

FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCES TO SUPPORT STUDENTS AT RISK

Lessons learned designing and
implementing an Italian RCT

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RCTs being implemented in Italy in education

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- Providing information to support university choices (2012- on going)
- Support to excellent non native students (2012 – on going)
- Teaching chess to primary school students (2010 – papers)
- Family Group Conferces in schools (2012– on going)
- Booklet for teachers (2014– on going)
- Teacher professional development in Southern Italy (2009 – papers)
- Informing teachers about their grading bias (2013 – on going)
- Providing information For upper secondary track choice (2014- on going)
- Follow up and statistical analysis
- Delivering the intervention
- Designing the RCT

The study

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- ❑ Assessing the effectiveness of Family Group Conferences in increasing students well being, thanks to stronger parental involvement in their educational process
- ❑ The study is taking place in Garbagnatese (near Milan)
- ❑ It started in 2013 and it will be concluded in 2015 (the intervention was delivered in s.y. 2013/14).



The Family Group Conference model

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FGC is a **decision making and planning process** whereby the wider family group makes plans and decisions for children and young people who have been identified either by the family themselves or by service providers as being in need of plans that will safeguard and promote their welfare. (Ashley et al.)

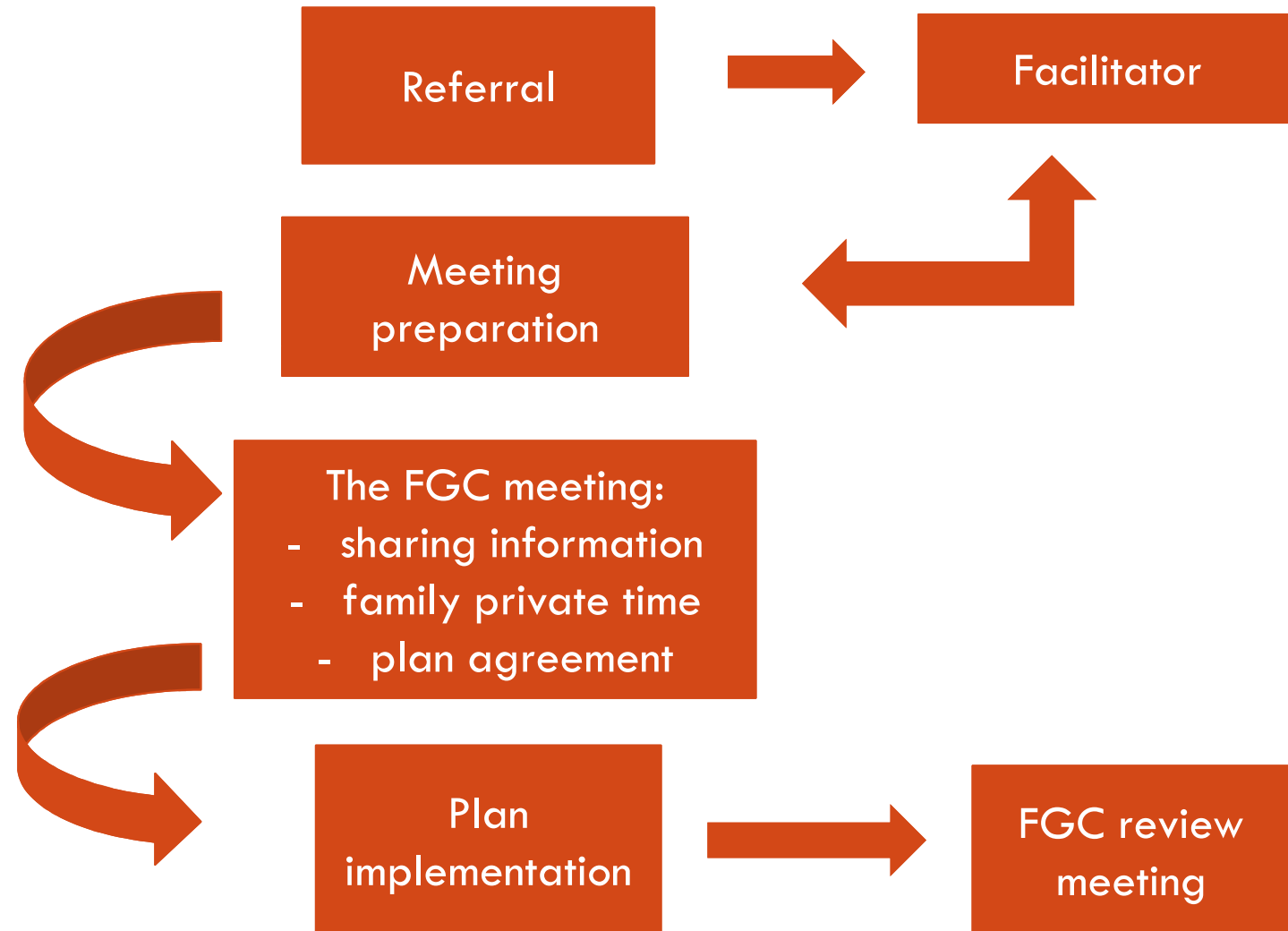
FGC – main actors

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- ❑ Referred difficult child
- ❑ Wide family members
- ❑ Facilitator (non professional)
- ❑ Advocate (non professional)
- ❑ Professionals

The Family Group Conference process

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FGC – key features

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- Light welfare intervention
- Voluntary and participatory process
- Child-centred
- Family-led (empowerment, expertise by experience)
- Based on the strength of the family network
- Focused on practical solutions

Previous Studies on FGC effectiveness

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- Mainly in the field of child protection
- Weak evidence: quite often based on small scale studies and strong assumptions (i.e. matching)
- Mixed results

Positive: Crompton (2003); Marsh & Dawn (2007)


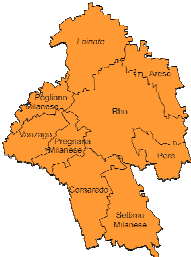
Null: Wheeler & Johnson (2003); Hayden (2009)

Negative: Sundell & Vinnerliung (2004) higher rates of re-referral to child protection services; Weigensberg et al. (2009) more connection with social services, during the first 36 months; Brown (2001) cancelled because of the impossibility to recruit a sufficient number of subjects.

The FGC project – applying the model to less severe problems, family may be more effective

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- ❑ FGC applied in school setting, to educational issues (Family-school conference), as a preventive tool
- ❑ We asked teachers from 14 schools to name about 350 6/7th graders in difficulty to be randomized (“grey zone”)
- ❑ Longitudinal data about 2,600 in 14 treated schools
Pre: October 2013 - Post: May 2014
Follow up: May 2015
- ❑ Additional data in another set of 6 schools (about 1,300 students) to investigate spillover effect/contamination

ZONE 1 Treated zone	ZONE 2 Not treated zone, only observed
	

Implementation – positive aspects

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- ❑ Strong interaction among evaluators and implementers, structuring and increasing the process monitoring (protocols)
- ❑ Interest towards the model: after some starting concerns, collaborative participation by teachers and school leaders
- ❑ No opposition to the randomization
- ❑ Extremely low attrition in data collection
- ❑ Balanced randomization

Balanced randomization

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□ Randomization balanced on gender and grade (by design) and also on: family social class and educational level, migration status, previous school failure.

Slightly unbalanced about monoparental families

(24% among controls versus 15%; marginally significant – $p = 0.098$)

□ Pre-intervention outcome measures resulted all balanced (up to now)

Implementation – main problems

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- ❑ Less referrals than expected (261), therefore lower statistical power
- ❑ Non compliance: out of the 131 proposed FGC, “only” 84 completed the process. Mainly due to refusals to participate from students/parents (few cases were considered too severe and addressed to social services)
- ❑ The process is not concluded: some FGC review meetings are still pending
- ❑ Strong interaction among evaluators and implementers: time consuming and risk to interfere with the intervention (i.e. mistargeting, in order to get more referrals)

The referral students selection

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Students referred (and randomized), compared to the population, are more frequently:

- ❑ males (66% versus 52%)
- ❑ not Italian (36% versus 18%)
- ❑ from lower social background (27% versus 18%)
- ❑ displaying previous school failure (23% versus 7%)

Referred students identikit fits the profile of students with higher dropping out risk

Dependent variables (up to now)

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Student well being is a multidimensional concept.

Variables collected through a pre-post questionnaire.

Up to now, we analyzed these outcomes:

- ❑ **Family support** – presence of someone who regularly supports the student at home; contents of family support
- ❑ **Relation with teachers** - perception of being treated unfairly by teachers; reported improvement in the relation during the school year
- ❑ **Satisfaction about school and skills self assessment**

Models

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□ ITT

bivariate analysis + linear (probability) models taking into account data clusterization and, in order to gain statistical power, controlling for: pre-intervention measure, sex, grade, family background, migratory status, family composition, previous school failure

□ ATT

instrumental variables regression: control variables considered as above

Effects on parental involvement

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- Probability of being regularly supported by someone during homeworks (controls: 60%)

ITT: +15%**

ATT: +24%**

- Number of activities where student is supported (out of 6; controls mean: 4)

ITT: +.37** effect size: +.22

ATT: +.57** effect size: +.34

Someone listening to me asking what we did at school, participating to school activities, coaching me, et.

Effects on relations with teachers

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- ❑ Feeling of being treated unfairly (factorial score based on 3 items; controls' mean: .43)

ITT: $-.26^{**}$ effect size $-.24$

ATT: $-.40^{**}$ effect size $-.37$

My teachers consider wrong everything I do, At least one teacher hates me, Teachers are unfair in their grading

- ❑ Improvement in the relationship during school year (controls: 32%)

ITT: $+13\%^*$

ATT: $+20\%^{**}$

Effects on satisfaction about school

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- My studying skills (scale 1-10; controls' mean: 5.32)

ITT: $+.49^{**}$ effect size $+.20$

ATT: $+.76^{**}$ effect size $+.32$

- The school I attend (scale 1-10; controls' mean: 5.72)

ITT: $-.13^{ns}$ effect size $-.05$

ATT: $-.20^{ns}$ effect size $-.07$

Preliminary conclusions

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- ❑ The evaluation produced a structuring effect on the program design (protocol definition) and implementation (monitoring & mentoring), **but** could (involuntarily) bias the program implementation or mis-interpret the data
- ❑ FGCs (and randomization) are viable in Italian schools and FGCs are fairly well accepted by parents
- ❑ FGCs, up to now, were quite effective in increasing parental involvement and in improving student's attitudes toward teachers and learning.

Future actions (please, advice)

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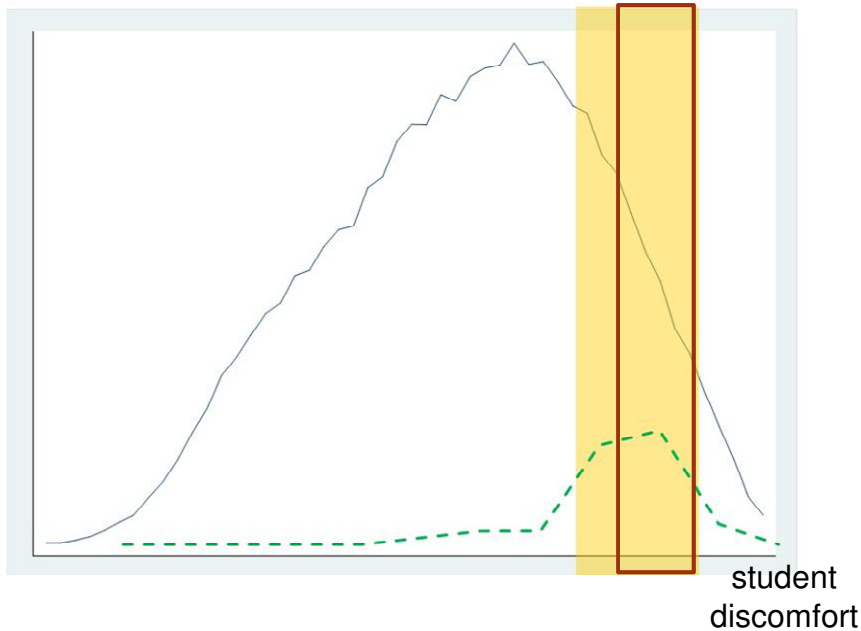
- Enriching the analysis considering other attitudinal outcomes (i.e. peer nomination)
- Did we affect school behaviour or is it just perception?
Expand the analysis to student performance (we collected 2014 attendance rate, grades, failures, et.)
- Will the effects last?
Follow up (May 2015) + administrative data (national assessments 2015/16)
- Did we affect class climate?
Investigating the spillover and contamination issue through a difference in difference (additional control schools)
- Spend the residual money, trying to expand the trial size (re-randomization of controls or new referrals?)

**THANK YOU VERY MUCH
FOR YOUR ATTENTION!**

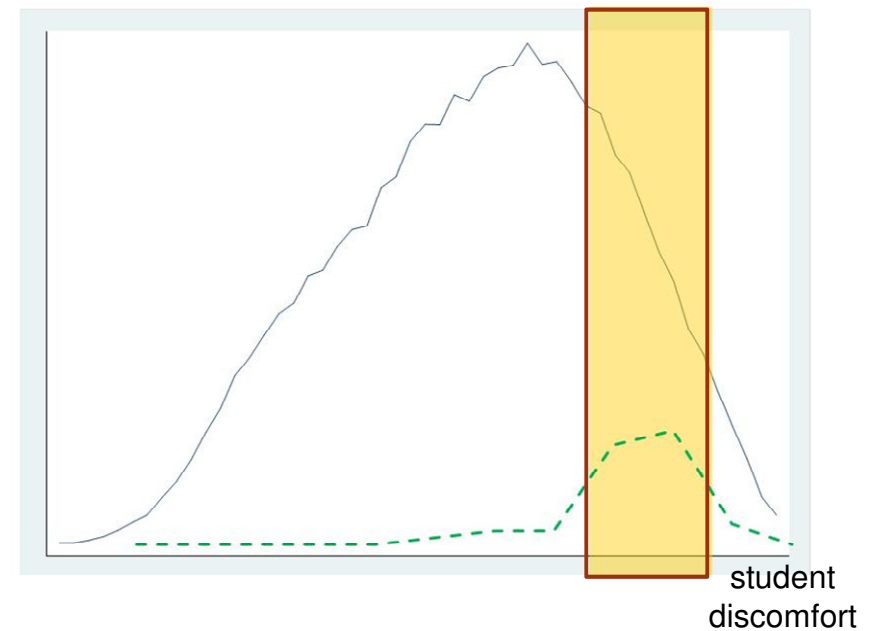
An example of evaluators' interference: facing the shortage of eligible students

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Situation 1: more eligible students are still there



Situation 2: all eligible students are already in our list



————— Students population
- - - - - FGC effectiveness

We decided to allow more time for referrals