

The challenge ahead: building an effective accountability system for Italian head-teachers

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Up to now, head-teacher evaluation is a mere bureaucratic procedure that does not involve any specific assessment of the real professional qualities of the individual. Such situation is meant to change with the implementation of article 20 of the new head-teacher¹ contract signed in 2006. This article indicates that a share of the head-teacher salary will depend on the results of a formal process of external evaluation.

From bureaucracy to accountability, the step is wide. How could such substantial change come about? The first part of this contribution presents the Italian journey for conceiving, designing, and implementing an educational accountability system and for creating a culture of evaluation. The second part of the paper describes how the results of this journey have created the conditions for developing an actual proposal for a system of head-teacher evaluation, which is now under discussion and should be implemented for the first time in 2009. Before the discussion, an introductory section gives an overview of the structural characteristics and the models of governance of the Italian educational system. The last section concludes by summing up the suggestions that the Italian experience could bring to the debate on educational accountability.

Characteristics of the Italian school system²

Education in Italy is compulsory between the ages of 6 and 15 years. Although education is compulsory, schooling is not. A very small number of students are educated at home, either by their parents or a tutor.

Compulsory education covers primary, lower secondary and the first year only of upper secondary education as follows:

Table 1: organization of schooling in Italy

Phases	Age range	compulsory education
Primary education	<i>First cycle</i> 6 - 8 years	
	<i>Second cycle</i> 8 - 11 years	

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¹ Although they have slightly different meanings, in this contribution the terms *head-teacher*, *school manager* *school leader* will be used interchangeably. These words are the English counter-parts for the Italian words *Preside* and *Dirigente Scolastico* (DS).

² Excerpt from: <http://www.inca.org.uk/italy-system-mainstream.html?p=1>

Secondary education	Lower secondary education 11 - 14 years	
	Upper secondary education* 14 - 15 years	
	16-19 years	
Higher/ Further Education Institutions	19 years -	

*As a whole, this phase caters for 14- to 19-year-olds.

Post-compulsory education (ages 15+) is provided in several different types of upper secondary school. These establishments also cater for students aged 14 to 15, in the final year of compulsory education. School types include the *liceo classico*, (general academic upper secondary school), *liceo scientifico* (scientific upper secondary school), *liceo artistico* or *istituti d'arte* (different types of art school), various types of technical school and various vocational schools (*istituti professionali*). The length of studies depends on the type of course and establishment, and usually ranges from three to five years. Students follow a compulsory curriculum, which varies according to school type. The courses grant access to higher education, or employment at middle-management level or as specialist workers. Students generally have to pay tuition fees to attend upper secondary school.

As specified in Table 2, the governance of the Italian school system is mixed. While policy-making is still rather centralized, the administration of the system is more and more delegated to the Regional and local authorities.

Table 2: Educational governance structure in Italy

National level	Second level	Third level	Institutional level	Notes
Ministry of Public Education (MPI) and Ministry of University and Scientific and Technological Research, National Education Council - advisory function	20 regions	Provincial and municipality offices	School councils	Centralized policy making; increasing delegation of administrative powers from central government via regions, provinces and communes to schools.

The responsibilities of the individual schools are growing; but their space for action remains limited and hinders the possibility of the head-teacher to substantially influence the activity of the institution. Law 59/1997 was the first step towards a system set-up that provides the individual school with legal personality, and gives the school manager actual influence in tracing the route the school is to follow to achieve excellence and equity. The legislative decree 59/1998 carried on specifying that the primary role of the school manager is the organization of "... the activity of the school on the basis of formative efficiency and effectiveness criteria, and is the reference for the relationships with the labour unions."³ The constitutional reform of 2001 secured these concepts in the amendments to art. 117, which indicates that the individual school – and not the central government as it was before – is the unit of reference of the Italian school system. Sentence 13/2004 of the Italian Constitutional Court further specifies this vision, and

³ Legislative Decree 59/1998, art. 1 (2) <http://www.cgilscuola.it/leggi/DM59-98.htm>

affirms that, “with regard to school planning and administrative management of the service, the State only decides on the fundamental principles.”⁴ Although these legal principles design a system where head-teachers have increasing freedom of action, many limitations persists. Specifically, law 275/99 (section II, art.3-6) indicates that the Preside, together with the Consiglio d’istituto (School Council) and all the other components of the school, drafts a document called POF,⁵ which is the *mission* of the educational institution. On the basis of such document, and within the general guidelines defined at national level, the school manager defines the calendar, and how the existing human resources (teachers and staff) will be used. However, art. 15 (1) of law 275/99 says that the recruitment of teachers, staff members and technicians with full-time contract is not a competence of the school – and therefore of the school manager. School managers, then, do not have the power to choose cooperators who share their vision, and cannot even rely on national directives to make sure that everybody is working in the same direction.

Development of the evaluation system

The evaluation process aims at gathering information on all the schools and the students in the compulsory education range. The development of the system has gone through two distinct phases – the three Pilot Projects, which explored the possibility of putting into place a national system of evaluation (SNVI), and its subsequent actual implementation. While participation to the Pilot projects was voluntary for the schools, the national system of evaluation is compulsory.

The first concrete step towards the creation of an evaluation system dealing with all aspects of schooling was the establishment of the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education and Training Systems (INVALSI⁶), a public organization which was given the tasks of evaluating analytically the efficiency and effectiveness of the entire national system of education as well as of single schools, research the causes of success and failures and provide continuous monitoring of the effects of education policy measures put into place by the government. As said, the establishment of the SNVI has been preceded by an experimental phase comprised of three Pilot Projects between 2001 and 2004 which had the goal of testing the organizational machine, the schools’ interest, the capacity to produce, administer and analyze the tests and questionnaires, for the implementation of the national system. The main characteristics of the Pilot Projects were voluntary school participation from a pool of schools with some experience in self-evaluation and a short list of objectives to be verified (one system objective and the learning objectives for two subjects – Italian and Math). The concrete process involved a school system survey distributed to the pool of schools while multiple-choice tests in the designated subjects were administered to students from the 5th grade of the first cycle of primary school, 3rd grade of the second cycle of primary school and 2nd grade of secondary school.

The figure below presents the areas of analysis for system evaluation.

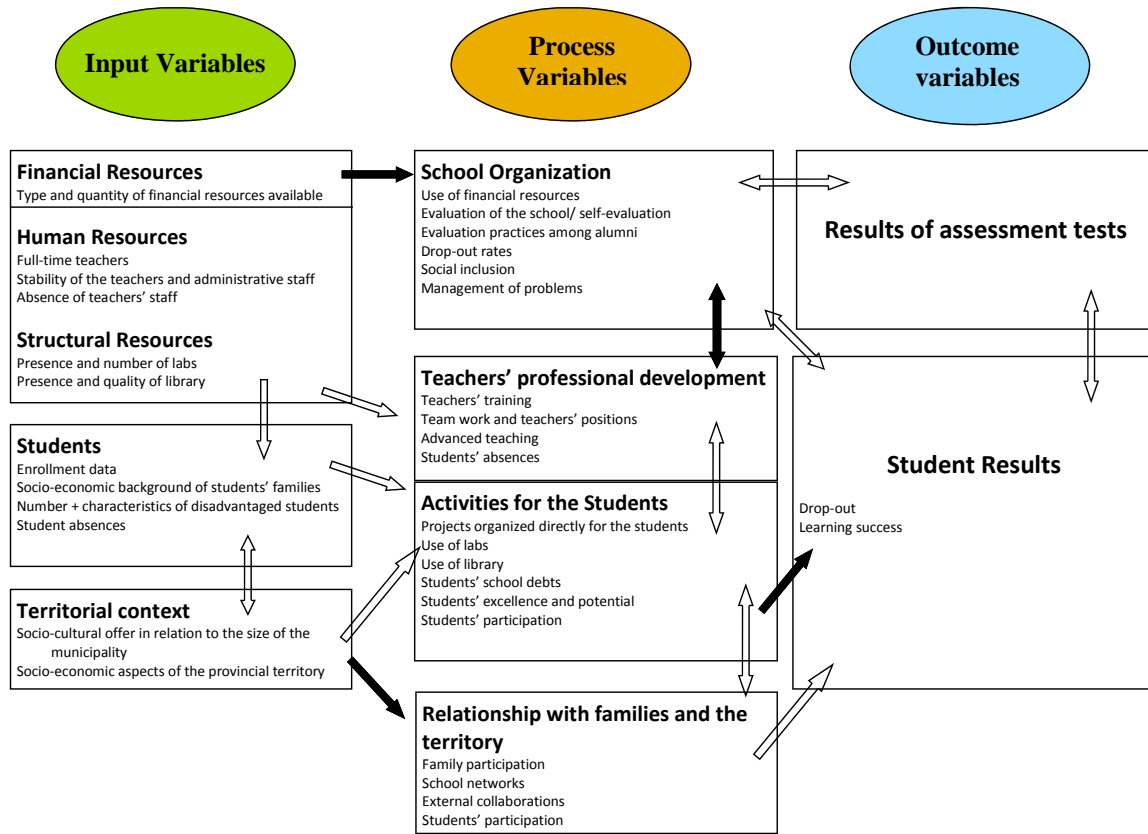
⁴ Corte Costituzionale, Sentenza 13/2004

<http://www.istruzioneer.it/Documenti/Comunicati%20stampa/Corte-Sentenza%2013.doc>

⁵ *Piano dell’Offerta Formativa*. the document is the mission of the educational institution.

⁶ Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema dell’Istruzione – www.invalsi.it

Figure 1: System evaluation



Process of continuous improvement— responsibility of the individual school

Source: adapted from INVALSI SNV, 2007

The combination of assessment both on the student performance and the performance of the school institution has been considered as a way to see education as a process of learning but also as a service.

After the success of the pilot projects, in 2004 the Ministry of Education started setting annual general objectives for education policy and each year it specifies the principal aspects which need to be evaluated by SNVI. The overarching goal is to have information which is public and comparable on the functioning and results of the system of education, a service able to measure the level of achievement of the national objectives set by the Ministry every year, thus enabling early identification, school by school, of the critical points in need of intervention.

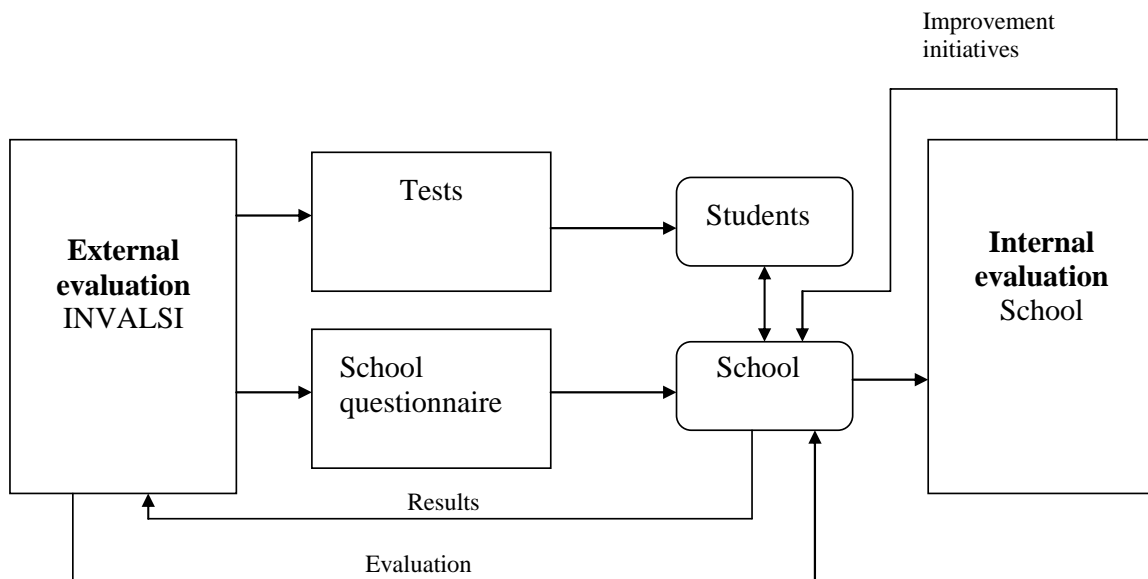
The first nation-wide survey was done in 2004-05. The 2005-06 survey launched some new elements with respect to the previous years - identification of a statistically significant sample of schools and the employment of external evaluators. Since 2004-05, the assessment is compulsory for public and private primary and lower secondary schools. It is optional for upper secondary, and the INVALSI still makes sure to involve a statistically significant sample of school at national level.

The school questionnaires and the tests in the different subjects are distributed to the school in paper form. The materials are then collected and stocked at INVALSI, which proceeds to the scanning and the compilation of the databases.

With respect to the tests in the different subjects, the datasets are encrypted and each school receives only the information related to its own students via password protected access to the INVALSI website. The INVALSI compiles statistics at provincial, regional, and macro-regional level⁷ and publishes these statistics on its website. The same procedure is followed for the school questionnaires; although the individual school records are communicated to the school and to the Ufficio Scolastico Regionale (USR), the administrative branch of the ministry of education at regional level.

As apparent, this arrangement collects standardized data for all the national school, but it impedes the direct comparison of individual school performance and characteristics. In fact, the aim of the Italian model has been to stimulate a continuous improvement at school level through giving quickly and confidentially feedback on the results of the school and on the relative attainment at national, regional and provincial level, assess through tests in each school, students' knowledge and abilities in some subjects. Afterwards, data is analyzed by the school in relation to its particular context (social background, educational offer, etc.) and should feed into a process of self-evaluation as depicted in the following figure.

Figure 2: Relationship between internal and external evaluation



Yet, this limited use of the data collected should not be underestimated; such arrangement has been necessary because the first steps of Italy towards standardized evaluation and data collection in education were seen with great suspicion by school staff and by labor unions. Slowly, stakeholders have become more and more aware of the need of objective information on school characteristics as a tool for improving school quality. Along the

⁷ Italy is administratively divided in 20 regions. The 20 regions are the aggregated in 5 macro regions: North-West, North-East, Centre, South, Islands.

way, people expectations have increased to the point that school principals and labor unions have taken an unprecedented step by agreeing to link a share of principals' salary to the result of an evaluation process. The INVALSI is currently drafting a proposal for a model of school-principal evaluation; among other things, the proposal includes an indication of the necessary steps forward in terms of data contents and data processing, which will be necessary for this data for the evaluation. The next section presents the lines of development of the INVALSI proposal.

The evaluation of Italian head-teachers

Up to now, the school heads were evaluated every year by the provincial school superintendents (Provveditori agli studi) but this practice is now under great attacks and in the new regional restructuring of the school administration also the provincial superintendents are suppressed. This evaluation is a mere bureaucratic procedure and does not involve any specific assessment of the real professional qualities of the head.

The inspectors are involved in the process only if and when there are behavioral problems or other disorders to be dealt with.

The need to formally evaluate school's managers emerged with the role attributed to this professional figures under the reform started in 1997-99 (Point 5 of Legislative Decree 286/99 and point 25 of the Legislative Decree 165/01). The evaluation of the head teacher was first realized in an experimental way (SI.VA.DI.S model, the evaluation system of the school managers) and then specifically included (art. 20) in the new contract regulating the profession of head-teachers and signed on April 11th, 2006.

Along the lines of the contract, this evaluation entails two phases. The first one concerns an external group formed by a technician, an administrative and ad educational professional with certified skills. The second phase is attributed to the general manager of the Regional Educational Office and is related to the results and the skills to of the school managers:

- Results are measured through the annual auto-evaluation executed by the school manager on the bases of the goals planned at the beginning of the school year and with the consultancy of an evaluation group;
- Skills' evaluation (performance, professionals actions) are in the long term, in correspondence with the duration of the contract of the school manager and it takes place on the bases of a list of behaviors shared with the union and professional's associations.

The INVALSI proposal has been molded on these principles. By following the same logic adopted for the development of the SNVI, the proposal for the evaluation of Italian head-teachers tries to balance the needs of the system with the needs of the individual school and tries to arise in the head-teacher professionals a sense of ownership that shall facilitate the establishment of the system. The general object of the evaluation is the services of head-teachers, within the specific context in which they shall exercise their action. The full understanding of the context and its dynamics is a necessary precondition to identify the specific areas of improvement of the school that the manager should seek to influence.

It is on basis of the analysis of context, territorial and organizational, that the headmaster negotiates with the Director of the Ufficio Scolastico Regionale (USR – Regional School Authority) the targets to be secured within the three years of each evaluation period.

Giving head-teachers and school staff an active role in the negotiation and definition of the objectives aims at empowering and motivating them in their activity. These objectives must balance the needs of the system and the specific needs of the school within its specific context. In general terms, the head-teacher performance shall be checked against three core indicators:

- reducing % early school leavers;
- improving student results in core subjects;
- reaching an objective agreed upon at local level with competent authorities.

The process of definition of the objectives must comply with requirements of simplicity, clarity and simplification of wording. But – above all – for being reliable guides for the head-teacher actions, the objectives shall comply with two main operating conditions:

- they must be measurable with quantitative parameters which represent an objective basis for monitoring the results and the degree of achievement of the original objectives;
- the objectives defined at the level of the individual school must be compatible and consistent with the general objectives defined at national and regional level.

The definition of the quantitative parameters relating to the objectives mentioned above takes into account the characteristics of the individual school (in terms of quality of teaching staff, financial resources and infrastructure equipment), the socio-demographic characteristics of the students who attend the school and the other contextual conditions.

The quantitative objectives cannot be set below a certain thresholds equivalent to the minimum standards (national or regional). If the characteristics of the schools are so problematic that these minimum standards cannot be complied with, the head-teacher must file in a specific request with the USR to discuss the minimal conditions necessary to operate.

Yet, achieving the system objectives (reducing % early school leavers; improving student results in core subjects) is the result of the decisions and of the actions of the individual schools. Yet, these central objectives – which could be referred to as “mission objectives” – depend on variables internal *and external* to the school, many of which are exogenous to the action of the head-teacher. Thus, if the system focused solely on the mission objectives, it would violate the principle of “controllability” that is basic for any evaluation process. Hence, the head-teacher would be frustrated in his attempt to obtain certain results without being able to influence the decisional and operational leverages that these results depend on. For this reason, the mission objectives shall be used more for tracing a route, rather than tying the head-teacher to specific quantitative parameters.

Instead, the “leadership objectives”, i.e. the objectives agreed upon at local level with competent authorities, are more specific and are objectives of organizational development through which the head-teacher sets-up for the school a pattern of improvement that is consistent with the mission objectives. The leadership objectives depend more directly from the action of the head-teacher and involve a wide spectrum of areas: development of formative offer, educational effectiveness, innovation, professional development of staff,

team-work, student participation, participation of families and stakeholders to the life of the school, reorganization of the administrative procedures etc.

These objectives are a strategic map for the school management, and they design an organizational model that can reasonably support the staff in pursuing the mission objectives.

The task ahead is to define the specific summative and formative characteristics of the evaluation process and its scheduling.

Lessons to be learned

The Italian case is evidence of the steps necessary for the development of a “culture of evaluation”: collection and usage of data cannot simply be imposed on a people whose roots lie in a different field. If any such thing would happen, the most probable result is that the tool would be considered an extra weight to carry, rather than a useful instrument to use.

Before the system became compulsory, the evaluation process involved already almost all Italian schools, and the confidentiality of the data reassured the schools on issues linked to unwanted (and potentially unfair) comparison with institutions of different social intake or different contextual conditions. Now the system has been understood, and – as pointed out earlier – a large share of the school staff considers the possibility of moving further by using the data not only for counseling purposes, but also for the actual evaluation of school staff.

The model for the evaluation of Italian head-teachers is an example of this development and it shall merge the need of achieving some specific system objectives (reducing % early school leavers; improving student results in core subjects) measured in a reliable way by using comparable information on student results with the need of focusing on aspects of the school life that the head-teacher can effectively influence. For this reason the mission objectives shall serve as the compass that tells the direction of head-teacher actions, while the leadership objectives shall be the instrument for defining the strategic map that will help the school on the road for improvement.

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