

Introduction

School site-based management in Italy: ten years after

by *Roberto Serpieri*

This issue of the *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* focuses on site-based management in Italy in the context of school autonomy, ten years after its introduction. It is a complex task to explain to an international audience what site-based management for schools means in Italy. Understanding this, may be a challenging task for the Italians themselves.

To offer such an explanation is not the aim of the articles published in this issue, however. either it is to provide prescriptive recipes or to make evaluative statements about the reform's failure or success. Were we interested in carrying on a similar 'exercise', we could look at the Italian system through a comparison with the English one, increasingly regarded as an "exemplary way" to be followed. In doing so, we could use two 'classic' analytical dimensions, that is the degree of structural centralisation/decentralisation (the role of the central government, the financial and human resources management and allocation, and so on) and the features of the evaluation and assessment system, although using them in a simplistic fashion. As the Table below highlights, there is no doubt that the English system can be regarded as more decentralised. This evidence seems even more significant if we consider both the centralising policies enacted in England in the last two decades and the ten years long school site based management in Italy. In the English system the three forms of evaluation are strongly emphasized i.e. the international evaluation (OECD-PISA mainly), the national and the most relevant one (OFSTED, League Tables and so on) and the one realised at the local level (schools' self-evaluation that is the basis for the inspectors' work)). In Italy instead only some initial steps towards a national system of evaluation have been done. since we are now learning how to cope with the influential impact of

international evaluations. At the same time, we are still discussing the space to be given to schools' self-evaluation, as is the case for the head teachers evaluation (INVALSI).

Table 1. Comparing schools site-based management in the English and Italian systems

	Structural centralisation	Structural decentralisation
Trans-national evaluation	Italy	England
National evaluation		England
Local evaluation		England

It is not our purpose to draw up ranking lists or to propose recipes.

It is interesting to observe how also in Italy several private actors are entering the field of educational research, finding their way in a space which has traditionally been always occupied by public actors. We are increasingly facing a shift, moving closer and closer to the English system (Ball, 2007). In this respect we could look at the rich and wide activity of organizations such as *TreeLLLe*, *Fondazione per la Scuola della Compagnia di San Paolo* or *Fondazione Agnelli*. The legitimacy of these private or “philanthropic” voices is increasingly growing in the diagnostic and prognostic debate on the ‘illness’ of the Italian school system. The entering of these “non-public” actors represents one of the most relevant change in the Italian education policy-making. Interestingly, however, all these voices do agree about the substantial failure of the site-based management reform ‘ten years after’. Given this diagnosis, they profusely offer suggestions, patterns, recipes and proposals. Although those recipes could sound a bit ingenuous and rhetorically¹ emphatic to the

¹ In a recent publication focusing on school headship of the *TreeLLLe* Association (2007), for instance, a “partial” review of the literature on educational leadership is presented. The critical studies are ignored, while the crucial debate on distributed leadership is discussed in an oversimplified fashion (for an in-depth examination of these issues, see Serpieri, 2008 and Serpieri et al. later in this essay). As a consequence, the recipes and solutions proposed recall the timeless transformational leadership approach, being still enmeshed in a managerialist perspective. Another example is offered by the rhetorical recovering of the *Progetto Educativo di Istituto* (Institute Educational Project, the planning the schools were asked to elaborate before the site-based management reform) that should

“discriminating taste” of many academics and researchers², their authority and influence on politicians, practitioners, media and public opinion is growing. No matter if, sometimes, they forget how some of the recipes suggested as best ways have produced in other national context (England is a good example again) failures or at least substantial rethinking (Barzanò, 2007; 2008; 2009 and later in this issue).

Yet, the articles published in this issue have mainly descriptive aims. As the work by Paolo Landri shows, the interpretative approaches adopted by the authors act as part of theoretical tool-kits that enable a deeper understanding of the phenomena considered.

The reform introducing school site-based management is the focus of many essays (Anna Arnone, Lorenzo Fischer and Maria Grazia Fischer, Emiliano Grimaldi and Roberto Serpieri, Assunta Viteritti), and different readings and understandings of this process are offered³. School site-based management is part of a wider reform concerning the whole Italian public administration that was promoted by a centre-left government in the end of the '90s. As a matter of fact, this reform has represented the *Italian way* for introducing in the public sector some of the main principles, devices and rhetorics of the New Public Management. Among them, the role of public managers has been strongly renewed and empowered. It is not a case, then, if many voices recognize in the “formation” of a new headship the distinctive trait of the site-based management reform (Fischer et al., 2002; Serpieri, 2009).

Schools have been recognised as “autonomous subjects” from a juridical point of view, therefore being free to establish relationships with other public and private organizations (given the juridical formalism of the Italian public system this represents a crucial step). Through a rich texture of laws and regulations, the Italian education system has been decentralised and new functions have been devolved to local governments (Regions,

come back and substitute the *Piano dell’Offerta Formativa* (School Educational Plan, the annual planning concerning each school activity), as suggested by another publication (TreeLLLe, 2006).

² Much more grounded on a theoretical and empirical base seem to be the annual reports published by the *Osservatorio sulla Scuola dell’Autonomia* working at the LUISS University in Rome.

³ In order to make this short introduction more readable, any reference to laws, acts and regulations is avoided here. All the references can be found in the articles of the issue.

Provinces and Municipalities), on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity (see, De Martin et al, 2008; Morzenti Pellegrini, 2006; Grimaldi and Serpieri 2009; 2010 and later in this issue). Within this scenario, the pyramidal structure of the Ministry of Education would have had to break up, in order to promote and encourage processes of devolution (administration and management) towards local governments and schools. Nonetheless we need to use *would have had to break up* and not *has broken up*, as brilliantly suggested by the title of two essays (Benadusi and Landri, 2002 and Landri in this issue), who have presented the “eclipse” of ministerial bureaucracy as a temporary phenomenon (sun or moon eclipses do not last long). In this context processes of evaluation should have been enacted, as in the case of headship, which are encountering many hinders. Moreover, only partial accounts are available about some of the most interesting sides of the reform, such as the promotion of activities of research and teaching innovation at the school level or the constitution of networks among schools (Landri, Queirolo Palmas, 2004; Benadusi, Giancola, Viteritti, 2009; Ribolzi, 2006). Notwithstanding, various innovative experiences seem to flourish in schools, as the article by Assunta Viteritti effectively shows.

The ‘formation of new actors’ and processes⁴ is, then, one of the most visible consequences of both the site-based management reform and the subsequent whirlwind of policies promoted by governments and Ministers who strongly wanted to leave their imprinting⁵. Interestingly enough, among the actor who seem to have been left apart in the reform are teachers themselves. The works by Colombo and Romano investigate the changes that have interested teachers identities and practices after the reform. Changes that have developed within the “invisible” and “silent” space of professional reflexivity. It is only in the last two years that the teaching profession and the related roles have started to be restructured, as a

⁴ The changes concerning the administrative structure of the Italian schools have been analysed in Landri and Serpieri 2004. The same work and those of Ingrosso, 2005 and Morcellini, Cortoni, 2007 have also addressed the policies and practices for the introduction of the ICT in the Italian education system.

⁵ It is worth to notice how, after the reform promoted by the Minister Luigi Berlinguer, who strongly wanted school site-based management, the following Ministers, from both the centre-right and centre-left government, have attempted to ‘reform the reform’ through sectorial policies.

consequence of the policies promoted by the present Minister of Education of the centre-right government. In a similar vein, Marco Pitzalis illustrates how after the attack directed against the teaching profession in the primary school, the Italian education system runs the paradoxical risk to waste the significant legacy of professional knowledge that school site-based management itself had the declared aim to preserve and reinforce.

The 'formation' of the new head teacher and the features of its renewed role are addressed in the essay by Armone, while the article by Lorenzo and Maria Grazia Fischer offers an empirical account of the changes concerning headship after the introduction of site-based management. This last article reprises and develops the results of previous and relevant research conducted by Fischer and his colleagues in the last ten years. A cross-section of the interactions among head teachers and other public and private actors within the devolved arenas of local governance is depicted by Emiliano Grimaldi and Roberto Serpieri in their work.

This issue aims at providing to international and Italian scholars and experts a contribution to the description and the understanding of the features of school site-based management in Italy. Nonetheless, it also intends to offer some examples of how Italian scholars can critically read other national experiences and the debate in the international literature. Barzanò presents in this issue part of her comparative work on leadership and accountability in England, Italy and Portugal (Barzanò, 2007, 2009), focusing on the English case. The mirage of the English "oasis" and the harsh contrast with the "desert" of the Italian experience are strongly reframed and downsized. In this respect, the champions of the thaumaturgical powers of head teachers⁶ should reflect upon their assumptions. In the last article of this issue, Serpieri, Grimaldi and Spanò provide a critical reading of the international debate on educational leadership, discussing the most influential understandings of the fashioning idea of distributed leadership.

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⁶ In a recent work focusing on the disposition of the English and Australian head teachers (and more generally of the head teachers experiencing site-based management) to understand themselves as the 'heroes' of change and innovation, Thompson (mimeo) has offered an illuminating critical view.

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