrative of decision-making as participated and shared, thus reinforcing the epistemic status of all participants: the latter point is crucial for the interpretation of Co's turn 12. When the interaction is structured by PCM and expectations concern personal expressions, conflict management can develop as an interweaving pattern of talk whereby

participation is facilitated, because a positive value is placed on the possibility for all participants to contribute to decision-making.

Discussion and Conclusion

Participative decision-making and PCM are intertwined: they are forms of communication that are structured by expectations of personal expressions, where participants are positioned as epistemic authorities who have recognised rights to author and co-author knowledge. The analysis of interaction allows us to examine the intersection between the micro-dimension, that is, the sequences of turn of talk and the macro-dimension, that is, the culture of the organisation. The expectations that structure interaction are made visible by contextualisation cues; in the excerpts discussed in sections 4 and 5, the management of turn taking, the use of pronouns, the nature of questions are contextualisation cues for the positioning of participants.

Intersection between micro- and macro-dimensions does not necessarily entail coherence; the corpus of data produced in the research presented in this chapter offers instances where the micro-dimension of interaction contrasts with the macro-dimension of the organisational culture. This is the case with HCM in the contexts of the research, because with HCM the micro-dimension of interaction makes relevant expectations of role performance and hierarchical positioning that contrast with the participatory culture of the settings.

A genuine adhesion to the participative culture of the settings does not secure that, in the reality of empirical social practices, day after day, leaders will necessarily position themselves as facilitator of participation rather than gatekeepers. Embracing the methodology and ethics of collegial management does not guarantee that, in the reality of empirical social practices, day after day, leaders will not prioritise role performances against personal expression. The culture of the organisation can be strong and shared but cannot control the unpredictability and complexity of all interactions, where many contextual variables can play an important part, from professional exhaustion to interpersonal relationships, from stress to limited resources, from time constraints to problems in the partnership with families or local authorities.

Whilst organisational culture cannot control interaction, organisational culture can nevertheless support reflection on conflict management when importance is recognised through training and time in the life of the organisation is ring-fenced to allow collective reflection. Previous research in educational settings (Farini, 2009; Baraldi and Farini, 2012) suggest that reflection on activities can support organisational change when expectations concern equality in participation, empathy and personal expressions.

This chapter presents a limited range of conflict management scenarios. Both HCM and PCM should be understood as categories that include more nuanced and ambiguous forms of conflict management. The corpus of data offers examples of conflict management that oscillates between HCM and PCM. However, the scope of the chapter is to discuss how the culture of an organisation can be reinforced or challenged by the management of conflict, in a bid to promote reflection on the great influence that even the most ephemeral interaction can exert on the positioning of leaders and staff with implications for well-being and attitudes towards active

participation and risk-taking. For this reason, clear-cut examples from the corpus of data have been selected.

It is possible to conclude the chapter by highlighting that, notwithstanding the symbolic power of pedagogica relazionale and the collegial organisational culture of the settings participating in the research, in meetings of pedagogical planning decision making, particularly in situations of conflict, may depend on HCM where positioning concerns role performances rather than personal expression.

However, the corpus of data offers many instances, represented in the chapter by excerpt 2, where PCM facilitates participative decision that sustain non-hierarchical cooperative floor (Morgenthaler, 1990), thus favouring reflexivity (Schipper et al. 2008) and focusing the intelligence of the team on pedagogical planning rather than diverting it towards inter-personal conflict. The chapter suggests that the management of conflicts is central to pedagogical leadership. What matters is that conflicts arising in pedagogical planning are managed in a way that is participation-centred rather than hierarchy-centred.

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