

The Role of Internal Managers of Children's Homes in a Time of Crisis and Change: A Social Pedagogic Perspective from Italy

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Abstract

The paper highlights the fundamental functions of the role of the internal manager - planning, human resources management, staff support, and internal and external communication (Reggio, 2008) - and presents an advanced version of the Internal Management Multidimensional Model (IM3). Attention is paid to the role that internal managers play in pursuing, managing, and synthesizing the extraordinary complexity of internal and external processes, dynamics, and issues in which every residential care centre is involved. Managers' core competence is identified as an ability to address every dimension of their role (planning, organisation, staff leadership, relations with commitments, institutions, external agencies and the community, and the development of a professional culture) based on a 'child-centred' approach from a social pedagogy perspective (Cameron & Moss, 2011). It may seem particularly challenging to take on responsibilities in a time of uncertainty and crisis, but in this situation, and particularly in the caring professions, it is important that there should be a figure who connects and guides the various professionals in such a way that fatigue and discouragement do not completely undermine the effectiveness of their interventions.

Keywords

Child residential care, internal manager, child welfare services, leadership in social care

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Introduction

The most recent official estimates report that in Italy, 28,449 children and adolescents are placed in care outside their families. Of these, 7,807 are placed in foster care and 6,387 in kinship care. The remaining 14,255 children and adolescents are placed in approximately 2,800 approved residential centres (Gruppo di Lavoro per la Convenzione dei Diritti dell'Infanzia e dell'Adolescenza, 2007).

As in other Western countries, since the 1970s, the de-institutionalisation movement in Italy has harshly criticised child protection policies, which are oriented towards placing children and adolescents at risk in structurally inadequate institutions that lack the capacity to create relational residential contexts, and where the relationships that are created do not have a truly educational and rehabilitative function (Palmonari, 2008). Although there was a consistent increase in the number of small, family-like reception facilities during the 1980s and 1990s, it was not until the end of 2006 that Law 149/2001 established that all institutions for children and adolescents had to be definitively closed.

Residential reception facilities, which are known as 'comunità educative' [educational communities] in Italy, were initially counter-posed to institutions and intended to be environments centred on the principles of 'organization and interpersonal relations similar to those of a family' (Article 2 of Law 183/1984). To this end, every residential centre is, and must be, open to the local community and integrated into local services and authorities, primarily schools. The number of children and adolescents that they can accommodate varies from nine to twelve, depending on the provisions of the relative regional law.

There is no doubt that educational and family-like communities in Italy were created and developed with close attention paid to the individual, and to his or her needs and rights, giving rise to a type of intervention that can be ascribed to the grand tradition of Italian and European social pedagogy (Premoli, 2012a; Kornbeck & Jensen, 2012; Hämäläinen, 2003). In this regard, the strengths of accompanying children's growth and change in the residential context are the following: acknowledgment that every child is unique; care for the child's existential, educational, and emotional dimensions; the quality of interpersonal relations; the capacity of the staff to listen to and understand the child and create an educational strategy centred on the person and his or her needs; a warm, safe and familial environment; and assistance from loving, stable, and constant adults. In line with the provisions of the above-mentioned Law 149, Paola Milani (2009, p.153) notes that support must be offered for the right of every child in residential care to:

- a life plan: 'the framework project is the horizon of meaning, and at the same time the container of all interventions that relate to the child and his or her family in order to ensure their new orientation to the future';
- the family: in many cases of out-of-home placement, the objective of family reunification can only be achieved if the natural parents take responsibility, and through stable contacts between the child and his or her birth family. However, if the deterioration of parenting skills has reached a

point where reintegration into the family is not possible, the child must be offered a positive family experience through fostering, or adoption in extreme cases; and the most suitable ways to maintaining a relationship with the family of origin must be identified;

- his or her own life history: 'children experiencing the difficult reality of one or more placements outside their families must retain the right - possibly more than others - to a unitary narrative history, a sense of belonging and continuity with their roots'.

Managing residential care for children and adolescents

It is well known that fair, functional services for vulnerable and troubled children, adolescents, and their families require an effective organisational structure so that care interventions can work, and the employment of a qualified professional who is able to lead, manage, and support all of these complex activities. High-quality internal management is one of the most important organisational drivers for ensuring positive outcomes for users of child-care services (Hicks, Gibbs, Weatherly & Byford, 2007; Premoli, 2010).

Studies on leadership in social work can make a major contribution to the development of a theory applied to residential facilities for children (Coulshed, 1990; Harlow, 2003; Lawler & Hearn, 1997), provided it is borne in mind that most of these studies refer to contexts characterised by very large hierarchical organisations with very well-defined operational profiles regulated by standardised principles. We know well that residential centres for children are decidedly different, smaller, and more delicate settings, which therefore require specific reflection on the leadership that must guide their operations (Hicks et al., 2007).

In Italy, the pedagogical internal manager is required to have both skills that relate to the specific interventional objective of the service that he or she coordinates (for example, the residential care of children and adolescents) and organisational skills able to create the conditions under which first-level staff can do their jobs most effectively (Premoli, 2008; Scaratti & Zambonardi, 2002; Salomone, 2001). There is, therefore, a leadership and training function which must be assumed by professionals, with skills centred on educational planning and the management of working groups and human resources. These practitioners must be personally mature, have experience in the field, and be integrated - or be willing to be integrated - into the organisational and pedagogical culture of the agency for which they work.

The Internal Management Multidimensional Model (IM3)

Residential care schemes can be understood by reading the relevant documentation (residential unit procedures, service plans for each child, reports written for the juvenile courts and the social services, and work tools such as observation grids, assessment schedules and regulations), but also by observing the small-scale simple routines that characterise day-to-day activities (Molteni, 2008). For this reason, the prime

task of coordination is to strike a balance between ensuring that planning and concrete actions are properly carried out and fostering an everyday reality replete with emotionally significant, intentional, and projected meaning (see Premoli, 2009; Stein, 2005) that can offer:

- stability, in the sense of the opportunity to 'create roots' and develop relationships, to attend school on a regular basis, to receive adequate medical treatment, to discover the local area, and to cultivate friendships;
- security, which is linked to the stability guaranteed in quotidian reality and the opportunity to experience continuing relationships with at least one parent or another family member;
- development of trust in the adult world, through attachment to at least one educator;
- formation of the child's identity;
- ability to live with one's personal history;
- enhancement of a sense of personal efficacy.

The Internal Management Multidimensional Model, also known as the IM3 (Premoli, 2008; 2010; 2012b), represents the complexity of the function of an internal manager, who must synthesise the dimensions of thought; support for educational action; governance of organisational and interpretative aspects of events, situations, and information; and promote the integration of many diverse points of view (Scaratti & Zambonardi 2002; Maffei 1994).

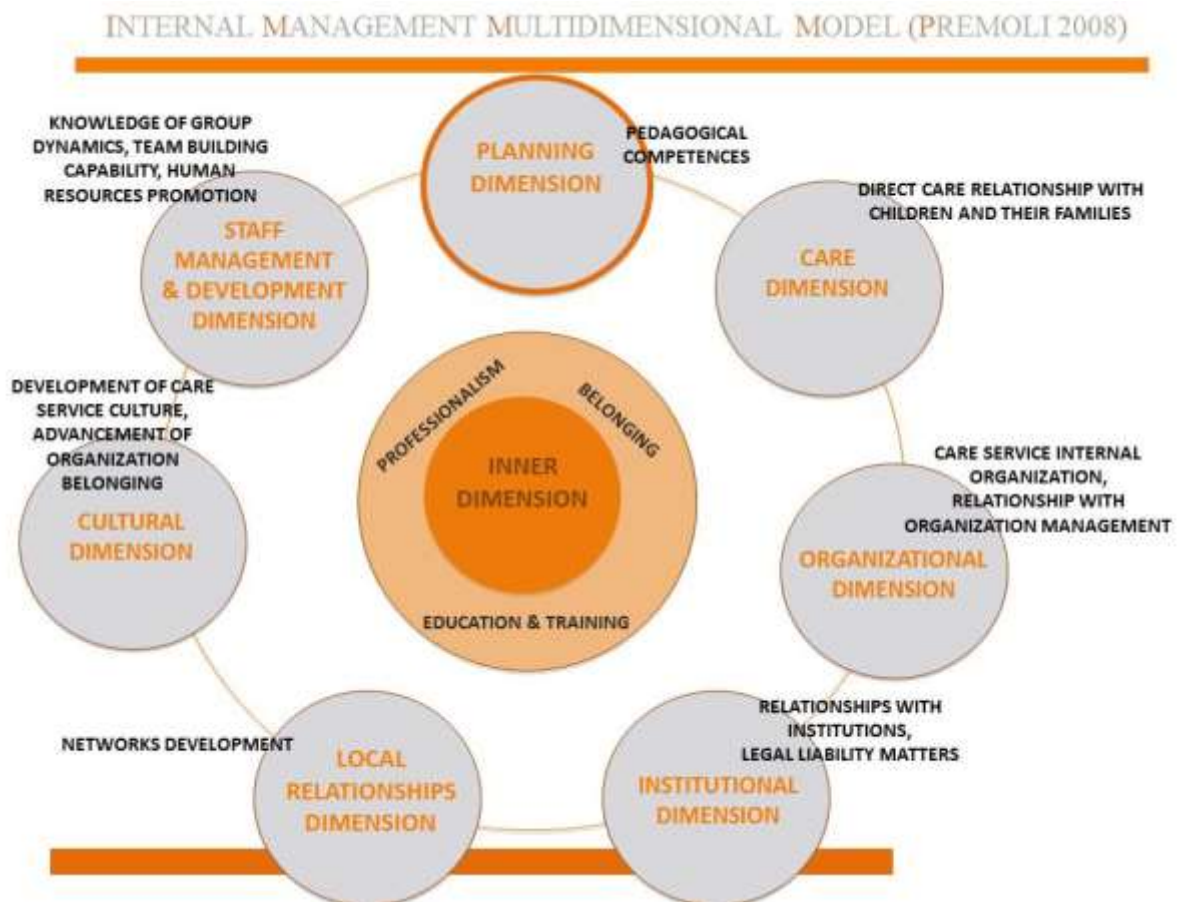


Figure 1. Internal management multidimensional model (Premoli, 2008)

The *subjective* dimension, which forms the core of this model, relates to the subjective nature of the internal manager, which consists not only of experiences, emotions, stories, thoughts, values, and beliefs, but also of professional skills and a sense of belonging to the organisation. A management role may be performed by an individual possessing a series of specific practical and relational skills, a personality suited to a leadership role, a strong sense of belonging to the organisation of which the residential facility is part, and agreement with the organisation's style of action.

Above all, internal management involves guiding and supporting the socio-educational activities of adult professionals. It is therefore essential to possess 'relational skills' (Blandino, 1993) that enable managers to tolerate the suspension of action and the solitude of responsibility, to listen to themselves and others, to remain silent while awaiting clarification, to resolve conflicts, and to manage uncertain and frustrating situations: this is a negative capability (Bion, 1970).

It is also possible to identify a second series of skills associated with the ability to assume responsibility, to take the initiative, to be creative, to make the first move, to take the floor, to seek clarification, to summarise, and to be a source of certainty for others. Substantially, this is the capacity to generate and act that complements the ability to receive, restrict and wait.

In social work, it is particularly important to exercise a formal leadership role able to create consensus and promote independence and participation. To this we should add that it is not possible to conceive of leadership responsibilities that do not require the management of differing points of view and contrasting opinions.

Many studies on educational contexts have documented the importance of leadership in the construction of a positive organisational culture (see Deal & Peterson, 1999). Accordingly, every organisation needs those with responsibilities to develop a strong sense of belonging. If the organisational culture corresponds to the set of established ways of thinking and acting that arise from a constant, unstoppable process of co-construction (Scaratti & Zambonardi 2002), then it is of fundamental importance that internal managers know how to regulate communication processes, as well as processes of mutual co-construction and negotiation of shared meanings (Weick, 1995).

While the subjective dimension is the core of the model, the socio *pedagogical planning dimension* is its interpretative key, the perspective from which all the other dimensions are observed and translated into action.

Pedagogical competence comprises ideation and planning with regard to educational and care actions on behalf of the person as a whole. Accordingly, internal managers must assume a 'pedagogical gaze' when they observe, think about, and act on every aspect of their role, not only the aspects more closely tied to educational processes and the service's users, but also those related to organisation, human resources management, and relationships with the social services, schools, courts, community, etc..

The pedagogical gaze, therefore, looks for 'potentialities' that can be used as the basis for an educational intervention strategy with the transformative force of change. In order to be able to transform constraints into resources and opportunities, and in order to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles by mobilising desires and dreams, internal managers must maintain openness to the possible in their relations with the educators that they coordinate, their managers, social workers, psychologists, teachers, and magistrates.

The pedagogical gaze, therefore, knows how to set value on real life and the here and now. At the same time it is able to renew this reality, this here and now that constitutes everyday life, and to design its change (Premoli, 2012a).

In this dimension, an internal manager's duties are:

- to give meaning to events that occur in light of constant reference to planning tools such as each child's Service Plan;
- to have a constant vision able to grasp the globality of a situation and deal with its complexities;
- to recognise the value of even the most trivial things and events, and enhance the normality of everyday life;

- to support educators in their analysis of situations in which it is necessary to assume a 'pedagogical risk': that is, those cases where children or adolescents must be permitted to live a new experience, even though it may be risky, knowing that they can trust in the adults closest to them;
- to confront compromises, requirements, and economic and bureaucratic issues, and defend educational needs;
- to develop the ability to acknowledge his or her mistakes (and to learn from them).

The core competence of internal managers is the ability to address all dimensions of their role (planning, organisation, staff leadership, relations with commitments, institutions, external agencies and the community, and the development of a professional culture) based on a 'child-centred' approach from a social pedagogy perspective (Cameron & Moss, 2011) that allows a continuous internal presence that can grasp all the small, 'insignificant' issues which make the difference in a process of personal care and change.

The *cultural dimension* concerns the ability constantly to formulate new plans while maintaining a balance between identity and change, between memory and innovation, in development of the culture of residential centres. In concrete terms, managing the processes of building an identity for the service means:

- accompanying the group of educators through the process of revisiting their experiences and constructing a shared history of the service;
- fostering the growth of a service culture, understood as a specific and conscious way to attribute meaning to the service, planning and implementing educational interventions, and selecting and evaluating the areas in which it is worth investing resources (economic, mental, temporal, professional, etc.);
- promoting the educators' sense of belonging to the organisation of which the service is part;
- fostering openness to the future, so as to prevent the possibility that focus on an idealised past or a crystallised here and now might trap the residential centre in stasis.

The *organisational dimension* relates to main issues: on the one hand, scheduling the work of staff and supervision of the service's facilities; on the other, the relationship with the organisation and its various operating systems (external manager, administration, human resources management, etc.).

Internal management must organise aspects associated with the administration of time, space and resources. Put briefly, it must:

- establish and supervise work schedules for the service and each educator (direct contacts with users, planning actions, coordinating meetings, supervision, training, network relationships, and writing reports);
- supervise the facility (layout of the premises, furniture, cleaning, tidiness, and maintenance);
- managing economic, administrative and procedural matters (outlays, documentation, certifications, inspections, etc.).

Work group leadership and supervision concerns coordination as a formal leadership function enabling a group of professionals to work to the best of their abilities.

Leadership of a working group involves three main duties (mediating among diverse points of view, communication and support, and control and assessment), and requires an ability to deal with others and understand the dynamics of the group, to discuss and listen, to negotiate and resolve disputes, to address problems and take decisions, to guide changes and build a common vision, to accompany the educators' professional growth by teaching them to give sense to events and confront problem situations, providing examples of proper conduct and attitudes, and promoting independence by delegating duties to permit the gradual acquisition of responsibilities.

The most appropriate interpretation of an internal manager's style of conduct, in my view, is that suggested from the perspective of situational leadership (Hersey and Blanchard, 1969). This approach replaces the traditional models, and makes the case that there is not just one coherent leadership style if all the variables of the context are taken into account: on the contrary, this style must be selected on the basis of the various situations that need to be managed. In this regard, Ripamonti's (2008) study on situational pedagogic coordination in social care services becomes fundamentally important, because through a systemic-relational approach, the manner in which an internal manager is influenced by the behaviour of his or her co-workers and *vice versa* is highlighted, and everyone is indissolubly tied to the features of the context in which the interaction develops. The most significant factors for analysing and defining a situation are the professional and psychological maturity of the internal manager and the members of the working group, the composition of the latter, the nature of organisational duties, and the organisational context within which the action takes place. An analysis of the situation allows identification of the features relating to the most appropriate and effective leadership style from among the following options: a directorial coordination style (low maturity level); a supportive style (low to medium maturity level); a participative coordination style (medium to high maturity level); and a cooperative coordination style (high maturity level).

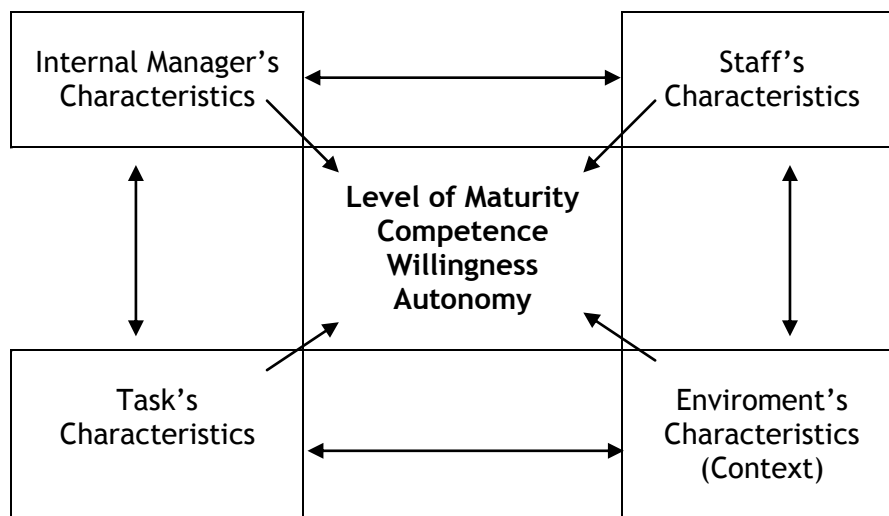


Figure 2. The Situational Analysis (Ripamonti, 2008)

Confronting the *territorial dimension* means, first, that it is necessary to define a service's territory of reference as the place where ties and relationships will develop over time from the service towards the individuals and organisations that are close to it and share the same local reality.

The duties of the internal manager may be:

- planning the forms of interaction with the local community according to the service's characteristics and needs;
- attending to network relations;
- facilitating awareness and mutual recognition between the residential unit and the local community;
- offering the service as a resource for the community.

In particular, it is of fundamental importance to acquire deep understanding of the needs of the users and the educators, and of the characteristics of the residential centre in order to gain a balanced definition of the relationship between the internal and external environments, weighing care, protection and security, on the one hand and openness, contacts and dialogue, on the other.

The *institutional dimension* concerns nature of the work undertaken to protect children in residential facilities. The most important institutions in the life of children's residential units are the juvenile court, the social services, and the school. Social workers therefore

have relations with institutions that use complex, non-participatory decision-making mechanisms and with greater powers than care agencies. Clearly, the asymmetry in decision-making power in their relations with some institutions can generate feelings of impotence and burnout in educators. The internal manager must therefore supervise this experience, reinterpret it with his or her team, and gather and process the emotions that it produces so that the educators can recognise the good work that they have done. In cases where institutional actions are seen as abuses of power on the part of the authority that frustrate care efforts, the internal manager must restore back to the educators and users the sense that they have made progress.

Externally, the internal manager's function is to enhance to the pedagogic view compared with those professional and institutional visions - legal, social, psychological, and medical - that enjoy greater public recognition, and to demonstrate the importance of 'educational materiality'¹ (Massa, 1988) in institutions. Every child's Service Plan are the main frames of reference within which to base evaluations and decisions, and from which to start in defining of new objectives and purposes, so that the focus of attention on the 'real child' in flesh and blood can be maintained at all times.

Finally, the small size of the residential facilities and their staff groups often means that the internal manager has some of his or her working time available to cultivate a direct relational dimension with the resident children and adolescents. This limits the possibility of offering an external, dispassionate vision of events and dynamics, but permits him or her to understand the daily life of a residential centre, and to exert greater influence over it.

Never leave the helm in a storm!

Today, the social policies of the national government and regional administrations, which have made drastic cuts to welfare resources in recent years, threaten the possibility that the most fragile and vulnerable citizens will be able to enjoy the minimum level of rights. This is especially true of children. According to non-governmental organisations participating in the Convention on the Rights of the Child reporting and monitoring process, there is currently no guarantee that children's rights will be enforced in Italy, because achievement of the interventions set forth in the law is conditioned by the limited availability of resources from State, Regions and local bodies, which may lead to non-application of the interventions foreseen by the law (Gruppo di Lavoro sulla Convenzione per i Diritti dell'Infanzia e dell'Adolescenza, 2009).

At a time of crisis and change, the role of internal managers in fragile, 'precious' care contexts like children's homes must be to deal with challenges even greater than those they usually face.

¹ 'Educational materiality' consists in the 'here and now' of education, in its concrete aspects, made of bodies, of daily life, of settings, but also of latent aspects that affect the relationship unconsciously (desires, projections, fears, expectations, etc.).

Today, professionals with coordination and leadership roles must respond to a truly difficult challenge: that of developing approaches and management methods that reconcile market demands and the new social policies with the need to safeguard and give value to the specific elements that characterise social response in a positive manner, such as attention to the person and to relational skills (Banks, 1998; Healy, 2002).

Being the internal manager of a residential community undoubtedly means facing the uncertainty generated by a residual welfare model and social policy choices that undermine the certainty of the citizenship rights of vulnerable children and families, and therefore the working conditions of the professionals who assist them. The principal duty of the internal managers of residential units, who experience at first hand the strain of coping with uncertainty in a time of crisis, is to assume a role of responsibility and guidance with regard to a group of adult professionals and a group of children and adolescents in difficulties. The internal manager must simultaneously learn and teach how to 'navigate through uncertainty'. But is it possible to learn and teach how to navigate through uncertainty without sinking? Laura Formenti (2009, p.123) referring to Morin, suggests:

taking a gamble - that is, awareness of the risks and willingness to run them - and working strategically - that is, the ability to take well-thought-out actions. These types of behaviour can be developed through knowledge and care of oneself and the system by giving value to *biographicity* (Alheit, Dausien): that is, the ability to build a life project autonomously, and pursue it creatively and flexibly, on the one hand, and identify a composition of the various elements of the system, on the other.

Thus an internal manager must inevitably deal with gambles and risks, the capacity for action, and the search for a strategy. If a risk is worth taking, then it becomes necessary to find a way to succeed: even in especially adverse conditions, 'it is possible to navigate with the wind against you', 'contrary forces can be turned in your favour', and it is necessary 'to become accustomed to going against the current, because the situation is what it is, and there is no particular chance that it will change at present' (Bodei 2010, p.10-11).

Taking risks and devising strategies therefore require their substantiation in the care that one takes of oneself and the system (the residential unit and its staff), the ability to develop projects by promoting innovations to improve the quality of services, and in negotiating one's projects with those of other stakeholders, be they users or other professionals.

Taking Care of Oneself

Taking care of oneself has a central function in a period marked by fragile identities in constant flux. This is especially true of those whose profession as internal managers of residential units requires them to 'take care' of others and exercise power over them through knowledge and actions (Cambi, 2008). For an internal manager, taking care of oneself may entail reaffirming the formative value of the autobiography, and thereby

acquiring awareness of one's own history and preparing to care for others, free - as far as possible - from personal prejudices that often originate in experience and have a latent, unforeseen effect in the form of certainties, dogmas, and rules. Internal managers must become reflective professionals (Schön, 1983) who enact their roles as researchers, giving close thought to what they do, and as constant experimenters who thus learn how to develop new skills.

Taking Care of the System

It is of fundamental importance to find suitable balance between resource management (budgeting and finance, administrative tasks, etc.) and the social pedagogy perspective, to appreciate the whole person, whether a user or a professional, and overcome the structural incompleteness of child and family services.

The staff

Taking care of adult professionals interweaves with care of the service and its functionality, above all in relation to the management of organisational, administrative, and economic aspects. Performance of the role requires precision and attention to issues connected in various ways to accounting, establishing priorities, the ability to delegate, and also the exercise of authority if a more 'participatory' management style proves ineffective.

Colleagues must be helped to find a place for themselves in the current phase of the sector, to understand its dynamics, to give meaning to events, to mobilise positive resources, to cultivate loyalty, and to have hope, which is an 'indispensable ingredient of the historic experience' (Freire, 2004, p.59).

Children and Adolescents in Care

The essential component of the system consists of attention and care towards the people that the system has to assist (the 'users') and which can be cultivated above all by sustaining the capacity of the educators to reflect and ask questions of themselves, so that they do not act automatically and without reflection.

At a time of uncertainty, is there a risk that we will not ask the questions that induce us to direct our actions towards more appropriate forms of social work? Despite the uncertainties, can we succeed in protecting our professions from pseudo-professional rigidity and formalism, and maintain our curiosity and capacity to see humanity in the stories of the people that we encounter?

Constantly acting as a 'linkage'

Management entails a duty to facilitate communications between managers and educators by bringing together needs and requests that are too frequently far apart and in conflict (Reggio, 2008).

Today, more than ever before, the connecting role of the internal manager is of key importance in order to ensure integration and synergy between direct intervention and organisation, to promote consistency among visions, approaches and styles, and to ensure that communications flow. Supervision of this function allows sense to be given to the risks and gambles that all professionals take at various levels of an organisation, to start dialogue among the various perspectives that inspire the planning and strategies for the pursuit of the organisation's mission and reconcile them, and to make the pathways to be followed sustainable. At the different levels of an organisation, understanding these projects and strategies may be laborious. It starts from localizing the point of view of the individuals who have developed them and those who subsequently observe them: thus, the internal manager's mediation can facilitate a match between the organisational and operational visions.

Promoting innovation

Systems are not static; they constantly change. For this reason, it is of fundamental importance to manage changes and to seek to direct them through the planned introduction of innovations. Promoting innovation in interventions means continuing to gamble on, and invest in, the quality of services in the best interests of the children. It means, for example, experimenting with recent innovations in Child and Family Welfare (Premoli, 2012a), and opting for the Child Rights-Based Approach, family preservation and family bond protection, the improvement of professional strategies based on enhancement of factors of resilience, strengths, and beauty, child participation, the adoption of an intercultural approach, the need for professionals with different educations and disciplinary points of view to work jointly, and the introduction of appropriate evaluation processes.

Building composition

The etymology of the verb *com-pose* (from the Latin *cum+ponere*) refers to the idea of bringing various components together and intermingling them to create a single whole, but it also recalls the actions of the 'composer' and his or her desire to produce and create intentionally (Brün, cited in von Foerster, 2000).

A cultural and strategic decision to use and promote a compositional logic in relationships among the professionals, institutions, organisations, and families involved in various capacities has become increasingly necessary in Child and Family Welfare.

The following actions are essential to make this choice concrete:²

- 'synchronize your watches', above all in the face of moments and phases that might be defined as 'delicate' (such as assimilation, resignation, or important communications) so as to identify mediations that consistently respond to the needs of users and respect personal times;

² This reference is to the document entitled '*In cerca di composizione*' [In Search of Composition] collectively written in 2009-2010 by the *Gruppo dei Coordinatori di Servizio - Gru.Co.S* [Internal Managers's Group] of La Grande Casa scs, a non-profit organisation based in Sesto San Giovanni.

- adopt a new way of seeing and conceiving shared situations and giving greater emphasis to individuals' positivities and strengths;
- amid common awareness of the crisis in the current welfare system, share every planning problem so as to leave no stone unturned in the search for opportunities to support responsabilisation;
- jointly construct a system which evidences the vital interdependence between pedagogical and socio-psychological viewpoints (and possibly others as well), and in which everybody assumes 'one hundred percent of the responsibility' inherent to their role;
- reflect not only on the content but also on the style, meaning, and consequences of communications from both the social services and residential units, and finding time to discuss and prepare the most significant moments in individuals' pathways.

Conclusions: understanding in order to act

Amid the current complexity of social policies and the organisation of services, the need to redefine social and educational competences consists of the capacity to learn about changes and overcome these, to know how to frame the option of continuing to take action and persevere through uncertainties and hope in a broad sense, not so much to give vent to an unreflective pragmatism as to 'give legs' to dreams and utopia. These can only be accomplished in the presence of solid foundations represented by the ability to understand, communicate, take decisions, co-construct meanings, restore the value of growth pathways, and create networks and alliances for the benefit of 'all our children'.

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