

## Editorial

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This special issue of the *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* grew out of a conference on the ‘Changing Education Policies in Italy’ held at the University of Naples Federico II in February 2010. Organised by the *Educational Section of the Italian Sociological Association (AIS-EDU)* and the *Faculty of Sociology*, the conference was sponsored by *Campania Region*. It was the occasion for many contributors to discuss the shifting scenarios and the main changes in the Italian education system and to share generative insights emerging from the comparison of the Italian education policy trajectories with those of other European countries such as England, Spain and Germany.

During the conference, the participants presented and discussed theoretical and empirical works addressing four main areas of interest, namely a) *educational governance*, b) *equity and social inclusion in education*, c) *Higher Education and Lifelong Learning*, and d) *Knowledge and Information Society, Education and New Media*. Those issues were discussed adopting interpretative tools drawn from different subfields of sociological and educational theory and research.

The debate on educational governance was informed by a constant attention to the shaping influence exerted on national and local policies by the Lisbon Strategy and the wider European and transnational policy frameworks on education and training. More generally, the analysis of the processes of convergence and divergence (Ozga & Jones, 2006) and those of *policy borrowing* (Phillips, 2005; Ball, 2008) between and across different education systems represented a common framework for the debate. The changes affecting the modes of regulation and coordination

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(Kooiman, 2000; Newman, 2001) of the national and local education and training systems constituted a central focus, with a specific reference to their re-articulation within the new multi-level governance scenarios (Martens *et al.*, 2007; Benadusi & Consoli, 2004; Cobalti, 2006). Contributors also discussed the tensions originating from the coexistence of policies inspired by conflicting discourses (Serpieri, 2008a; Grimaldi, 2010; see for instance the tension stemming from the contemporary pressures to enact competitive and collaborative logics of action, Parker & Gallagher, 2007). Moreover, the processes of 'formation' (Hoyle and Wallace, 2005) of new policy actors within the shifting transnational *educational policyscapes* (Carney, 2011) were addressed, looking for example at the relation between contemporary trends towards more and more pervasive systems of accountability and the emergence of new forms of headship enactment (Barzanò, 2009). Discourses of leadership, interpreted as one of the tyrannic managerialist devices to shape educational actors' subjectivities, were also focused on in a critical fashion (Ball, 2006; Serpieri, 2008b; 2009). Finally, participants reflected on policy programs aiming at integrating and/or connecting schooling, Higher Education, school and vocational guidance, training and work experiences.

Social inclusion, equity and the integration between education and social policies were the second centre of gravity of the conference. In a session dedicated to those issues, the presentations offered a wide range of analyses and reflections on national and local policies aiming at: a) promoting social inclusion of disadvantaged students and adults; and b) combating those social, economic and cultural stumbling blocks that impede equality of educational opportunities in Italy (Bottani & Benadusi, 2006; Schizzerotto & Barone, 2006). Equality of opportunities was discussed both in terms of educational access and outcomes (Raffo & Gunter, 2008). Whereas some contributions offered quantitative analyses of educational inequalities in Italy, mainly reworking international and national databases on test results (Giancola, 2009), others addressed with a qualitative approach specific policies or programs combating drop out and early school leaving and/or supporting schools working in disadvantaged areas. Inclusion of young immigrants and intercultural education (Besozzi *et al.*, 2009; Giovannini & Queirolo Palmas, 2010; MPI, 2007) were also discussed in the session, analysing Italian policies and the approaches underlying them. Education for active citizenship, equal opportunities in terms of gender and ethnicity, and participation in education were constant and central concerns.

An intense debate developed around Higher Education and Lifelong Learning. Transformations of Higher Education governance in Italy were discussed in a comparative perspective, reflecting on the *Bologna Process*, the reforming recipes shaping the Italian debate and the processes of policy borrowing across European systems (Moscati *et al.*, 2010). Participants also examined the actual functioning of the Italian Higher Education system, focusing on: a) trends in students' access and performance through longitudinal analyses (Trivellato & Triventi, 2008a; 2008b; Barone & Triventi, 2010), b) choices of Italian students in the transition from high secondary schools to Higher Education and factors influencing them; c) policies aiming at widening and promoting the access to Higher Education, through the offer of guidance services and other facilities; d) policies of Lifelong Learning and the progressive structuring of new governance configurations integrating Higher Education, adults education and labour.

Finally, a specific session of the conference was dedicated to the theme of Knowledge and Information Society, Education and New Media. The discussion concentrated on the relation between new media and the transformations of teaching and learning processes, highlighting both the possibilities ICT technologies open for the structuring of new modes of education and the new problems they pose (the effects of the *digital divide*, for instance) (Kellner, 2002; Buckingham, 2003). Given a specific reference to the Italian scenario, contributors offered interesting insights on those issues presenting their works on: a) experiences of teaching innovation through ICTs; b) policies, programs and experiences promoting *e-learning* and the *2.0 web* as new 'social environments' for learning and socialisation (Colombo, 2009); c) policies and programs reinforcing the ICTs infrastructure of schools, universities and other educational agencies and aiming at reinforcing the 'digital competences and skills' of their professionals.

This special issue is intentionally plural and multivoiced, attempting to render the great deal of educational issues, transformations and phenomena addressed during the conference. Although it would have been impossible to fully represent the multiplicity and richness of both the debate developed and the 'voices' heard during the conference days in Naples, the articles published in this issue give the idea of the scale and the depth of the conference contribution in understanding the changes that are interesting the Italian education system. The theoretical and empirical insights coming from the presented works offer the multifarious 'flavour' of the intensity

and complexity of the exchange among Italian and international scholars that took place in Naples.

The edition begins with two articles by Jordi Blanch Huguet and Helen Gunter, which analyze the educational governance structure and the recent reforming trends in Spain and England. Blanch Huguet offers a thick description of the Catalonian education system, framing its recent developments in the wider process of decentralisation promoted by the Spanish government since 1978. Once outlined the structure of the education system and the social and political debate developing around educational issues, the author highlights how decentralisation and school autonomy have enhanced democracy and participation, and increased the awareness schools have of their responsibilities, potentials and innovation capacities. Starting from the Catalonian experience, a direct connection is established by a fully established school autonomy, more responsible and accountable schools, their capacity to meet the students and local communities educational needs and schools' vocation towards improvement. The article ends underlying some required changes in the functioning of the system, if school autonomy has to be effective: school leadership needs to be supported; educational administration has to play an enabling role, rather than simply controlling schools; policies of evaluation are required, whereas evaluation is not intended as an instrument of pure control, but as a knowledge-base for improvement.

Helen Gunter, in the second article, reconstructs the main traits of the reforms that have reconfigured the English education system over the past thirty years. Such a review is carried on adopting the concept of governance 'as a means of understanding and explaining those reforms'. Drawing on the data collected during the ESRC *Knowledge Production in Educational Leadership* (KPEL) project, the author grasps the complex intertwining between hierarchical and market-driven modes of education governance developed under the New Labour, focusing also on the increasing and pervasive entering of private interests and non educational actors into the education policy-making. Finally, Gunter proposes institutionalised governance as a frame for explaining the inter-actions of government with researchers, private consultants, and the profession in designing and delivering reforms.

The third article, by Gabriele Ballarino, compares the German and Italian Higher Education Systems, both framed as belonging to the "continental" model, where the main actors are the state and the academics' corporation. The author both outlines the common traits of the two systems

and points out a significant difference concerning the governance structure, being the German a federal structure and the Italian a centralized one. This difference represents the centre of the argument developed in the paper. Ballarino offers a insightful description of the recent transformations of the German Higher Education System, emphasizing the texture of interactions through which the main stakeholders participate to the HES governance. Moreover, the article uses the German experience as a blueprint, presenting the situation of the Italian HES, in the light of that of the German HES and drawing potential lessons to be given to the Italian system.

Valeria Glorioso, in the fourth article, addresses the issue of guidance activities for high school students as an answer to the demand for information concerning study programs available in higher education. The assumption underlying the article is that a more detailed knowledge of the decision-making process of study choice is needed if we want to offer more comprehensive, differentiated and targeted guidance services to students in the choice of Higher Education programs. Glorioso presents the main results of the Pilot Project on Study Choice, a research project based on the Study Choice Task Inventory and carried out in 2009 on a non-probabilistic sample of final year high school students in the province of Como. Drawing on the insights the research offered on students' decision-making, it is argued how longitudinal studies on such processes may: a) offer valuable information to high schools, enabling them to respond actively and appropriately to the real demand for support on study choice; b) make available for universities the knowledge-base to design and implement guidance activities; c) benefit students in terms of reflexivity on their own opportunities and responsibilities, helping them to make a conscious choice and reflect on their future projects.

The fifth article, by Paolo Trivellato and Moris Triventi, examines trends in student access and performance at university during the implementation of the "Bologna Process". Focusing on the universities in Milan, the authors explore the enrolment trends of Milan's principal universities and the "exceptional" and/or enduring effects of the "Bologna process" on enrolments, comparing the trends for Italy and for Lombardy region. Moreover, they highlight the differential effects of the reforms on the social composition of incoming students and how the reforms affected the progression of students' careers in the different universities, focusing on the changes in the performance of Milan's universities. The analysis reveals how the reform determined a growth of enrolments and an heterogeneous change in student characteristics, although it is not clear if

these changes are going to be transient or enduring. The exploration of students' characteristics highlights how private and more prestigious institutions have maintained, and even relatively increased, their "compositional" advantage over other universities, whereas public and large universities attracted mainly students with a weaker school background. Furthermore, the article shows how student performance (early drop-out and exams inactivity) has improved and a reduction of its heterogeneity across universities took place. The authors emphasize the need to carry on further research to address whether this is due to organizational improvements or simply reflects a lowering of academic standards.

The sixth article, by Emiliano Grimaldi, deals with the complex issue of the shift towards heterarchical modes of coordination in educational governance, exploring the nexus established by the contemporary discourse on networking between networking itself and innovation. A contribution to a critical analysis of education governance is given, presenting the findings of a case study on a policy program for combating social school drop out developed through the establishment of a network to innovate the practices of teaching and learning in a group of Italian failing schools. The study highlights how the discourse on networks tends to offer a partial and simplistic view on the functioning of the networked forms of coordination, eliciting those analytical dimensions that could be related to the issue of power. The author highlights how it is crucial to take seriously into account the issue of power, if the dynamics of networks are to be understood. The study will also highlight and address the tension and the clash between two different and conflicting representations of innovation. The prevailing of one or another understanding in the enactment of innovation policies can be regarded as strongly influencing, it is argued, the possibility to effectively pursue the development of a bottom-up innovations and their embedding in local contexts.

Rita Fornari and Orazio Giancola, in the seventh article, examine the inequalities in educational performances among the Italian regions after the decentralisation of the education system and the introduction of school autonomy. The authors analyze data from OECD PISA 2006, highlighting the dynamics that produce the differential in educational performance. The article offers a complex understanding of the phenomenon in focus, taking into account the differences between individuals and between geographical areas, the influences exerted by students' background, the role played by a wide range of school-level variables and, finally, the weight of diverse

contextual factors. The analysis shows how marked differences in the various educational pathways still persist in the educational system in Italy (especially in the first and second years of upper secondary school). Moreover, the article brings to light how a profound gap continues to exist also at geographical level. The authors relate those differentials in educational performance to individual socio-cultural level (family background) and emphasize the correlation between average social status in schools and average performance (aggregated background). In their opinion, the empirical evidences presented clearly demonstrate how the upper secondary educational system continues to produce deep-rooted inequities. The above considerations underlie the authors' final plea for a 'set of national policies aimed at filling the cultural gaps which traditionally cause stratification, rather than delegating directly to local levels (individual schools and/or Regions), thus producing greater heterogeneity in interventions which could result in a further increase in inequalities among the territories'.

Anna Milione recognizes the increasing participation of immigrant children in the Italian school system and the consequent heterogeneity of the socio-cultural worlds facing each other in the sphere of education and training, due to the large variety of ethnic groups and different migratory trajectories. Within this scenario, the article examines the different strategies used to include the younger generation of immigrants in the Italian school system. Milione's argument develops through a critical reading of the concept of integration, with reference to some European models and approaches of the more established migration experience. Alternative modalities of inclusion are briefly described, namely assimilation, differentialism and interculturalism. Then the article analyzes the set of discourses, policies and practices developed in the Italian education system in response to the demand for education increasingly coming from students without Italian citizenship. The author ends the article emphasizing how, despite the universalist rhetoric expressed in speeches and policies and the real capacities for implementation of measures envisaged in programmatic documents. According to Milione, 'the question of the inclusion of immigrant children clearly points out the structural problems of our school system, primarily anchored in institutional arrangements that tend to reproduce social inequality and makes therefore even more urgent the need to redefine the overall educational policy for promotion and practical implementation of equal educational opportunities'.

The article by Valeria Pandolfini addresses the issue of the provision of multimedia tools and skills in the use of new technologies for the non-teaching staff of Italian schools, arguing for measures to strengthen such provision and skills. The author presents the key findings of a research evaluating the “PuntoEdu ATA” course and focusing its attention on two innovative elements of the course: the blended learning model and the user for which it is intended. An identikit of the ATA staff in Italy is offered through the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data drawn by the assessments provided by the course participants. Moreover, the work investigates the real usefulness of the course for improving the non-teaching staff’s skills in the use of new technologies. Finally, the article identifies some elements of improvement in view of the model of lifelong learning and refresher courses to ATA staff, which is fundamental to educational institutions to adequately address the work of cultural and organisational renewal under way.

Annalisa Buffardi reflects on the new circulation of information in the scientific research and in the learning environments. The article highlights how the Open Access revolution represents a new scenery that opens new possibilities to researchers, scholars, and all users. Starting from this point, the paper debates about the new practices in the construction and dissemination knowledge in the digital era, emphasizing that Internet and new technologies can be used to retrieve research materials, to organize, keep and treat information. The author points out how these activities can contribute to create a different way to produce scientific knowledge and also to introduce important changes in the higher education system. The article ends up suggesting that given the described transition, openness is a fundamental value to preserve the university’s role in the access to educational content.

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*Acknowledgements:* The editors would like to thank all the colleagues that gave their contribution to the passionate debate that characterized the Conference held at the University of Naples in 2010. Luciano Benadusi, Gianfranco Pecchinenda, Roberto Moscati, Luisa Ribolzi, Silvio Scanagatta and Paolo Trivellato himself chaired the sessions, providing valuable comments and governing the discussion charmingly. Roberto Serpieri himself, Antonio Schizzerotto, Gabriele Ballarino and Maddalena Colombo very generously offered to work on their keynote speeches commissioned for the conference. Carlo Barone, Rita Bertozzi, Maurizio Merico, Fausta Scardigno and Massimiliano Vaira kindly offered to serve as discussants and brought their constructive critiques to the works presented. The chairs and discussants' contribution has been immensely important in shaping the final versions of the articles published in this special issue. We are also grateful to all the conference participants that shared their works with the wider community of the AIS-EDU. Their papers are not part of this issue only because they have been published elsewhere in the last months, given their high quality. Finally, our thanks go to the authors that decided to rework their articles to be included in this issue.

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