

The changing role of the Assistant head in schools. Voices from the field

Nuove professionalità educative. Il ruolo della vice-dirigenza scolastica

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ABSTRACT

Who is the assistant head of school? Why has this position largely been overlooked as a significant force in educational leadership in Italy? In answering such questions, the main aim of this pilot study is to shed light on the crucial role of the assistant heads, considered as 'key pedagogical figures' in the day-to-day leadership and management of a school. This paper is exploratory in nature and follows a qualitative design based on in-depth interviews with ten assistant heads. A systematic qualitative data analysis approach grounded on cross-interview synthesis is used. Findings are critically reviewed in light of the few available national studies in the middle leadership field. Conclusions containing research recommendations will follow with the aim of paving the stage to formally recognize this neglected role.

Chi è l'*assistant head*? Perché questa professionalità educativa è stata generalmente poco indagata nella tradizionale teorizzazione pedagogica e ricerca empirica che connotano in modo specifico le istituzioni scolastiche? Nel tentare di rispondere a tali interrogativi, la finalità di questo studio è illustrare i modelli di riferimento e i tratti peculiari delle trasformazioni dell'agire educativo del profilo del docente collaboratore, considerando precipuamente le sue dimensioni pedagogiche nonché gli aspetti di caratterizzazione più didattica e organizzativa. Tale indagine esplorativa si serve di un piano di indagine di tipo qualitativo e di interviste in profondità con docenti collaboratori che sanno analizzate secondo un approccio *grounded*. Gli esiti verranno criticamente dibattuti alla luce del panorama di ricerche nazionale e internazionale al fine di introdurre alcune aperture problematiche che possano, in prospettiva, vedere impegnata la ricerca e la riflessione educativa.

KEYWORDS

Middle Leadership; Assistant Head; Educational Leadership, Italy; Distributed Leadership.
Leadership Media; Assistant-Dirigente; Leadership Educativa, Italia; Leadership Distribuita.

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, most educational reforms have been characterized by a growing trend towards decentralization and school-site management (Harris, 2014; Keddie, 2015; Diamond & Spillane, 2016). Italy is no exception. For example, the recent introduction of Law 107/2015 – the so-called “Good School” (*La Buona Scuola*), formally recognizes distributed leadership within the Italian educational system with increasing power granted to the heads of schools.

Within this accountability scenario, considerable research in school leadership literature has focused mainly on headship (e.g. Hallinger & Heck, 2011) and its role in school effectiveness and school change (e.g. David, Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). In contrast, contemporary middle leadership literature (e.g. Bennett, Woods, Wise, & Newton, 2007), although it acknowledges the pivotal role of middle leaders in securing better learning outcomes for students, is far from extensive, with Harris, Jones, Ismail & Nguyen (2019) recently pointing out that research attention on this specific layer of management has faded a little.

In the case of Italy, the discourse on school leadership is arguably at an early stage. In fact, albeit the attempts are recent (Bezzina, Paletta & Alimehmeti, 2018; Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2014; Paletta & Bezzina, 2016; Scurati & Paletta, 2009), many Italian studies of school leadership are very limited in the international educational leadership field (Bush, 2014). Moreover, given the current scenario of accountability reforms, any attempt to introduce and recognize intermediate layers of management have been unsuccessful (Pirola, 2015), with no formal legitimization of middle management roles. In reference to the Italian context, within the umbrella term middle management the roles of “*funzione strumentale*” (Petrucci, 2002; Fischer, Fischer & Masuelli, 2006) could be encompassed – that is, designated teachers who are selected to undertake specific leadership roles (subject or department coordinator, teachers with specific responsibilities, etc.) – as well as the role of assistant head (site manager or deputy head teacher). In the present article, the latter, although not officially recognized, are described as being in the middle, between the head of school and the teaching staff.

Hence, the main intent of this study is to shed light on the pivotal role of assistant heads within the Italian school system. While this paper is exploratory in nature, a detailed study later looks at the experiences of ten assistant heads from different school contexts and shows a rich variety of experiences regarding the realities of their jobs. Thus, I will argue that their contribution is necessary for the efficient and effective day-to-day leadership and management of a school. Hence, along with a legal recognition of their role, a structured plan is needed for their recruitment, training, evaluation and management. In addition, this topic is particularly pertinent at the present time and also relevant to the current debate on middle management in Italy (Bufalino, 2017). In fact, in March 2017 a new association called A.N.Co.Di.S (*Associazione Nazionale dei Collaboratori del Dirigente Scolastico*, National Association of Assistant Heads of School) was established with the aim of promoting a sense of identity among assistant heads, providing opportunities for the exchange of experiences, problems and successes, and, more importantly, obtaining legal and economic recognition of this particular professional category.

Taken together, some of the following issues have not been reported in a systematic way in the previous research. For this reason, the following research questions were addressed:

- What are the current perceptions of assistant heads regarding their roles and responsibilities?

- What are the main motivations behind the desire to hold this position?
- How is the recruitment and training process organized? How can these practices be improved?

This article is organized as follows. First, based on the identified topics, I will review the international literature on assistant headship to present a theoretical rationale on which the Italian case can be framed. In doing so, it should recognise that many of the reported studies are strongly contextualised within Anglo-American paradigms and contexts, thus raising specific issues in terms of comparability and perfect overlap with the Italian middle management layer. However, only those studies that contribute to knowledge about assistant headship in Italy and inform future research and development have been included. Second, I will briefly outline the Italian school reform context and the historical trajectory towards (-non) recognition of the assistant headship. Third, after briefly describing the methodology, I will present the findings, which will be critically reviewed considering the few available national studies in the middle leadership field. Conclusions containing research and policy recommendations will follow with the aim of opening up a debate on the need to formally recognize the essential role of the assistant head in school management.

2. An overview of the literature on middle leadership: the case of Assistant Head

Contemporary literature on middle leadership includes a far broader variety of middle leadership roles, positions and perspectives (Blandford, 2006; Irvine & Brundrett, 2016; Carter, 2016). In fact, the duties and responsibilities of middle leaders can differ from institution to institution, since they function as faculty leaders, key stage managers, heads of departments, assistant heads, teachers in charge of subjects, and team leaders (Piggot-Irvine & Locke 1999). In response to the recognized need to distribute leadership more widely (Hartley, 2016), there is a growing realization of the centrality of middle-level leaders and in particular of assistant heads and deputy heads in making a vital contribution to school improvement and implementing education reforms (Fullan, 2015). Unfortunately, considering the growing responsibilities and increased pressure on assistant heads, there is limited research providing a “conceptual framework for understanding vice principalship” (Lee, Kwan, & Walker, 2009, p.188), and assistant heads are often seen as the “forgotten men/woman” (Glanz 1994, p. 283) or as “wasted educational resources” (Harvey 1994, p. 17).

Within this “under-researched area” (Cranston, Tromans & Reugebrink, 2004, p. 225), the review of the literature is based on three major themes, as outlined below:

- a) Role and responsibilities of assistant heads;
- b) Motivations to fill the role of assistant head;
- c) Training and development opportunities (initial and on-going).

2.1. Roles and responsibilities

Given that heads of schools are delegating more responsibilities, assistant heads have several major formal and informal roles, which include both management and pedagogical responsibilities (Muijs & Harris, 2003).

Some literature suggests that the original objective of the assistant head was simply to relieve the head of school of some management and administrative tasks (Armstrong, 2009). Moreover, the head of school determines the daily work of the assistant head, which is not necessarily based on a stated job description (Marshall & Hooley, 2006). For example, the lack of a specific role was confirmed in a review of 57 job descriptions received from assistant head posts across the UK (Watson, 2005). The different types of assistant headships that emerged in this research could be categorized around three broad headings: 1) quasi-deputy headship, almost equivalent to the deputy head; 2) subordinate deputy headship; and 3) niche assistant headship, which fills a specific need in the school.

In many countries, the main role of the assistant is to contribute to ensuring order and stability in the school (Mertz, 2000; Weller & Weller, 2002). For example, in a dated, but significant review of mainly US-based studies regarding how assistants spend their time, Scoggins and Bishop (1993) reported that discipline was rated as the most common duty performed, with attendance being cited as the second most common by about one-half of the authors. Another study in the USA showed the assistant head's job to be one that centres on the management of people, particularly students (Hausman, Nebeker, McCreary, & Donaldson, 2002).

The list of duties for assistant heads over the past 25 years has remained diverse and wide-ranging, but overall, matching the complexity of the tasks and responsibilities of the headship (Lowery & Harris, 2004). In recent years, the work of assistant heads has shifted towards relationship building (both inside and outside the school) (Petzko, 2008; Militello, Fusarelli, Mattingly, & Warren, 2015), although, according to Garret (1999), most deputies thought of their role in mainly operational terms, and very few were able to develop a more strategic perspective. In addition, alongside accountability and political pressures to improve learning outcomes for students, there are increased expectations for assistant heads to be versed in pedagogy and instructional content. Along the same line, Sun's study (2012) in the US revealed that current assistant heads aspire to more instructional leadership opportunities, such as curriculum development, evaluation teachers, and formulating school goals. According to a recent study in Australia, most deputies, heads of school and many teachers saw deputies as being leaders of learning, but with a range of management and administrative responsibilities (Leaf & Odhiabo, 2017). This study reveals that heads of school have a big impact on the deputy role and therefore on their deputies' ability to operate as instructional leaders (Celiketen, 2001). These results are in line with other research, which indicates that the deputy's role is heavily influenced, and ultimately controlled, by the individual head of school.

2.2. Motivation to access

For many teachers, the opportunity to be appointed to an administrative post is considered to be an important career progress (Lee, Kwan & Walker, 2009; Armstrong, 2009): in fact, it "represents a significant milestone within the personal and professional landscape of education" (Armstrong 2009, p. 3). Unfortunately, there is not much research available that explores the subject of teachers transitioning to the role of assistant head (Hohner, 2016), as most literature focuses on the motivation to access a headship role. Within this literature, assistant principal positions could be seen as a stepping stone to the role of head principal (Marshall, Mitchell, Gross & Scott, 1992); however, clearly, not all assistant heads aspire to the position of headship (Oplatka & Tamir, 2009), while, according to an Australian

study, deputy headship is a stable phase in the career of a promising educator (Harvey, 1994). These results are confirmed by a recent report by NAHT (2016) into the working lives of deputy and assistant head teachers in the UK, where only 36% of 849 respondents aspired to headship in the future, with the rest not sure or definitely not interested.

Within the few studies on motivation to become an assistant head access, significant insights can be gained from the literature on teacher leadership (Murriss & Harris, 2003a; Wenner & Campbell, 2017) and on teacher motivation “to undertake leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom” (p. 140). However, it is important to clarify that the role of assistant head considered here is a formal role, while, within the literature, teacher leaders have been given different titles involving a variety of informal roles, and the title “tends to be an umbrella term referring to a myriad of work” (Neumerski, 2013, p. 320).

Generally, many assistant principals have come to that role through departmental headship, and teacher leadership roles may have a significant effect in generating skills and interest in formal leadership. Armstrong (2009) suggests that teachers may be prepared to take on a leadership role beyond the classroom, and that they would like to learn more about education and be involved in school policy. In addition, “many aspirants indicate that their peers encouraged them to seek a leadership position because of their leadership capabilities, sense of vision, and ability to lead others” (Armstrong, 2009, p. 567). However, not all classroom teachers want to move into a leadership role, as they fear losing their connection to the classroom, teaching and learning (Newton, Riveros & Da Costa, 2013).

2.3. Training and professional development

Assistant heads perform diverse roles, and they likely learn on the job, often with very little formal support (Armstrong, 2009; 2010). Studies in England and Wales have shown that there were concerns among deputies who had little or no experience of, or training in, management and administration, to take over the running of the school in absence of the head of school. Overall, according to a literature review (Oleszewski, Shoho & Barnett, 2012), many assistant heads do not feel well prepared to perform their role. For example, newly-appointed deputy heads in Hausman et al.'s (2002) study did not understand the nature of their role, since the knowledge base regarding the essential role of the assistant principal remains inadequate.

Armstrong (2010) presents four challenges that assistant heads face when they take on a new leadership position: 1) assistant heads experience conflicts and tensions with staff members; 2) the new assistant head is inevitably compared to his or her predecessor; 3) many assistants become overwhelmed by the workload; 4) “the pressure from a variety of stake-holders pushes principles in the spotlight to increase student performance at the behest of vocal policymakers, community members, and parents.” (Armstrong 2010, pp. 568-569).

By analysing the lack of university training and professional development for the position of assistant headship (Marshall & Hooley, 2006) Harris, Muijs & Crawford (2003) noted that assistant heads gain experience through on-the-job training or internships. Along with the lack of initial preparation, few professional development programs are designed for this group of administrators. Harris, Muijs & Crawford (2003) suggested that training programmes should skill deputy and assistant head teachers to undertake a more substantial leadership role in schools (Mertz, 2000) and these are both “necessary and desirable to ensure that leadership at this level is both enhanced and that the potential for school improvement is maximized” (p. 17).

The report concludes that people skills, communication skills, knowledge of leadership theory, techniques for improving curriculum and instruction, and working with teams are considered by deputy and assistant heads to be important elements in any future professional development programmes (Morrison, 2012).

3. Assistant Heads in Italy: a historical trajectory

The necessity of assisting the heads of schools through the presence of collaborators who have specific responsibilities in managing and leading a school has been always recognized within the Italian school system. For example, in the 20th century, the school reform *Riforma Gentile* established a *Consiglio di Presidenza* (Management School Board) in secondary schools with more than 250 students. The board was composed of the head of the school, the assistant head, and a teacher acting as a secretary (Royal Decree of 30 April 1924, art. 23). This board was suppressed in 1974; however, the Legislative Decree n. 416/1974 (which then was part of the Legislative Decree 297/1994) gave the *Collegio Docenti* (the teaching body composed of the school's teaching staff and faculty) to appoint teachers who could assist the head of school (article 7) by also indicating the maximum resources to be selected (from 1 to 4), based on the number of students in each school.

Law n. 59/1997, along with the following Presidential Decree n. 275/1999 ('the school autonomy policy'), was one of the main milestones of the Italian educational system, as schools acquired legal personality and were vested with more powers. Consequently, despite the characteristic hybridisation of the Italian school autonomy in relation to truly decentralized systems (Ballarino, 2015) a further innovation was the formation of a new headship role, inspired by the main tenets of New Public Management (NPM) and coherent with the other high civil servants in the public administration (Serpieri, 2009; Serpieri & Grimaldi, 2015). Due to their increased managerial power, heads of schools had the faculty select and identify specific teachers who could undertake specific professional duties delegated by him/her. Within this new legislative framework of school autonomy, in 2000, the Ministry of Public Education asked the Council of State for clarifications ('*Parere*') to verify the validity and the applicability of the following points of the previous Legislative Decree 297/1994:

- Article 7, comma 2, letter h 396 which attributes to the *Collegio docenti* the power to appoint the assistant head in a school;
- Article 459, which allowed, under certain conditions, the possibility to ensure their exemption or partial exemption from teaching duties.

These interesting points raise two specific issues which remain valid and debatable, and that is the recruitment of these figures and their exception from teaching duties. The Council of State officially stated that, because of his/her management role, the head of school had the faculty identify and select his assistant; although it pointed out the need for legislative initiatives to put order in the subject matter, this management tier was considered somewhat unrecognized within the school organisation system. Hence, the recruitment was (and still is) built on a personal trust relationship with the head of school, and the following reforms secure these concepts, reinforcing the possibility (but not the obligation) to appoint specific teachers to whom specific tasks may be delegated.

More recently, Law n. 190 of December 23, 2014 (Stability Law 2015) abolished the possibility for teachers with various responsibilities to have exemption and partial exemptions from performing teaching duties, as previously required by

Legislative Decree no. 297/94. Along the same line, the recent law so called *La Buona Scuola* (Law 107/2015) allows the head of school the possibility to identify up to 10 per cent of teachers who can support him/her and the organizational and educational activities of the school, with no new or increased financial charges for public finances. Hence, the identified profile of assistant heads has been replaced by a new profile of a generic 'collaborator' (10 per cent of teachers) with no specific mention of a formal role of assistant heads.

Over time, policy reforms starting from 1997 have steadily neglected the role of assistant heads while, surprisingly enough, given the increasing pressures on the head of school, there is no formal recognition of this role. Within this current scenario, one exemplary case is represented by the March 2017 establishment of a new independent and professional association named A.N.Co.Di.S. In effect, one of the main aims of this association is to shape and influence government educational policy and to secure appropriate terms and conditions of employment for this professional category.

4. Research methodology

The study was designed to be exploratory and descriptive, since it did not aim at objective, statically-generalizable statements about assistant head roles, but it possibly suggests "analytical generalizations" (Curtis, Gesler, Smith & Washburn, 2000, p.1002). The stand taken here is similar to that of Bassey's (2001) *fuzzy generalizations* with the aim of engaging in a study that might be suggestive rather than generalizable. In this sense, since few studies on assistant headship in Italian schools exist, this study could be considered as a pilot work in undertaking further studies on assistant headship (Sampson, 2004).

This study followed a qualitative design based on in-depth interviews as a method of data collection (Yin, 2009). As observed by Boyce & Neale (2006), interviews can provide rich description and explanation of an event, a human affair or a linkage between events or affairs.

Because of practical reasons, the selection of the sample participants was limited to one city in the region of Sicily, Catania. In light of the research questions of the study, I have decided to focus on recruiting multiple participants across different school typologies ($n=5$ from different *Istituti Comprensivi* and $n=5$ from secondary schools). While a purposive and convenience sampling strategy was employed, key criteria for selecting assistant heads were their working experience (min 4 years) and their position as site managers (*Referenti di plesso*) since their strategical role should be more evident (see Tab.1)

Assistant Head	Gender	Age	Years of experience	School typology <i>IC.Istituto comprensivo</i>
Ah1	F	45	5	IC
Ah2	M	49	8	Secondary
Ah3	M	60	16	IC
Ah4	F	55	6	IC
Ah5	M	45	4	Secondary
Ah6	F	46	5	IC
Ah7	F	48	6	Secondary
Ah8	F	55	13	Secondary
Ah9	F	59	9	IC
Ah10	F	44	4	Secondary

Tab. 1 - Sample participants

Since the focus of this article was to provide richness of details, interview protocol in this research allowed for the best analysis, as it depended on thematic strands extracted from the material by dint of the researchers' interpretive and conceptual efforts (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

Questions for assistant heads were open-ended and explored role perceptions, motivation to access the carrier, recruitment, and training issues. When interviews are semi-structured, they allow for individual variations, and as an interviewer, I felt free to probe and explore within the predetermined inquiry areas (Patton, 2002). They also helped me to probe for more detailed responses, and when necessary, I asked every respondent to repeat and clarify for me what he/she had said (Gray, 2013). Such a process facilitated my initiative to gather more in-depth insights into the participants' attitudes, thoughts, and actions (Kendall, 2008).

For data analysis, Yin's (2009) two-layer analytic technique was employed as an overall framework of analysis. The general analytic technique (first layer) relied on the literature review (see Paragraph 2), while the specific analytic techniques (second layer) involved cross-interview synthesis.

5. Findings

In this section, I present the main findings of this explorative analysis by directly quoting the words of the assistant heads, believing that their voices add power to the perspective they are offering. In order to facilitate the presentation of the findings, I have outlined the findings related to each of the identified themes to provide explanatory materials. All names are pseudonyms (Assistant head1= Ah1; Assistant head2= Ah2...)

5.1. Roles and responsibilities

Assistant heads of school have a variety of pivotal responsibilities and tasks, mainly characterized in operational and executive terms. Their days are filled with activities of management, scheduling, reporting, handling relations with parents and community, and dealing with the multiple crises and special situations that are inevitable in schools. Hence, the duties of assistant heads varied from one school to another (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2019).

Data would seem to suggest that many assistants are seldom expected to assert leadership by creating new projects or inspired initiatives. Risk taking must be limited; assistants must confine themselves to the maintenance of the order, leaving visible leadership tasks for the head of school. Finally, they maintain the norms and rules of the school culture:

"I am responsible for managing teaching staff schedules (attendance, absences, replacements...), as well as training activities for professional development" (Ah2)

"I check all the deadlines the school may have, and I am always present at all of the staff meetings in the afternoons" (Ah4)

"I take care of checking the maintenance of the buildings; for example, in June, I create a list of all the necessary actions to be taken in order to facilitate access to our different school sites. I also make sure of the correct use of the phone, the photocopier, and all other facilities equipment. In the absence of the head of school, I undertake his management and professional duties" (Ah10).

Assistant heads must frequently play the role of *mediator*, addressing the conflicts that emerge among teachers, students, and the whole community. As consequence of their *mediator* role, strong organizational and interpersonal skills are required to hold this position.

“I can act as a mediator and an arbiter... certainly, the mediational role is fundamental for the day-to-day management of a school, i.e. in the relationship with parents that sometimes are anxious and emotional ... so they can find a point of contact in the school...; in the relationship with the external authorities (i.e. the local council)” (Ah8)

“I would say a strong organizational role and a deep relational component are fundamental to performing this role” (Ah7)

In term of roles perception, it is interesting to note that all ten assistant heads share the same role ambiguity and conflict between the two typical dimensions of their professional identity: the teaching and the managerial role (Armstrong, 2009). Once cause could be the lack of a formal and stable relationship with the school system and, in particular, with the teaching staff, while the leadership role of the head of school can be essential to support and frame their responsibilities.

“My specific position is not legally recognized within the school system. In fact, the assistant head is a teacher who, by choice, plays a key role in school governance. Therefore, the ability to mediate between the two roles almost antithetically is a daily task” (Ah5)

“I have an ambivalent relationship with the other teaching staff. On one hand, I do not have a clear job position; on the one hand, I consider myself as one of their colleagues because I am still a full-time teacher, and I am not exempt from my teaching duties. I represent a point of reference for them because of my filter role in dealing with the head of school. I would define myself as a teacher who temporarily carries out this role. On the other hand, I have no ‘power’ over them because it’s not part of my responsibility. I am a colleague, and this is the contradictory aspect” (Ah6)

“I feel like I am in the middle of everything, because the lack of the leadership role of my head of school, Half of my colleagues support my job; the others (especially those who are part of the Union) tend to fight with me” (Ah3)

5.2. *Aspiration to become assistant head*

Assistants are motivated by a sense of altruism, or by the possibility to contribute to the success of his or her own school. In many cases (7 of 10) assistant heads had some prior supervisory experience, or what Marshall Marshall & Hooley (2006) define as *anticipatory socialisation* in school leadership and management. In addition, they seem to be motivated to pursue this opportunity, although they work long hours without any real economical reward. The typical assistant head seems to be motivated by his/her personal mission in their work as an administrator and his/her desire to influence and improve education. This key finding supports the previous work of Pounder and Merrill (2001).

“The basic reasons are attributed to the desire to contribute to the growth of my school in a tough neighbourhood... In fact, my school is the only stable and strong State presence in the neighbourhood... being aware of this becomes a daily challenge for those who – by choice – have decided to remain in this area despite the context, the social emergencies, the absence of other educational or cultural

institutions. Therefore, the first, and perhaps only, reason to accept this role was the challenge for a social, educational, and cultural project” (Ah12)

Nevertheless, I have been committed to 18 hours of teaching duties (mathematics and sciences), by trying to integrate teaching and this other commitment has resulted in extreme fatigue

“I am a person who always wants to experience something new. Before holding this position, I had experience in other supervisory roles in my school, which allowed me to become familiar with the whole school organisation system” (Ah8)

“An internal motivation to be personally involved in the day-to-day operations, even for free, to make things happen in a determinate way” (Ah4)

5.3. Recruitment and training issues

The recruitment of the assistant head of school is based on a trust relationship with the head of school, who can select a member of the teaching staff based on some criteria, such as: “*Reliability, seriousness, and willingness to be available and present at school*” (Ah12), “*strong organizational skills.*” (Ah10), “*skills and credibility*” (Ah9).

In terms of improvement, all assistant heads agree to include more teachers in the applicant pool panel to be sourced for this post. Therefore, one suggests to “*make the recruitment process more democratic in order to give others the opportunity to apply for*” (Ah5). In the same line, another assistant head suggests “*I would propose an analysis of CVs in order to extend this opportunity to more people. It is in a closed system and it is not easy to find a structured selection system.*” (Ah4).

An assistant detailed a significant proposal:

“My opinion is to give interested teachers the opportunity to apply for this position. His/her profile should be assessed by the Comitato Interno di Valutazione (Internal Assessment Committee). The Committee could set out specific assessment criteria by considering the professional experience and the CV of all the candidates. The number of this applicant pool should be proportional to the level of complexity of the school. The head of school can, therefore, identify the proper candidate from this pool of eligible teachers. Clearly, selected teachers must be recognized according to a specific national collective agreement, and the selected assistant head should be entitled to the exception of teaching duties with a proper role and a proper salary. With this possibility, the head of school is still responsible for the recruitment process, but at least this is carried out through agreed criteria, which may offer teachers an integrated career” (Ah2)

Regarding training, there are no existing opportunities for assistant heads of school to get formal training for the position. “*There is no structured training, no official title or certificate to hold the position* (Ah2). When an assistant head started this job, she “*jumps into the fray*” (Ah4). In fact, almost all the assistant head gained experience through self-training and on-the-job training and in three cases they expressly received support from the head.

“Well, I learned everything in the field. One of the main challenges at the beginning was the lack of time... you do not have enough time to learn when you are busy with lessons and you have to be present in class. You do not

have time to receive because managing these two things (my teaching role and my role as an assistant head) is difficult" (Ah3)

Assistant heads of school indicated a strong desire to participate in professional development activities, especially in the areas associated with management skills; in fact, there are no professional development programs designed for this professional category. In this sense, professional associations could plan and organize specific professional courses in this category

"We need to know about different organizational and managerial models of other school realities, we need to share problems with the other professionals in the school and, more importantly, we need a network for sharing our experience/challenges with other colleagues in the same position" (Ah10)

6. Discussion and conclusions

One of the main aims of this explorative study was to pave the way to a debate on assistant headship in Italy. Findings have shown the pivotal role of assistant heads in the efficient and effective management of Italian schools, since they perform a variety of activities, mostly at an operational level. This is in line with other research (Marshall & Hooley, 2006; Weller & Weller, 2002), where there is no universally accepted definition of the role or responsibilities of the assistant heads. In the presented study, the main role of the assistant head was still considered to be one of ensuring stability and order in the school, rather than a developmental function (Weller & Weller, 2002). At the same time, assistant heads were expected to fulfil all the responsibilities of the head of school, especially when he/she was absent. The expanded set of responsibilities places additional pressure and demand on the role, without a formal juridical and economical recognition as well as a proper exception from teaching duties.

There are several recommendations for future practices and research. The role of the assistant school head needs to be reconfigured and clearly defined. As shown, the lack of a clear and formal job position in the school organisation has resulted in the development of role ambiguity, because as middle managers in education, they have to balance relationships with people at different levels, but in particular, in their roles of teaching and managing. It is the nature of the job that *screams* ambiguity (Hartzell, 1995). On the other hand, they seem to fully enjoy a trust relationship with their head of school, who is responsible for their recruitment and generally trusts their work. For example, a research carried out by *Istituto IARD* in Italy (Cavalli & Fischer, 2012) indicated that heads of schools mostly consulted their assistant heads (81.5 per cent of 512 surveyed heads of schools) when they had to make strategical and sensitive decisions. This research showed, among other things, that when leaders are aware of their leadership role, they are also more likely to involve a team of collaborators in the exercise of their role. In effect, engaging many people in leadership activity is at the core of distributed leadership in action, but this would imply a much stronger leadership role for the assistant heads and some redefining of core responsibilities (Muijs & Harris 2003; Harris, Mujs & Crawford 2003). However, as rightly pointed out by Bezzina & Paletta (2016), the lack of middle-management positions together with the only prerogative afforded the heads of schools to allocate specific responsibilities to teachers over and above their teaching duties, makes it very difficult for school leaders to introduce distributed or shared leadership initiatives. In effect,

“Italy lacks an organizational component that the literature has identified as crucial to improving the quality of education” (p. 534).

The introduction of a specific and well-defined layer of management could represent an opportunity that affects career development for all the teachers in Italy (Calidoni & Weyland 2009). In fact, the Italian school system traditionally does not provide pathways, which promote meritocracy among teachers, while the only recognized career path is that of seniority, which economically and psychologically mortifies professionals within schools (Fumarco, 2006; Pirola 2015).

In addition to role restructuring, this study has emphasized the importance of professional development, which is absent or pursued on a voluntary basis. Assistant heads should receive training specific to their position (initial and ongoing) to ensure that leadership at this level is both enhanced and that the potential for school improvement is maximised (Muijs & Harris, 2003).

Overall, future research is needed to explore this neglected layer of management, which *de facto* influences schools’ effectiveness. As shown, the knowledge base remains inadequate to meet the needs for understanding this vital role in educational administration. In this sense, further research could be aimed at:

- Exploring the variety of forms of leadership/management practice enacted by assistant heads from different types of schools;
- Mapping the activities and responsibilities of the assistant heads, to understand i.e., what their main tasks are and the organizational issues on which they spend more time; how they describe their working realities;
- Assessing the degree to which these practices can contribute to the school improvement, exploring which factors (structural or agentic) can inhibit or support the full exercise of their leadership role, especially in relation with the head of school, the teaching staff, students, or all of the other members of the educational community;
- Exploring the role tensions stemming from their complex identity and their dual role as a teacher and manager;
- Identifying and evaluating strategies to improve important key issues, such as improved recruitment practices and defined requirements to access the position, a clear definition of their role within the school organization, and an evaluation of their activities; preparation for headship and succession planning issues;
- Assessing their training needs in order to design and provide professional training courses for their induction and ongoing training.

The last point should be framed within a new paradigm for the development of the full potentiality of their leadership role. In this way, rather than relegating their role to an ancillary operational mandate, new training models should be developed to enhance the role of assistant heads as school leaders who are committed to improving the quality of teaching and innovation. It is also important to promote debate through conferences, seminars, and meetings among professional associations and academia, to redefine and reaffirm the educational profile of the assistant head.

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