

# Italian and French teachers faced with pupil's Academic Failure: The "Norm of Effort"

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*115 Italian and French teachers of high school and junior high school participated in a study aimed at investigating the impact of causal attribution on judgments of responsibility in case of academic failure of their pupils. Results support the attribution theory as conceptualized by Weiner (1986, 1995) and confirm the predictive utility of the theoretical model in Italian and French schools: Effort causal attribution of failure give rise to punitive strategies and ascription of responsibility to the pupils. The data therefore document cross-cultural differences concerning the responsibility ascription and behavioral consequences in terms of student's assessment. Results are also discussed in terms of the role of social norms in school context.*

## Introduction

Theories of causal attribution are dominant in social and educational psychology. The most important approach which has had strong empirical support and which guides this contribution is the attributional theory of social conduct proposed by Bernard Weiner (1986, 1995).

In this paper we attempt to verify if the attributional theory of social conduct applies in European educational and school contexts, investigating the social-psychological mechanism which influences responsibility attribution, evaluation practices and teachers patterns of interaction with failing students. The studies reported relate to the themes of causal attribution, judgment of responsibility and its behavioural consequences.

Weiner's attributional approach to classroom issues is guided by the metaphor that people are scientists (Weiner, 2000, p. 2) trying to understand themselves and their environment and then acting on the basis of this knowledge: *"Success and failure in achievement setting do not occur in a vacuum. Quite the contrary there is a rich social context that effects and is affected by achievement performance. This social environment includes*

peers, parents and teachers, who experience happiness and sadness given the performance of their students, and who reward, punish, help or neglect” (Weiner, 2000, p. 7).

The social-psychological process theorized by Weiner proceeds from a causal decision (the causal attribution for the student’s failure) to an inference about the person (a judgment about the student’s moral responsibility).

Furthermore, theoretical and empirical literature in social psychology clearly distinguishes “causality” from “responsibility” and both of those concepts from blame (e.g., Shaver, 1985; Shaver & Drown, 1986). In this tradition, causality refers to the production of an effect and applies to all factors that might have contributed to the occurrence. The cause of an event is the antecedent sufficient for the occurrence of the effect. On the contrary, responsibility and blameworthiness are made only after the occurrence of events with negative consequences. Responsibility is a moral judgment about an event made by an individual and blame is the moral opprobrium attached to a person who has intentionally committed a negative event without adequate excuse or justification.

Many investigations conducted by Weiner and colleagues (for a review: Weiner, 1986, 1995) reveal the three-dimensional structure of causal thinking whose components are the locus, the stability, and the controllability of the causes. These contributions also highlight that the causal properties are related to emotion, that affective states systematically influence complex social judgments and achievement attributions, as well as directly motivated behaviour (Farwell & Weiner, 1996; Weiner, Graham, & Chandler, 1982; Weiner, Graham, & Reyna, 1997; see also Forgas, 1991; Forgas, Bower, & Moylan, 1990; Roseman, 1991). In this process, personal responsibility plays a key role: when a negative event is attributed to an internal and controllable cause (if it “could have been otherwise”), it results in ascription of personal responsibility; personal responsibility determines emotional consequences which in turn give rise to behavioral responses (Weiner, 1993, 1995).

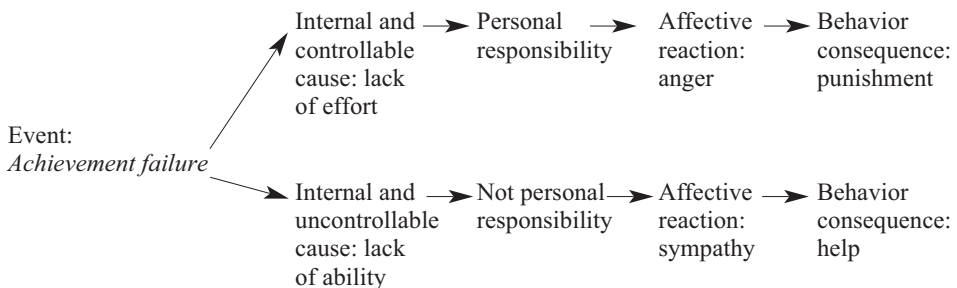
This attributional process is diagrammed below:



In the achievement context success and failure are social events which elicit causal explanations with the aim of giving rewards and assessing students. Teachers’ assessment is not determined only by outcome or performance, in fact, moral determinants have a role in this process, and on feedback given to pupils, inasmuch as judgments concerning causal controllability and personal responsibility exert a great influence over these decisions. According to Weiner (1995, pp. 26-27, 2003), moral precepts affect reward and punishment in achievement settings, as in the courtroom. The moral principle that influences teachers’ decisions about achievement evaluation is the “ethic of effort” that – in Weiner’s theory – comes from the Protestant Ethic: everyone should make an effort and work hard; at school, pupils have to apply themselves and try to perform as well as possible in exams.

The two main determinants of achievement evaluation are performance (or the outcome of an activity) and effort (or the input into an activity).

The attributional process applied to the school setting (in the case of achievement failure) is diagrammed below:



In his first research, more than 30 years ago, Weiner (Weiner & Kukla, 1970) presented to a sample of subjects eight achievement scenarios in which information about outcomes of an exam (success or failure), effort expenditure (high or low) and ability level (high or low) were manipulated. Researchers asked the subjects to assume that they were teachers of these students and to give them evaluative feedback (negative versus positive). Results showed that, as expected, exam outcomes significantly affect evaluations but, given failure, when the student has high ability, lack of effort is more severely evaluated.

Successively, the role of effort information was explored studying the perceived fairness of evaluative judgment (Farwell & Weiner, 1996). The researchers presented to the subjects a series of teachers' evaluation of pupils described as failing exams either because of the absence of effort or because of lack of ability. The subjects were asked to judge the fairness or the strictness of teachers evaluations. The evaluations judged most unfair occurred when lack of ability resulted in harsher feedback than did lack of effort; the most fair judgments were given to the teacher's evaluations when the lack of effort student was more negatively evaluated than the lack of ability student.

Another line of research followed by Weiner and colleagues inquired into the goals of sanctions given in case of responsibility ascription (Weiner, Graham, & Reyna, 1997; Reyna & Weiner, 2001). Actually, teachers have a considerable amount of freedom to operate in their classrooms and they can use a number of possible interventions for motivating (help) and/or reprimanding (punish) students who violate social and moral rules (explicit or implicit), such as not putting effort into study. For example, giving a negative evaluation (or failing the student) can be considered a form of punishment ("a penalty for the transgression!") (Weiner, 2003).

Psychological literature on punishment includes a body of research regarding the motives behind assignment of punishment (Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002; Darley, Carlsmith, & Robinson, 2000; Fiske & Tetlock, 1997; Lerner, Goldberg, & Tetlock, 1998; Vidmar & Miller, 1980; Weiner et al., 1997).

Two principal perspectives regarding goals or motives which lead to punishment arise from this research: the perspective of "just desert" or retributive approach and the consequentialist perspective of deterrence or utilitarian approach.

Retributive or just desert approach holds that the perpetrator deserves to be punished, the punishment is an end in itself, proportionate to the wrongdoing.

Utilitarian or consequentialist perspective considers the costs and the benefits of punishment and the justification for punishment lies in prevention of future transgression by the perpetrator or by others through imitation.

Thus, the moral component of the punishment is evident. According to Tetlock and colleagues (Fiske & Tetlock, 1997; Lerner et al., 1998) the measures of moral outrage substantially predict punitiveness and punitive intent: culpability and punishment are closely linked to the morality of the action. Another important component of punishment is the affect antecedent, particularly anger that intervenes in the attribution of the responsibility process and leads to the punitive behavior. Blame, anger and responsibility are three factors associated with just desert (see Carlsmith et al., 2002), and a negative evaluation can be considered a punitive behavior composed of cognitive, affective, moral and social components.

In an investigation conducted by Weiner, Graham, and Reyna (1997), subjects had to judge several scenarios depicting a student failing in an exam, a burglary and a murder. They had to decide the degree of punishment that they would give to the scenario's actor and which goal (retributive *versus* utilitarian) their punishment served.

The scenarios were created by varying two factors: the personal responsibility of the actor (for example the student did not study or did not have the ability or he/she was a late transfer student) and the occurrence of the behavior: if it was repeated or if it was the first occasion that it happened. Results show that punishment goals are influenced by the type of the event considered, in particular, achievement failure rather than murder and burglary is most likely to elicit utilitarian concerns; however, if the student is responsible for the failed exam, whether repeated or not, the punishment goals are more retributive than when the student is not defined as responsible.

Another study conducted by these authors confirmed that teachers make use of interventions guided by retributive purpose (Reyna & Weiner, 2001).

The present study aspires to validate the cross-cultural salience of Weiner's theory, testing the idea that the moral principle that intervenes in achievement failure is linked to the effort that pupils put into study and schoolwork. We want to corroborate the importance of "lack of effort" attribution in teachers' choice of evaluation and behavior towards failed students. Moreover, we argue that putting effort into study is a norm distinguishing school setting, an implicit rule or norm of conduct applied to the student's role. In fact, the protestant "ethics of work" invoked by Weiner (1995) to explain the value attached to effort is quite inapplicable to Italian and French cultures which are not based on the protestant ethic. Despite this, and corroborating our idea, previous contributions highlight that in the case of negative outcomes, an actor whose behavior transgresses norms will be held more responsible than an actor who did not violate them (Devos-Comby & Devos, 2001; Hamilton, Blumenfeld, & Kushler, 1988; Schlenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy, & Doherty, 1994).

Furthermore, Hamilton (1978, 1992), in her role-based model of responsibility, argued that responsibility judgments involve not only consideration of what the person did but also what he /she was supposed to do given his/her social role, a proposal that allowed for different degrees of responsibility to be expected from people in different social positions. She defined responsibility as a "decision about liability for sanctions based on a rule" (1978, p. 316). It is important to note that, according to Hamilton, responsibility varies as a consequence of which rule is applied in a particular context, and that the rules invoked in decisions about liability for sanctions are cultural products and are a function of the social context within which the action takes place. So the elements which enter the judgmental process – the outcome of which is an application of a social sanction – are the responsibility rules, the deeds of the actor and the expectations that others have, which Hamilton defines as the actor's "social role". According to Hamilton, the role has a normative value (what an actor should do!) and the social expectation is the criterion by which the actor's deed will be judged.

In Weiner's theory responsibility judgment is a consequence of the causal attribution based on the "Protestant ethic". Because we cannot apply this general explanation to our subjects, we put forward an alternative interpretation, considering that the responsibility ascription is made on the basis of cultural and sub-cultural context specific rules (Semin & Manstead, 1983). In this paper we assume that effort could be regarded as a school context rule, an implicit moral principle of conduct pertaining to the student's role and influential in guiding teacher's everyday life decisions. Responsibility ascription cannot be considered a cognitive judgment made by an individual, but a social, interactive process (Hamilton, 1992). In keeping with Semin and Manstead (1983) we shall deem the context, in terms of rules (or norms) and roles (or expectations), a necessary component of the process of holding people responsible and accountable for their conduct and, as a consequence, when people are accountable for their behavior, they can be judged, evaluated and sanctioned.

On the basis of this assumption, we developed a study composed of two parts: the first part of the study concerned research regarding Italian teachers, the second part of the experiment was the cross-cultural comparison between Italian and French results, obtained by the same experimental design. The originality and the importance of this study was based on the stimulus materials evoking an actual situation with a real student in failure; in this way everyday school life, from the teachers' points of view, came into the experimental design.

We wanted to improve the external validity of our research by asking participants to conform to subjectively real rather than artificial simulations, proposing representative situations and presenting stimuli in context rather than in an artificial setting. Conversely, the majority of the research conducted by Weiner and his colleagues kept tight experimental control over a narrow and homogenous set of subjects. This method, although widely used in attribution research, may suffer from limited external validity; in such a way we are unlikely to find results that are widely applicable to a large number of other settings or relevant to a more diverse range of social contexts. Moreover, the literature does not include cross-cultural contribution which applies Weiner's attributional theory of social conduct to European subjects (particularly with teachers).

## First part – Experiment 1

In keeping with Weiner's interpersonal theory (2000) and following previous experimental results (e.g., Farwell & Weiner, 1996; Weiner & Kukla, 1970; Weiner et al., 1997), we assumed that if a student fails because of not studying ("*lack of effort*"), an involved observer, such as the teacher, infers the volitional control of the event that gives rise to the ascription of responsibility and the student is perceived as responsible for the failure. Responsibility for the negative outcome, in turn, gives rise to anger and to anti-social responses such as reprimand or punishment or, we suppose, to failing the student at the end of the school year<sup>1</sup> or to utilizing behavioral responses characterized by "just desert" motives rather than utilitarian purpose (Weiner et al., 1997; see also: Carlsmith et al., 2002).

Conversely, we supposed that in the case of causal attribution to the student's lack of ability the teachers will not ascribed to him/her the responsibility for the failure because the student does not violate the moral rule of putting effort into study and, according to Weiner's model, this uncontrollable cause will not give rise to responsibility ascription. The emotional reaction elicited by this cause is the sympathy toward the student which, in turn, would give rise to prosocial behavior such as to pass the student or to use interventions with utilitarian purpose.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were 115 teachers (88% women, 12% men; average age: 47.3, *s.d.* 6.5) of junior high schools (42.6%) and high schools (57.34%) situated in a central region of Italy (Marche). The high schools were "liceo" (25%); technical institutes (48.4%), vocational schools (26.6%). Participants were teachers of literary subjects (38.3%), scientific subjects (30.4%), technical subjects (9.6%), art subjects (2.6%) and others (4.3%).

We chose teachers of junior and high schools for reasons of the differences between secondary *versus* primary school. In fact, we considered that junior and senior high school have a different culture, that is influential in determining teachers' commitment, sense of responsibility for pupils, evaluation and behavioral actions (cfr., Prosser, 1999).

### *Procedure and materials*

The research was presented to the teachers as a study on academic failure. The instrument utilized was an anonymous questionnaire that aimed to recall a real situation of failure, with the purpose of finding results that sprung from, and which could explain, real life events. In this way we wanted to improve the external validity of our results. The instrument was based on the reconstruction of a real-life scenario, and therefore, after a presentation of the research, on the first page we asked the teacher *to fill in the questionnaire regarding one of his/her failed students*. Two versions of the questionnaire were created and submitted to the subjects: the first version asked the teacher to answer the questionnaire *thinking of a student with achievement failure caused by lack of effort (but with sufficient ability)*; in the second version the teacher was asked to answer the questionnaire *thinking of a student with achievement failure caused by lack of ability (but who put effort into study)*. 59 subjects (51.3%) received the first version of the questionnaire (concerning the "*lack of effort*" student); 56 subjects (48.7%) received the second version (concerning the "*lack of ability*" student). After the instructions, the teachers were asked general questions about the student (sex, class, etc.) and then the questionnaire presented one item assessing the student's responsibility for the failure (participants rated the extent to which the student was responsible on a 7-point scale ranging

from 0 to 6), one item assessing teacher's personal responsibility (participants rated the extent to which they held themselves responsible on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 to 6), a list of 20 emotions which the teacher might feel towards the student (each of these emotions had to be rated according to its strength, on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 to 6), one item assessing the intention to pass *versus* fail the student at the end of the school year (on a 7-point scale which had at the two extremes the two different decisions), and one open-ended question asking about interventions used by the teacher with this student. The presence of "mitigating or extenuating circumstances" (Carlsmith et al., 2002; Weiner, 1995) that could alleviate or completely eliminate student's responsibility was controlled by an open-ended item asking about the motivation for the ascription or non-ascription of responsibility. The answers were coded into a dichotomous variable: presence *versus* absence of "mitigating circumstances".

## Results and discussion

The data were analyzed using a multivariate ANOVA (Manova – G.L.M.) design with two completed crossed factors: Cause controllability (lack of ability *versus* lack of effort) and presence *versus* absence of mitigating circumstances. A series of one-way ANOVA's on each of the four dependent variables was then performed.

The independent variables (factors) were:

- causal attribution (lack of effort vs. lack of ability);
- mitigating circumstances (present vs. absent).

The dependent variables were:

- degree of student's responsibility;
- degree of teacher's responsibility;
- nature and degree of emotional consequences;
- Behavioural consequences in terms of likelihood to pass or fail the student.

The variables controlled in this experimental design were: gender, age, disciplines taught by subject and the type of school (junior high school or high school) in which they taught. Gender, age and disciplines did not have significant effects, nor did they interact significantly with other variables in preliminary analysis, and were therefore ignored in the final data analysis. On the contrary, the type of school had significant effects, and was included in the analysis. Singular schools were not analyzed independently because of the insufficient number of subjects present in each institute.

The teacher's self-ascription of responsibility was included in the experimental design because we considered that the attribution of responsibility depends on the nature of social relationships between parties (teacher and student) and the sense of obligation to the other person is one of the key ingredients in the responsibility ascription process (Hamilton, 1992).

The Manova revealed a highly significant influence of the factors on the dependent variables.

We first examined the results concerning the causal ascription of the failure (controllable cause: lack of effort *versus* uncontrollable cause: lack of ability), which revealed a main effect of the controllability dimension of the cause,  $F(3,96)=12.63$ ,  $p<.001$ , Wilk's  $\lambda=.72$ , partial  $\eta^2=.28$ . The univariate analyses (Anova) performed for each of the dependent variables revealed a significant effect of this factor on the degree of responsibility ascribed to the student,  $F(1,98)=27.91$ ,  $p<.001$ , on the degree of responsibility self-ascribed by the teachers,  $F(1,98)=5.69$ ,  $p<.05$ , and on the variable concerning the likelihood to pass the student or to fail him/her,  $F(1,98)=6.26$ ,  $p<.05$  (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Degrees of responsibility ascribed and likelihood to pass the student as a function of causal controllability*

	Controllable cause ( <i>lack of effort</i> )		Uncontrollable cause ( <i>lack of ability</i> )	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Student's responsibility	4.19	1.01	2.92	1.23
Teacher's responsibility	1.74	1.26	2.33	1.41
Behaviour (fail vs. pass)	3.22	2.14	4.29	1.74

*Note.* Judgments were made on 7-point scales (from 0 to 6). The higher the score, the greater the likelihood to pass the student and the responsibility ascribed.

As expected, the data revealed that the teachers ascribed a major degree of responsibility to the students who failed for lack of effort, but ascribed more responsibility to themselves for the students who failed for lack of ability. Furthermore, teachers were more likely to pass the students with lack of ability than the students failing for lack of effort.

The presence *versus* absence of “*mitigating circumstances*”, the second independent variable, was coded by two researchers reading the answers to an open-ended question about the motivation for the ascription or non-ascription of responsibility to the student (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Presence versus absence of “mitigating circumstances” as a function of failure causal attribution*

	Lack of effort	Lack of ability	Total
Absence of mitigators	34 (31.8%)	29 (27.1%)	63 (58.9%)
Presence of mitigators	21 (19.6%)	23 (21.5%)	44 (41.1%)
Total	55 (51.4%)	52 (48.6%)	107 (100%)

Considering the whole sample, the presence *versus* absence of “*mitigating circumstances*” (Weiner, 1995), had a main effect,  $F(3,96)=5.03$ ,  $p<.01$ , Wilk's  $\lambda=.86$ , partial  $\eta^2=.14$ , and significantly influenced the student's responsibility ascription,  $F(1,98)=10.51$ ,  $p<.01$ , and the likelihood to pass the student or to fail him/her,  $F(1,98)=4.29$ ,  $p<.05$ . As expected, teachers attributed more responsibility to the students when there were no mitigating circumstances to alleviate individual culpability for the failure. For this reason, the participants were more likely to pass the failing student when some “*extenuating*” factors intervened in their failure's social-psychological account (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Degree of responsibility ascribed and likelihood to pass the student as a function of presence vs. absence of mitigating circumstances*

	Presence of “ <i>mitigating circumstances</i> ”		Absence of “ <i>mitigating circumstances</i> ”	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Student's responsibility	3.09	1.12	3.90	1.30
Behaviour (fail vs. pass)	4.32	2.01	3.34	1.94

*Note.* Judgments were made on 7-point scales (from 0 to 6). The higher the score, the greater the likelihood to pass the student and the responsibility ascribed.

If we consider just the sub sample of the “lack of effort” students, the presence of “mitigating circumstances” had a main effect,  $F(3,48)=4.13, p<.05$ , Wilk’s  $\lambda=.79$ , partial  $\eta^2=.20$ , and intervened significantly on the student’s responsibility ascription,  $F(1,50)=12.38, p<.01$ . But if we consider separately the sub sample of the “lack of ability” group, the “mitigating circumstances” did not have a significant effect. The only main effect was due to the type of school,  $F(3,46)=6.26, p<.001$ , Wilk’s  $\lambda=.71$ , partial  $\eta^2=.29$ , which influenced the teacher’s responsibility,  $F(1,48)=15.94, p<.001$ , and partially the likelihood to pass or to fail the student,  $F(1,50)=3.66, p=.06$ .

These results may be interpreted by considering that lack of ability does not necessitate mitigating circumstances, because it is still a sufficient and adequate justification: if a student does not have sufficient ability to achieve, he/she cannot be considered personally responsible for the failure. The data confirm the theoretical consideration about the role of mitigating circumstances in modulating the responsibility ascription only in the case of failure for lack of effort and support also the idea regarding the primary role of effort in ascribing responsibility.

Next, the type of school was examined as independent variable and the answers were analyzed confronting teachers of high school and teachers of junior high schools. The average responses for the two groups of teachers were significantly different,  $F(3,96)=3.64, p<.05$ , Wilk’s  $\lambda=.90$ , partial  $\eta^2=.10$ . The teachers of junior high schools ascribed to themselves significantly more responsibility for the failure of their pupils,  $F(1,98)=5.19, p<.05$ , and were more favorable to pass the pupils,  $F(1,98)=6.96, p<.05$ , than their colleagues of high schools.

The interaction between causal ascription and type of school was also significant,  $F(3,96)=3.64, p<.05$ , partial  $\eta^2=.10$ . The univariate Anova revealed that the junior high school teachers ascribe significantly more responsibility to themselves for the student’s failure, than do the high school teachers,  $F(1,98)=9.99, p<.05$ .

We consider it important to specify that the difference between the degree of responsibility self-ascribed by the teachers ( $M=1.97$ ) was significantly lower than the responsibility attributed to the students ( $M=3.54$ ),  $t(113)=8.65, p<.001$ .

Moreover the significant interaction shown by the Manova can be interpreted as being due to the strong influence of the type of school in the case of lack of ability attribution. Despite the absence of mean differences between junior high school and high school teachers’ when the failure is attributed to lack of effort, the differences in self-ascribed responsibility are relevant when considering the uncontrollable cause (see Figure 1).

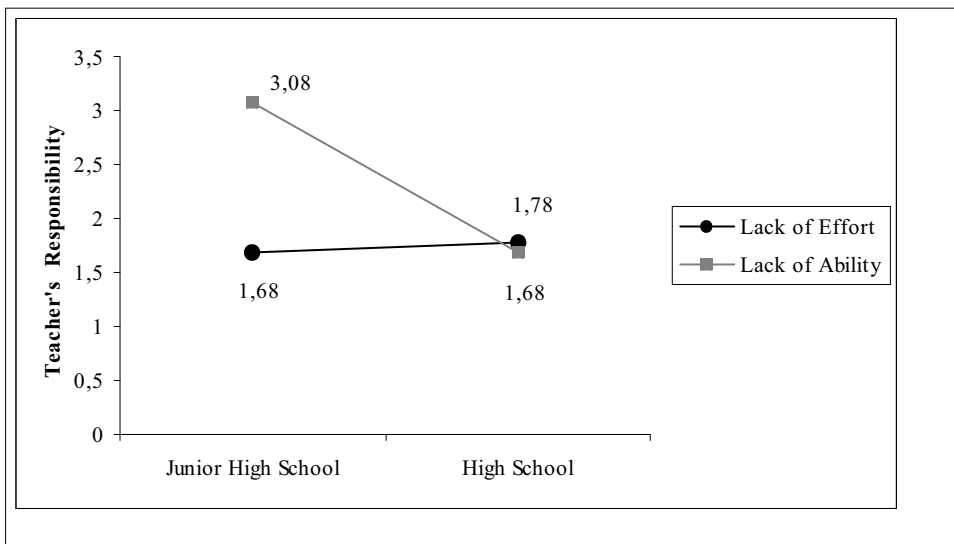


Figure 1. Teacher’s responsibility as a function of causal attribution and type of school



On the grounds of some evidence regarding dissimilar cultures in different types of school (secondary *versus* primary school) and the influence of school culture in determining teachers' commitment, involvement and sense of responsibility for pupils (Nias, 1999; Prosser, 1999), we may interpret these results taking into account that junior and senior high schools have different "institutional cultures", with specific aims, values, roles, norms of behaviour, evaluation systems and traditions. Specifically, the Italian junior high school – providing compulsory schooling – is characterized by a culture grounded on the aim of developing student's autonomy and ability in studying, and in social interactions. On the contrary, high schools are more focalised on the acquisition of cognitive-technical ability and skills. Furthermore, junior high school may be considered a "bridge" which connects the primary school to the high school and we may suppose that the culture of junior high school can be influenced by the "ethic of care" of primary teaching (Nias, 1999). In this consideration of school culture, care is regarded as "answerability" or moral responsibility for pupils. In this way, we can realize the higher level of responsibility that junior high school teachers assigned to themselves compared to their high school colleagues.

Moreover, as regards the previous result concerning the likelihood of passing the student, we can consider that traditionally schools providing compulsory schooling have a low level of student failure (3.59%) and 95.57% of successful students. In contrast these percentages increase when considering the high schools, where successful students are 85.81% and student failures are 6.30% (source: Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca [MIUR], school year: 2001/2002).

We calculated the magnitude of each main effect and each interaction of the Manova by the partial Eta-squared ( $\eta^2$ ). Results show that 28% of the total variance was due to the effects of causal attribution (to "lack of effort" *versus* "lack of ability") for the student's failure. The magnitude of this effect was quite large in relation to the size of the other effects: in fact, the presence *versus* absence of "mitigating circumstances" explained 14% of the total variance, the type of school and the interaction explained only 10% each. This analysis provides additional information to our results, revealing that the cause attributed to the student's failure is the stronger predictor of the consequences (in terms of holding the student responsible and choosing intervention strategies).

The nature and degree of emotional consequences were also investigated, by asking the participants to fill in a list of 20 emotions. A 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (not at all) to 6 (very much), was used to rate responses regarding which emotions stir up the students and the strength of these emotions. We conducted factor analyses (principal component analyses with Varimax rotation) of the emotional scale and the best factorial solution we found is four-factors. The factors extracted – labeled as: (a) Fulfillment, (b) Sympathy, (c) Demoralization, (d) Anger – were submitted to reliabilities analyses which gave rise to good values of Cronbach's Alpha (see Table 4).

We used the factor scores as dependent variables to investigate emotional consequences of causal controllability. A Manova of these data revealed a significantly stronger effect on the subscale labeled "Anger" and "Sympathy" due to the cause attributed to the failure,  $F(2,98)=11.75$ ,  $p<.001$ , Wilk's  $\lambda=.80$ , partial  $\eta^2=.19$ , (see Table 5). According to Weiner's theory and to our hypothesis, the controllability dimension of the cause not only has cognitive effects, but also emotional implications. In particular, anger is affected by the "lack of effort" cause, whereas sympathy is affected in the case of lack of ability.

We also performed correlations to show if the emotional scales were correlated to the responsibility variables and the evaluation behavior (to fail *versus* pass the student). As we saw in Table 6, teacher's "anger" was significantly correlated to the student's responsibility, whereas the "sympathy" scale was significantly correlated to the teacher's responsibility, to the likelihood to pass the student, and negatively correlated to the student's responsibility. Finally, the likelihood to pass the student was negatively correlated to the student's responsibility.

Table 4

*Factor loadings (principal component analyses with Varimax rotation), variance explained and Cronbach's Alpha coefficients*

	Factor 1 Fulfillment	Factor 2 SYMPATHY	Factor 3 Demoralization	Factor 4 ANGER
Variance explained after rotation	16.82%	14.25%	14.15%	13.40%
Satisfaction	.83			
Enthusiasm	.82			
Surprise	.78			
Happiness	.70			
Affection		.86		
Sympathy		.73		
Tenderness		.67	.34	
Comprehension		.56		-.43
Frustration			.73	
Resignation			.70	
Sense of guilt			.66	
Discouragement			.63	
Indignation				.78
Anger				.64
Dissatisfaction			.32	.63
Disappointment			.32	.55
Cronbach's Alpha	.80	.77	.67	.63

Table 5

*Affective reactions as a function of causal controllability*

	Controllable cause ( <i>lack of effort</i> )		Uncontrollable cause ( <i>lack of ability</i> )	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Subscale "Anger"	7.87	5.70	4.38	4.00
Subscale "Sympathy"	7.45	5.15	10.92	6.74

*Note.* Range from 0 to 24. The higher the score, the greater the strength of the emotions.

Table 6

*Pearson's correlation matrix (n=115)*

	1	2	3	4	5
1 Subscale "Anger"	1	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>	.32**	<i>n.s.</i>
2 Subscale "Sympathy"		1	.29**	-.24**	.25**
3 Teacher's responsibility			1	<i>n.s.</i>	.27**
4 Student's responsibility				1	-.29**
5 Behaviour (fail vs. pass)*					1

*Note.* \*\*Sign<.01.

These results support the theory of a relation between the affective component of the responsibility attribution and reinforce the assumption that anger and responsibility have a central role in determining behavioral outcomes.

To summarize, the data support our predictions: the controllability dimension of causal ascription is significantly related to responsibility ascription, affective reaction and to the likelihood to pass or fail the student. In line with the alternative explanation put forward previously, we could interpret these results considering effort as a norm of conduct, an ethical-moral principle of school context, which guides teachers' everyday decisions and influences the judgments, evaluations and sanctions they are called upon to take every day ("What grade should I give to this student's essay?"; "What or which type of intervention should I take with this student?").

Finally, we explored the behavioral consequences asking teachers which actions they used with the student considered. Two researchers coded the answers to the open-ended item by generating a repertoire of 22 possible interventions provided by teachers. These included the assignment of extra work, more frequent testing, reprimands, increased patience, improvement of the student’s self-esteem, etc.

We consider this analysis to be a first step towards the creation of a closed-ended instrument for further research aimed at investigating the social-psychological mechanism which determines the behavioural consequences rooted on the lack of effort attribution. However, these descriptive results are interesting in accounting for teachers behavior towards low-achieving students.

The greater number of behavioral actions indicated by the teachers had positive (e.g., helping actions) or neutral connotations (e.g., work in groups; talk with parents), but the analysis of the answers confronting the controllability of the cause for failure (lack of effort *versus* lack of ability), revealed some differences due to the cause attributed to the failure. As shown in Figure 2, interventions aimed at recuperating the student’s gap (with specific exercises or more explanations) and at encouraging the pupil, were in general preferred by the teachers. On the other hand, considering the cause of failure, the practices of “Encouraging” the student were chosen more frequently when the cause of failure was lack of ability ( $\chi^2=3.55$   $p<.05$ ), whilst actions more directed at reprimanding the student (“Reprimand and bad marks”) were used more in the case of failure for lack of effort (controllable cause), ( $\chi^2=9.0$   $p<.01$ ).

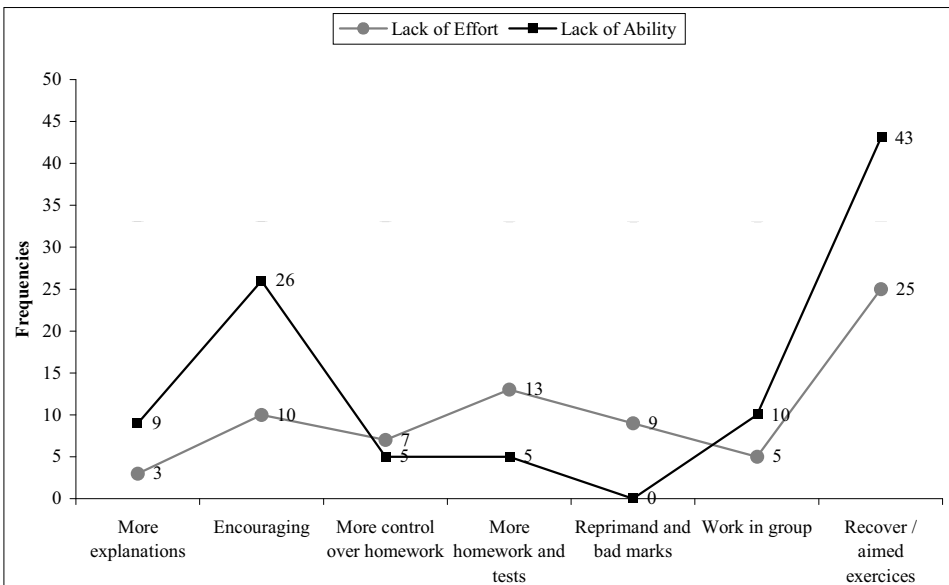


Figure 2. Teachers’ interventions as a function of causal controllability (frequencies)

This was an explorative analysis which will necessitate more detailed investigations to provide additional exhaustive and representative data, because motives underlying these different practices (just desert motives rather than utilitarian purpose) were only supposed by the authors. In fact, teachers can pursue both retributive and utilitarian goals with the same action (Weiner, Graham, & Reyna, 1997).

To summarize, on the whole the results of this research suggest the reliability and the predictive value of this approach to classroom behaviour, which is useful in making inferences about teachers’ reactions to success and failure and to understand the evaluation process and

its moral implications. In fact, teachers could make use of a series of possible interventions to discourage (e.g., punishments) or promote (e.g., rewards) the repetition of a particular behaviour. According to this principle, punishments such as giving a negative evaluation, failing the student or the use of educational practices with retributive purposes are applied to students who violate the implicit moral rule of putting effort into study, to discourage this “immoral behaviour”.

Study two extended the first study providing a cross-cultural analysis between French and Italian teachers.

## Second part – Experiment 2

We conducted a cross-cultural comparison between Italian and French subjects to verify the applicability of the attributional theory of social conduct across cultures. Since Joan Miller (1984) first demonstrated the importance of culture in causal attribution, numerous studies within diverse attributional domains and using different methodologies have been conducted to examine culture variations and universality in the causal attribution process (e.g., Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999; Carpenter, 2000; Kivilu & Rogers, 1998; Norenzayan, Choi, & Nisbett, 2002), and regarding the theme of responsibility (e.g., Hamilton & Hagiwara, 1992; Zhang, Guan, Zhou, & Lu, 2003). The present research attempted to explore if Weiner’s theory is a general, pan-cultural model which fits teachers who belong to different cultures and work in different school systems or if it is a theory which reflects a culturally-specific sociocognitive process (Duda & Allison, 1989).

## Method

### *Participants*

The comparison was conducted on the sub-sample of 65 Italian high school teachers (55.1%) and on 53 French high school teachers (44.9%) working in the Parisian area. The Italian junior high school teachers were not included due to the significant effect of this variable (“type of school”) found in the first analysis. We preferred to investigate the main effect of the nationality and of the causal attribution, controlling the influence of this variable which is of secondary interest.

### *Procedure and materials*

The same instrument used in the previous study with a sample of Italian teachers was translated to fit the French school system and submitted to the sample (see Table 7).

Table 7

### *Subjects and questionnaires*

		NATIONALITY		
		ITALY	FRANCE	TOTAL
Questionnaire version:	Controllable cause ( <i>Lack of effort</i> )	35 (29.7%)	26 (22%)	61 (51.7%)
	Uncontrollable cause ( <i>Lack of ability</i> )	30 (25.4%)	27 (22.9%)	57 (48.3%)
TOTAL		65 (55.1%)	53 (44.9%)	118 (100%)

## Results and discussion

The data were analyzed using a Manova design with two completed crossed factors: nationality (Italian *versus* French) and cause controllability (lack of ability *versus* lack of effort). A series of one-way ANOVA's on each of the four dependent variables was then performed.

As expected, the causal controllability gave rise to significant results,  $F(5,89)=9.75$ ,  $p<.001$ , Wilk's  $\lambda=.64$ , partial  $\eta^2=.35$ , and the univariate Anova performed for each of the dependent variables revealed that the causes attributed to the failure influence student's responsibility ascription,  $F(1,97)=39.68$ ,  $p<.001$ , and emotional consequences, considering the sub-scales (factors)<sup>2</sup> "sympathy",  $F(1,97)=13.64$   $p<.001$ , and "anger",  $F(1,97)=7.83$ ,  $p<.01$ . These data partially replicate the previous results and confirm, in some measure, the reliability of the attributional theory of conduct across Italian and French cultures.

The data also revealed a main effect of the nationality,  $F(5,89)=2.34$ ,  $p<.05$ , Wilk's  $\lambda=.88$ , partial  $\eta^2=.12$ , particularly on the responsibility self-ascribed by teachers,  $F(1,97)=3.90$ ,  $p=.051$ , and on the likelihood to pass or to fail the student,  $F(1,97)=4.97$ ,  $p<.05^3$  (see Table 8).

Table 8

*Degree of responsibility ascribed and likelihood to pass the student comparing Italian and French teachers*

	Italian teachers		French teachers	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Teacher's responsibility <sup>a</sup>	1.71	1.18	2.27	1.57
Behaviour (fail vs. pass) <sup>b</sup>	2.11	.77	1.83	.58

Notes. <sup>a</sup>Judgments were made on 7-point scales (from 0 to 6); <sup>b</sup>Judgments were made on 3-point scales (from 1 to 3). The higher the number, the greater the likelihood to pass the student.

French teachers held themselves more responsible for the failure of their students ( $M=2.3$ ,  $SD=1.6$ ) than Italian teachers did ( $M=1.7$ ,  $SD=1.3$ ). However, as in the case of the first research, the average of the teacher's personal responsibility ( $M=1.9$ ,  $SD=1.4$ ) was significantly much lower than the values of the student's responsibility ( $M=3.7$ ,  $SD=1.4$ ),  $t(116)=9.4$ ;  $p<.001$ .

Considering the sub-samples "lack of effort" and "lack of ability", the only significant differences emerged from the "lack of ability" group. In this case the Italian teachers were more likely to pass the student than the French teachers (Mann-Whitney  $U$  test=220;  $z=-2.82$ ;  $p<.05$ ). It is important to note that lack of effort does not give rise to cross-cultural differences, corroborating our supposition that effort is a moral norm in the school context and a student's role obligation. In other words, effort seems to be a wide-ranging norm shared by teachers who belong to different cultures and work in different school systems: a moral principle characteristic of the achievement context and particularly a duty arising from the student's social role. In fact, lack of effort is sanctioned and discouraged by both Italian and French teachers, while on the contrary, teachers of different cultures diverge when faced with failure for lack of ability: Italian teachers seem to be more indulgent than French teachers, even when considering the same type of school.

Correlations have been performed (see Table 9), and according to our hypothesis, for French and Italian teachers (without distinction) "anger" was the emotional reaction associated with the student's responsibility, whereas the "sympathy" scale was negatively correlated with the student's responsibility. It is important to stress that there was no correlation between

“sympathy” and the teacher’s self-ascription of responsibility, and the likelihood of passing the student. On the contrary to what happened for the Italian sample, the likelihood of passing the student was not correlated with any variables. This result could be explained by taking into account the cross-cultural differences found previously concerning the evaluation proposed by Italian and French teachers.

Table 9

*Spearman’s Rho correlation matrix (n=97)*

		1	2	3	4	5
1	Subscale “Anger”	1	-.24*	<i>n.s.</i>	.34**	<i>n.s.</i>
2	Subscale “Sympathy”		1	<i>n.s.</i>	-.36**	<i>n.s.</i>
3	Teacher’s responsibility			1	<i>n.s.</i>	<i>n.s.</i>
4	Student’s responsibility				1	<i>n.s.</i>
5	Behaviour (fail vs. pass)					1

*Note.* \*Sign<.05 \*\*Sign<.01.

In summary, the data suggest that for both Italian and French teachers the controllability of the cause of failure determines affective reactions and judgments of responsibility but the evaluation of the students is not elicited by perceiving the failure as due to lack of effort. The evaluation variable is affected by the cross-cultural comparison, especially when the failure is attributed to lack of ability.

As regards intercultural differences, they were especially related to the extent of the teacher’s self-ascription of responsibility and to the evaluation variable (likelihood to pass or fail the student). These results could be related to the different educational systems – Italian and French – in which teachers work, and probably to the specific culture of the two school systems and to the teachers’ images in “popular-culture”, which is a relevant factor which could impinge on teachers’ work, identity and, indirectly, on school culture (Weber & Mitchell, 1999).

In fact, previous research found cross-cultural differences (between English and French primary teachers) regarding the range of outcomes for which teachers take responsibility (Broadfoot & Osborn, 1993, 1995; Osborn, Broadfoot, Panel, & Pollard, 1997). According to this research, we could put forward a possible interpretation of our results considering that differences in self-ascription of responsibility could be explained in terms of the distinctive cultural features of the school system.

The significance of teachers’ image in “popular-culture” is another relevant factor to consider and which may result from a series of factors, including the domestic politics of a country in educational and scholastic matters. Concerning the teachers’ responsibility, we may suppose that a different level of involvement could give rise to higher *versus* lower sense of personal responsibility in student’s failure. The professional involvement of a teacher could be a consequence of the social valorization of the profession which, in turn, may be evaluated through the investment of the State in the quality of instruction, the teachers’ remuneration grant, and the percentage of the Gross Domestic Product (G.D.P.) assigned to the scholastic system. The salary of an Italian upper secondary school teacher after 15 years of experience is equivalent to \$28,329 (in USA Dollars converted using Purchasing Power Parities), whereas the French teacher’s salary is \$29,331. This economic gap increases with the length of service, and in fact, the maximum salary of an Italian teacher is equal to \$35,138, whilst that of the French is \$42,357 (data: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2002).

A second criterion that can be taken into consideration to understand the differences between the French and Italian school system relates to the Gross Domestic Product (G.D.P.).

In Italy, public expenditure for education is equal to 4.4%, whereas the French government invests 5.8% of G.D.P. in public education, opposed to the OECD country average of 4.9% (data: OECD, 2002).

These statistics may be considered indicative of the social valorization of the teaching profession and of the school system in a country. A low social valorization may promote teachers' disengagement from the job, and could therefore be one of the causes of the lower personal responsibility self-ascribed by Italian teachers.

In confirmation of the teachers' perception of low social valorization attributed to their profession, an inquiry conducted on a sample of Italian teachers shows that 50.4% of teachers interviewed consider the social prestige of their profession to be middle-low and a fourth of the sample consider it to be low (Eurispes, 2002).

The differences between French and Italian subjects regarding the likelihood to pass or fail the student could be explained by taking into consideration the percentage of failure in Italy and France. In Italy, at the end of the term, there is a failure rate of only 6.3% and no more than 2.2% of the students fail the *diploma* (source: MIUR, school year: 2001/2002). In contrast, 21.2% of French students fail the *baccalauréat* and particularly in the Parisian area, 24.9% of students do not obtain the school leaving certificate (source: Ministère de l'Education Français, school year: 2000/2001).

Through these statistics we tried to provide some interpretations of our cross-cultural results, but we envisage further research to understand the differences encountered in this study.

Overall, these findings corroborate the reliability of Weiner's attributional theory of conduct, and put forward its usefulness to make inferences about assessment process and moral implications of teachers' evaluation. However, some cross cultural differences emerge from our data. According to prior research, we may speculate that, in addition to causal attribution, roles, deeds and cultures also contribute to the process of responsibility ascription (Devos-Comby & Devos, 2001; Hamilton et al., 1988).

In conclusion we consider that both the macrocultural context and the microcultural school context should be taken into account in order to understand the social-psychological process which leads to responsibility ascription and which contributes to the creation of evaluative judgments.

We turn now to the general discussion of our study.

## General discussion

In the present paper we have tried to apply the theoretical framework of attribution theory of social conduct to Italian and French teachers. As a result we have found some empirical support concerning the effectiveness and the predictive utility of Weiner's approach even in Italian and French school contexts. Overall, our research confirms the usefulness of this model in accounting for the teacher-student relationship and particularly in explaining teachers' reactions when faced with failure. Thanks to the stimulus materials (that evoke an actual circumstance with a specific student in failure) we have obtained results with a high external validity. Moreover, we have tried to widen the knowledge about behavioral consequences of the causal attribution in case of school failure, exploring the evaluative behavior (in terms of likelihood to pass or fail the student) and the subsequent interventions taken by teachers towards students.

A moot point to consider is the interpretation given by Weiner of his social conduct theory. In fact, he explained why lack of effort is punished by resorting to the protestant "ethics of work". This is a morality of duty which is a basic ingredient of the "social contract" on the grounds that members of a social group were expected to contribute to the well-being of the entire society by taking part in a productive activity, expending effort to excel (Weiner, 1995). We have already argued that this interpretation is quite inapplicable to Italian and

French cultures, which are not based on the protestant ethic. Moreover we found some differences due to cross-cultural divergences and to the specific type of school in which our subjects teach. These results do not support the hypothesis of a general, pan-cultural model fitting teachers belonging to different cultures and working in different school systems. On the contrary, our results may suggest the idea that, in the case of academic failure, responsibility attribution process and behavioral consequences reflect a culturally-specific sociocognitive process. In particular, we suppose that the cross-cultural divergences found in our study are grounded on Italian and French educational systems and on the distinctive cultural features of different types of schools.

Despite the differences discovered and the difficulty in the application of the “work ethic” to interpret these results, a substantial agreement about the predictive role of lack of effort on responsibility ascription and negative evaluation emerged. A contextual and interactionist approach to sociocognitive processes may be a framework to explain effort as a moral norm, a prescription bound to the student’s role and which governs the teacher-student interaction. If in European schools effort cannot be considered a consequence of the Protestant ethic, we envisage that it could be more than a judgmental heuristic (Kruger, Wirtz, Van Boven, & Altermatt, 2004), rather a notion which refers to a psychosocial approach of didactic interactions.

We therefore suggest a psychosocial interpretation of our results, considering the concept of effort as a normative parameter of the culture of school and an implicit rule of conduct inherent to the “student’s profession” (Perrenoud, 1994). Putting effort into study might be considered a fundamental aspect of the “moral curriculum” (which cannot be considered a “hidden curriculum” because it does not elude the social actors of the school!) distinguishing the school culture. Indeed, everyone who is familiar with school-life knows that students are socialized with rules, norms and *habitus* of the context and soon become able to utilize impression management strategies and “defensive attributions” for punishment avoidance (based on lack of ability or evoking justification and extenuating factors) (Weiner, 1995, 2003; see also: Shaw, Wild, & Colquitt, 2003).

A further interpretation may be made. In fact the attribution of failure through lack of effort permits the teacher to escape personal responsibility, by attributing the liability to the student. From this point of view, explanation for failure due to the student’s lack of effort would be a defensive attribution: it relieves the teacher of responsibility by ascribing it to the diligence of the student’s work.

Establishing responsibility is essential because it is used to justify the application of rewards for desirable behavior, but more importantly to justify punishment for undesirable actions. Since Heider’s (1958) contribution, responsibility ascription is deemed a central issue to maintain a social order in society, and it is connected to moral and social regulation.

From a different perspective, our findings do not support the thesis maintained by some authors (Dubois, 1994, 2003) considering internal inferences the only factor at stake in accounting for judgment of responsibility and negative evaluation. In our results, lack of ability – an internal cause – gives rise to a lower level of responsibility than the internal causal attribution inherent to lack of effort. In this way, our findings supplement this argument by suggesting the normative role of effort in school context.

Thus we suggest that the attributional theory of social conduct proposed by Bernard Weiner can be improved by the contributions about the normative aspect of causal attribution and social conduct (e.g., Dubois, Loose, Matteucci, & Selleri, 2003; Hamilton, 1978; Semin & Manstead, 1983) which have highlighted the explanatory function of social norms, extending the strictly cognitive perspective predominant in attributional theories.

In a similar manner, these approaches might be improved by the wide *corpus* of empirical contributions which support Weiner’s theory. In fact, this model clearly distinguishing “causality” from “responsibility”, clarifies the role of responsibility within the process that leads to punishment and moral reprimand for undesirable actions.

Some empirical evidence concerning the idea that responsibility ascription is based on the social desirability of behavior is present in literature (Devos-Comby & Devos, 2001;



Hamilton et al., 1988), but despite this there is very little research which explores judgment of responsibility and evaluation process taking into account the organizational context in which they are made. Further studies are needed to corroborate the presence of the norm of effort in the school culture and perhaps an ethnographic study would be useful to obtain results which are more sensitive to the context.

Finally, we advocate the necessity of exploring the theme concerning teachers' perception and self-ascription of responsibility for achievement failure because *since teachers do not feel responsible for failure, they do not feel equipped to combat it.*

## Notes

- 1 The Italian school system provides a final judgment that decides if the student will pass to the next class or if he/she will repeat the same class (failure).
- 2 Another factor analysis was performed. On the whole, results confirm previous factors.
- 3 The questionnaire translation gave rise to a recoding of the variable in an ordinal measure. "Mann-Whitney" non parametric test was also performed (Mann-Whitney  $U$  test=1298;  $z=-2.06$ ;  $p<.05$ ); Italian Teachers Mean Rank: 63.4; French Teachers Mean Rank: 51.46.

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*115 enseignants italiens et français ont participé a un étude ayant pour objectif d'examiner l'impact des attributions causales de l'échec sur leurs jugements de responsabilité et leurs prédictions de réussite à propos d'élèves qu'ils connaissent. Les résultats tendent à supporter le modèle du jugement de responsabilité avancé par Weiner (1986, 1995): aussi bien en Italie qu'en France, l'attribution de l'échec au manque d'effort entraîne une prédiction moins positive qu'une attribution au manque de capacités, et une attribution de la responsabilité de l'échec à l'élève plutôt qu'à l'enseignant. Des différences interculturelles apparaissent au niveau du jugement de responsabilité et de l'évaluation des élèves. Les résultats sont interprétés en terme de rôle des normes sociales dans le contexte scolaire.*

**Key words:** Academic evaluation, Achievement failure, Causal attribution, Teachers.

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*Current theme of research:*

Causal attribution. Judgment of responsibility. Norm of internality. Social representation in educational context.

*Most relevant publications in the field of Psychology of Education:*

Carugati, F., & Matteucci, M.C. (1999). La norma di internality per spiegare comportamenti e eventi: Una ricerca nella scuola dell'obbligo. *Psicologia dell'educazione e della formazione*, 1(3), 317-333.

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*Current theme of research:*

Causal attributions. Judgment of responsibility. Cognitive dissonance. Vocational behavior.

*Most relevant publications in the field of Psychology of Education:*

- Gosling, P. (1993). *Qui est responsable de l'échec scolaire?* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Gosling, P. (1994). The attribution of success and failure: The subject/object contrast. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 9, 75-88.
- Gosling, P. (1995). Description Vs explanation and academic evaluation. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 10, 41-59.
- Guillon, V., Dosnon, O. Esteve, M.D., & Gosling, P. (accepted). The effect of the commitment in career counseling: The mediation of self-efficacy and behavioral intention. In Gosling & Wach (Eds.), Values, interests and attitudes within vocational behaviour. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*.