

## **School autonomy and the new “accountabilities” of European education leaders: case studies in England, France, Italy and Portugal**

*Giovanna Barzanò*<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract:* In most European countries in the last decades school autonomy became an object of significant normative intervention to reshape education systems within a global scenario of decentralization. The aim of this article is to provide a comparative reflection on how school leaders in different countries relate and feel “accountable” to local authorities in a variety of ways. Studying the introduction of autonomy in various national contexts offers interesting avenues of reflection on the relationship between the local and the global and in particular on how a global trend enters local contexts and comes to be “vernacularized” (Appadurai, 1996) in diverse ways according to the history and culture of the context. This contribution refers in part to data collected in a larger study regarding the relationship between leadership and accountability in different European and non-European countries. The research was undertaken with a qualitative methodology that included documentary analyses and field work, in particular direct observations of school contexts, semi-structured interviews elaborated with key informants within the selected countries. Analysing diverse education systems this way can be quite productive and useful when addressing a theme such as educational accountability, which represents a global trend. The research tackles education policies through critical analyses of experience, focusing on what happens in reality as well as on actors’ perceptions of that reality.

*Keywords:* school autonomy, education leaders, educational systems, governance

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<sup>1</sup> Institute of Education, University of London, WC1H 0AL, UK and University of Roma Tre, via Ostiense, 159 - 00154 Roma (Italy). Email: dott.giovanna.barzano@gmail.com

## **The research underpinnings**

In many education systems accountability policies affecting schools, and school leaders in particular, represent one of the more consistent effects of the processes of decentralization and autonomy introduced by the reforms. It's not by chance that accountability has been defined a “global megatrend” (Bush, 1999).

This study seeks to explore the relationship between the school leader and accountability in various school systems. The intent is to explore the local construction of a global phenomenon through the perceptions of the actors involved and to gather new insights into the development of the school leader's role and on the enactment of education policies (Barzano, 2008, 2009)

The theoretical assumptions of the research deal with three areas: the comparative perspective, the concept of education policy and the interpretation of the notion of accountability. Each one of these areas will be briefly tackled.

The analysis of diverse national contexts here does not aim to compare diverse national traditions, as in classical comparative studies. Rather, it is undertaken to observe in what way, through which mechanisms and with what effects and prospects, “words of an international order enter into national regulatory” (Derouet, 2005, p. 256) or, in other words, what common elements of international education policies come to be translated and recontextualized at the local level (Ball, 1998).

The relation between the global and the local in education is an object of great attention. Ozga and Lindgard (2007, p. 69) observe that three tendencies characterize the contemporary education scene:

- The emergence at the International level of a core set of common global themes and processes which policy decision makers draw upon to invent new policies
- The emergence of a new globalized intermediate space that is formed through stronger global pressures and the responses of local education policies
- The interaction of the objectives of global policies with traditions, ideologies and institutions that are developed within a given territory.

Particularly interesting to study, therefore, is the way in which local policies relate to travelling policies, how the former remain influenced by and reformulate their own aims on the basis of the latter.

Drawing upon the work of Appadurai (1996), Ozga and Lindgard speak of “vernacular globalization”, as something which has some consonance with the idea of “glocalization”, that is, the way in which local, national and global interrelations re-constitute, but with the mediation of local and national history and also with hybridization, an important cultural characteristic of the multi-directional flows of cultural globalization (*ibid.* p. 72).

The way these global ideas and objectives come to be “recontextualized and remodelled” (*ibid.* p. 79) according to traditions, national and local history, and social relations depends upon material and intellectual resources that can be enacted within the field. From this perspective research observing, describing and interpreting what happens in reality can generate useful knowledge and awareness amongst professionals and inform decision making processes and education policies.

However, what does education policy mean? And what knowledge can research on education policies generate? According to common language the term “education policies” returns to that deluge of regulatory texts, circulars and instructions of all kinds of which every actor in the field of education has great experience. According to Ball (2008), written texts -but also oral discourses- are only one component of that which makes up education policy, which instead comes to be a multi-dimensional process. Policies work beyond the legislative texts that announce them: they come to be re-elaborated and spread through other explicated texts, presented and discussed, declined in objectives. But above all they come then to be interpreted and “enacted” in a number of operative contexts where often the ideas and meanings that decision makers have sought to express are far from being translated in a direct and linear manner. Indeed: they are mediated, modified, misunderstood and in some cases are even neglected because they reveal themselves to be impracticable (*ibid.* p. 7). Hoyle and Wallace (2007) speak of an “irony of policies” that emerges when the gap between what is established at the central level and what the school can really accomplish becomes impossible to bridge.

Understanding accountability policies in various systems demands therefore considering a wide spectrum of dimensions: beyond tests, laws,

documents, the contextualized practices occurring in schools and classes are also crucial, where actors think to do things, where they experience emotions and fears. Their voice and perceptions are an important part of the process. Accountability is in fact a complex phenomenon, in which formal procedures and informal practices converge and lead the school to "respond" to various interlocutors, who often have conflicting interests. These include educational authorities, but there are also local entities, parents, the work world, and the social community in a wider sense.

What changes according to the different traditions and cultures of each system are the institutional assets and balancing relationships of forces/resources that are determined amongst these subjects.

On the other hand, the way in which educators account for their action is not only the consequence of specific and direct requests, but rather it is often the fruit of mechanisms that are determined in the assets of a particular system (Bell & Stevenson, 2006). For example the way in which interactions with parents is regulated and the school's selected modalities can construct an indirect mechanism of accountability in that they imply a duty to respond to certain expectations and lead the school to present itself in a certain way.

In the context of this study, the definition of Carnoy *et. al.* (2003) is used, which makes clear the polymorphous nature of accountability, considering three tiers:

the individual's sense of accountability or *responsibility*; parents', teachers', administrators', and students' collective sense of accountability, or *expectations*, and the organisational rules, incentives, and implementation mechanism that constitute the *formal accountability* systems in school. These accountability mechanisms represent the variety of ways, formal and informal, in which people in schools (including parents in some cases) *give an account* of their actions to someone in a position of formal authority inside or outside the school. Mechanisms are *formal* when they are recorded in a policy handbook or as part of a union contract. *Informal* mechanisms refer to a set of measures that school actors refer to, regardless of what bureaucratic rules and regulations in fact say, that are organic to that particular school culture. Mechanisms can also vary in the consequences they carry for success or failure. They can be *low stakes*, resulting only in approval by, say, the principal. Or they can

be *high stakes*, involving public disclosure or financial sanctions and rewards. (p. 4, emphasis in original).

Carnoy *et al.* also specify that these three levels - responsibility, expectations and formal accountability - interact with one another following different models in each school:

A given school's response to the problem of accountability is a product of how it resolves the conflicts and complementarities between individuals' internalised notions of accountability, their shared expectations, *that push them to account to someone else for what they do.* (*ibid.*, emphasis added).

What is interesting in this definition is the detailed description of the variables implied in the notion of accountability at school level. It acknowledges the relevance of the informal, and sometimes more profound, aspects of the conception of accountability and draws attention to the interaction between the informal and the formal aspects of accountability, avoiding sticking only to the more official aspects.

### **The Approach**

A crucial problem of research on global education policies is the need to clarify the approach adopted. A privileged path or recipe does not exist; rather it is necessary to consider the nature of the phenomenon, the position of the researcher and attentively determine what will be the most fruitful way to tackle the complex intertwining of the local and the global, seeking to avoid reification of the global dimension while focusing on its structural aspects (Rizvi & Lindgard, 2010).

In this research the interweaving of the local and the global was approached through a comparison of four education systems, underpinned by the analysis of the cultural and historical component of the contexts where policies are generated.

The research thus employed qualitative methodologies: documentary analysis, fieldwork, and particular direct observation of school contexts and semi-structured interviews with key informants in Italy, France, England and Portugal.

Two categories of key informants were interviewed: 24 school leaders at the primary school and lower secondary levels (comprehensive institutes) and 8 consultants or policymakers. The school leaders were chosen according to three criteria: qualified experience and positive recognition on the part of their colleagues and supervisors, their gender, and socio-cultural characteristics of the school locale and population.

Each interview was conducted during a school visit. Selected consultants and policymakers were high-level functionaries, union leaders or academics, all interviewed in their offices.

In the four countries, well-informed interviewees, of both genders, attentive and interested in the development of policies and reforms, were considered the ideal respondents to contribute to the study and to understand “the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, 1998, p. 221).

The research can therefore be defined a “collective case study” (Stake, 1994), since a number of cases are jointly studied, in order to inquire into the phenomenon of accountability. Collective case studies are “instrumental”, as opposed to “intrinsic”. Here cases are examined “to provide insight into an issue or refinement of theory” (p. 237), they play a secondary role and support our understanding of something else. According to Stake, a collective case study:

is not the study of a collective, but instrumental study extended to several cases. Individual cases in the collection may or may not be known in advance to manifest the common characteristics. They may be similar or dissimilar, redundancy and variety each having voice. They are chosen because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorising about a still larger collection of cases. (*ibid.*).

While the small number of interviewees and criteria which inspired their selection do not allow for any generalisations, their perceptions of reality and their narrations of experience provide insights and rich examples of interpretation which illuminate the context of educational accountability. The assumption here is that not everything needs to be generalised to be meaningful: “Large numbers may present a wider picture, but may fail to help us understand what is of deepest concern, what matters most. For that,

qualitative approaches may be far more appropriate” (Bottery et al, 2008, p.183).

Interviews were crucial tools of data collection. The interview model used is interactive: within the context of symbolic interactionism defined by Denzin (2001) the researcher, works as a painter or a novelist, and “makes recognisable and visible a slice of human experience that has been captured” (*ibid.* p. 47). In particular the interview is considered to be an interactive construction of knowledge that implies an intense cooperation between the researcher and the respondent.

Following Fielding (2003):

Producing interview data is now recognised as a collaborative accomplishment rather than the mechanical extraction of uncontaminated ‘data’ from the respondent as if one were plucking fruit from a tree (p.xvii).

However, the interviews were also semi-structured in that they were steered by a “topic guide” (Seale, 1998): when the planned topics had not been covered sufficiently in the narrative part of the interview, more specific questions were asked. This orientation of the study mirrors what Fontana (2002) calls “postmodern-informed interviewing”, as opposed to “traditional interviewing”:

one path from traditional to postmodern-informed interviewing is that the so-called detached researcher and interviewer are recast as active agents in the interview process and attempts are made to deprive their agency. Another path is that the interviewee’s agency is privileged and, in the name of the interviewee, all manner of experimentation is undertaken to make evident his or her own sense of identity and representational practices (p. 165).

In this context the “trinity of validity, generalisability and reliability” (Janesik, 1994, p. 216), which shapes quantitative and post-positivist qualitative approaches, becomes questionable. As Gubrium and Holstein (2002) observe, in interactive interviewing validity does not result from the implementation of a set of fixed techniques. The interviewer’s effort in fact does not consist of collecting what is already there, as if the respondent were “the vessel of answers” (p. 13). Rather, it implies seeing the

respondents as the owners of informative stories they are entitled to narrate. To this extent in the interview "the point is to provide the opportunity for this ownership to be expressed, to reveal what presumably lies within" (p. 19). In the work conducted the interviews were recorded and transcribed in their entirety, analyzed in detail and codified using an open codification and progressive focalization process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The call for studying a practice close up in its manifestation and through the perceptions of the actors engaged is today always greater (Ball, 2008; Bottery, 2009; Gunter, 2009): direct observation and in depth interactive interviews are instruments of inquiry that can generate important knowledge for understanding the phenomena of education through the voice of its actors and their reflections on professional practice.

### **The research object**

The data presented here are the elements of a much larger study that took as its object the phenomena of accountability in its complexity. Here the focus is on a sub set of aspects, concerning in particular the relationship of school leaders with local communities and the accountabilities it implies.

Accountability, in its varied declinations outlined earlier, is a "hot" topic (Domenici, 2005). It is hot in terms of change and innovation, hot in terms of fears and hesitations, but also in terms of pride and potential satisfaction. It is an emotionally charged issue, near to the heart of those who work in schools and whose professional identity may be affected. To be "accountable", having to give an account, to open the reasons, the paths and the results of one's actions to an external eye that can invade you. It is a delicate operation, an ambiguous one, in the etymological sense of the term (Hoyle & Wallace, 2007). It can mean making available one's story with pride and satisfaction (Ranson, 2003) thereby fulfilling the just needs and expectations of democracy. It can also mean finding oneself forced to show, to "fabricate" proof and results artificially, to be invaded by a culture of "performativity" that day after day alters the individual and collective professionalism itself (Ball, 2003; Blackmore, 2004).

The leverage exerted by the policies of accountability is powerful and full of steppingstones. The new *accountabilities* that surround the school leader have a great deal to do with the processes of decentralization and

autonomy that in many countries have led to the redrafting of laws and affecting the relationship between the school and local entities (Armone & Visocchi, 2005; Benadusi & Consoli, 2004)

### **Institutional contexts**

Some salient characteristics of the way the role of school leaders is conceived in four European countries is sketched in table 1. This is not a comprehensive picture, however the selected aspects allow for an overview of commonalities within the differences that can be found in diverse systems and represents some of the many nuances of the school-community relationship.

A few aspects should be highlighted in particular. With respect to school governance, Italy has a peculiar participative structure of governance. The “collegio dei docenti”, the assembly of all teachers operating in the school, has deliberative powers and is a typically Italian organism that does not exist in other countries. Instead there is no official direct participation of the local community in terms of the administration of the Italian school.

In all the countries considered, local authorities have an historic tie with the school, which has recently been revitalized with the introduction of autonomy. England is an exception since the role of the LA (ex LEA) has been rescaled with the assignment of greater powers given to the *Governing body* (Education Reform Act, 1988).

The system of recruitment (table 2) is an interesting aspect and shows a lot about the way in which the profession and its responsibilities are conceived and the relationships it implies (Thomson, 2008). In all four countries, in order to aspire to a leadership post today, it is necessary to have specific qualifications and experience as a teacher, even if this last requisite has begun to be called into question in England and even to some extent France.

In Italy and in France we find two national competition systems that are fairly similar, characterized by written and oral national tests offered to qualified teachers. The logic implied by the national competition is that by establishing strongly centralized and homogenous criteria for all of the country and by controlling for them, it is assumed that a “good leader” will be so no matter the school in which they are placed.

In France the competition is held every year and about 30% of applicant teachers are selected. Passing the tests leads initially to the role of adjoint (assistant head of school) who works under the tutelage of an experienced school leader. These characteristics make the French system of recruitment a particularly salient professional opportunity, that envisions a greater involvement of peers, both in the triennial tutoring of new arrivals, as well as in the pre and post formation phases where many expert school leaders participate as tutors. The annual competition, a stable and recurring structure upon which those who desire to advance professionally can count, is preceded by institutional formative activities that are available to anyone who is interested and qualified. French teachers, therefore, may make a number of “tries” at winning the competition.

Instead, in the case of England and Portugal, it is the school that selects its school leader. The presupposition here is that the management of the school, aside from some essential technical and cultural prerequisites (for example degrees *ad hoc*) is something absolutely specific, that must be exercised by someone with great familiarity of the context, who both embraces and declares oneself ready to take on that particular context with its challenges.

We are quite a distance here from the “universal” logic of France and Italy. Notwithstanding, there are also profound differences between England and Portugal. In England recruitment is accomplished within the framework of a business-style process. When a post becomes available, the governing body places an ad within professional journals and “invents” its own tests and criteria for selection with the help perhaps of an *ad hoc* consultant. Generally there is also a strong practice component established in these tests: for example, the candidate is asked to assist in a few lessons and to offer feedback and demonstrate to the governing body what he or she would offer to teachers. In England it is not easy to find someone who is willing to lead a school; the more difficult schools have a much harder time as well as a high turnover rate.

In Portugal the current recruitment process, revised in 2009, keeps alive an historical aspect of the Portuguese school system that has great symbolic value: the elections of the leader. Up until 2008 the school head (*presidente*) was elected, together with the governing team, by an assembly comprised mainly of teachers, who also had the task of proposing a precise program. The election, a practice introduced with the “Carnation

Revolution” of 1974 in order to counter the tradition of party nominations, has for four years now been considered the best approach, with a mixed assembly electing the school head from a restricted number of candidates, already shortlisted.

The post of headteacher is itself influenced by the way the recruitment process occurs. In Italy and in France, headteachers can be transferred on their own initiative or that of educational authorities, but always at the discretion of the educational authorities. In Italy there are no particular constraints; the role is unique and there are economic differences according to the complexity of the institution.

In France the post must be held for at least three year and at most nine years, with institutions having diverse levels of prestige and remuneration. Instead, in England and in Portugal this concept of transfer does not exist. In England if a school leader wants to move, he or she can apply for a post at another school, seeking as before in the advertisements posted in the professional journals. In Portugal the post is hold for a total of four years and then the school leader may again present him or herself as a candidate for election or could, in theory, return to teaching. Also important are the way in which the relationship between school leaders and teachers is structured and the evaluation of the school and its faculty (table 3).

In England and in France school leaders are hierarchically superior to teachers and have greater decision-making power regarding the events that affect scholastic life. In Italy the decisional power of school leaders is restricted by the presence of the teacher assembly. School leaders have a double sided relationship with teachers, who are both individual professionals to be lead and members of the Assembly, which in theory has the power to veto school leaders’ proposals. In Portugal teachers are “peers” and make up part of the group of electors that select the school leader. The different nature of the relationship and the imaginary space that this draws, notably influences the school leader’s relational climate, responsibilities and strategies.

School leader accountability, both formal and informal, is a further field of analysis. In England the presence of a strong evaluation system with annual tests and inspections, the results of which are published in newspapers and on the web, makes immediately visible the “results” of the school leader. Her employers (the Governing Body and the LA, Local Authorities) might want to get rid of him or her if performance reviews and

inspection are not good. Day after day the actions of the headteacher are conditioned by a logic of performance that often conflicts with the idea of professional and moral responsibility. In Portugal the *director* is involved daily in a process of continual and informal accountability by the Assembly that elected him or her, while formal evaluations do not have a strong bite. There are pilot evaluation experiences and an active inspector (IGE), however the efforts of the inspection remain bureaucratic controls that have little impact.

In France evaluation instruments *ad hoc* (mission letters, contracts of objectives) and inspectors celebrate a formal accountability that is accompanied in strong relief by informal relations and contextual conditions. The elements that are briefly described here constitute the scenario in which the data of the research was set.. In Italy evaluation, although foreseen by the legislation is far from being implemented.

### **Actors’ experiences and perceptions**

Presented here are some examples from the field where the voices of the actors provide evidence of how the previously illustrated structural characteristics are perceived and impact on those who live within them in terms of accountability.. The floor is given thus to the actors in particular who are, in this case, considered to be a unified population. Three issues are considered: the relationship between the school leader and the community/local authority, the provision/negotiation of resources, and the processes of decentralisation and the hiring of staff.

#### *A question of “wealth” to negotiate*

One of the salient aspects of the relationship between school leaders and local communities is that of economic resources. Apparently framed by rules that clearly indicate intervention areas and skills, the issue reveals itself instead to be one of great complexity, which puts at risk the very image of the school leader and his or her relationship skills:

Table 1. Context of school leadership

Contexts of school leadership A (Primary schools and lower secondary schools)				
	Italy	France	England	Portugal
<b>School governance</b>	Leaders and collegial bodies of diverse types. Italy is the only country where there is no official participation of local community representatives within collegial governing bodies.			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Dirigente scolastico</li> <li>-Vice</li> <li>-Consiglio d'istituto (School leaders, teachers, staff and parents)</li> <li>-Giunta esecutiva</li> <li>-Collegio dei docenti (the assembly of all teachers)</li> <li>-RSU union delegation in the school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Directeur + Inspecteur (école primaire)</li> <li>-President (college-lower secondary school)</li> <li>-Proviseur (lycée- upper secondary school)</li> <li>-Ajoint (sec I and II)</li> <li>-Conseil d'administration (school leaders, teachers and staff, parents and local community)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Headteacher</li> <li>-Deputy + L&amp;M team (vice and coordinating group)</li> <li>-Governing body (school council)</li> <li>(leaders, teachers and staff, teachers and LA)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Director</li> <li>-Equipe Dir.</li> <li>-Conselho Geral (school council)</li> <li>-Conselho pedagogico</li> <li>-Conselho administrativo (school leaders, teachers and staff, parents and local community)</li> </ul>
<b>School and Local Entites (Municipalities)</b>	Common characteristic: historic rapport of long duration of the municipalities with the school			
	Growing responsibility of Local Entites with the authority Competencies: building finances and planning within the territory	Interweaving of "deconcentration" (dislocation of state competencies within the territory, see paper on deconcentration, 1992) and "decentralization". ( schools assume new powers).	The Local Education Authorities, today LA, maintain official responsibility of the school (buildings, personnel), but with respect to the past their power is greatly weakened :1) by the increase of responsibilities of the governing body (ERA 1988) 2) by the strong relevance of National evaluations with tests and inspections (re-centralized action).	Official role of municipalities in terms of school management (1998 and strengthened in 2003). Financial competency, buildings.

Table 2. School leadership contexts

<i>School leadership contexts B</i>		<i>Primary schools and lower secondary schools</i>			
	<b>Italy</b>	<b>France</b>	<b>England</b>	<b>Portugal</b>	
<b>Recruitment of school leaders</b>	Common requirements : univarsity and post-graduate degrees and teaching experience				
	<i>Centralized recruitment</i>		<i>Local recruitment</i>		
	National-regional competition with more selection phases and tests. Competition held once every 3- 5 years. Requirements: degree + 5 years of teaching experience	National-regional competition with more selection phases and tests. Competition held <i>annually</i> . Requirements: degree + 5 years of teaching experience or education staff orientation. Age limit of 50 years old.	Local recruitment: the Gov. Body and the local Authorities place an advertisement in a professional journal or newspaper <i>ad hoc</i> and select the candidates. Requirements: experience and qualifications <i>ad hoc</i> released by the National College for School Leadership (NPQH)	Local recruitment: preliminary selection of the eligible candidates and then <i>elections</i> on the part of the <i>Conselho Geral</i> , made up of teachers, parents, staff and members of the community. Requirements: diploma in the area of administration + 5 years of teaching experience.	
<b>School assignment</b>	<i>Centralized appointment (regional-national)</i>		<i>Local appointment</i>		
	Appointment by regional school leaders in a school with available post. Trial first year.	Appointment by regional leaders or central administration in an available school. First post as a <i>ajoint-stagiaire</i> alongside an expert school leader (3 years) and then confirmed.	The candidate participates in the selection of a specific school and if he or she is chose receives a contract from the Gov. Body of that school.	The candidate participates in the selection of a specific school and is elected on the basis of his or her credentials in that school.	
<b>Stay in the post and Transfers</b>	Stay in the post determined at the <i>central-regional level</i>		Stay in the post determined at the <i>local level</i>		
	Stay in the post theoretically without limit. Transfers at the discretion of the administration at the initiative of the school leader or the administration.	Minimum stay in post for at least 3 years and at most 9 years. Transfers at the discretion of the administration at the request of the administration or school leader.	Stay in the post theoretically without limit. If the school head wants to change school he/she can participate in the selection of another school and resign from his/ her current post. If the institution is not satisfied the school leader can be dismissed.	The post is held for 4 years and can be renewed with the repetition of the candidature, selection and election process.	

I feel very responsible to my municipalities... we need to organize the service together! When I tell you that I have to coordinate a community with 1400, 77 classes, 6 schools and 3 municipalities... you can well understand what work it takes! The assessors... the technicians, those in charge of the cafeteria... it is difficult to describe! And everything asks you what do you do with the money, why do you want more! And each of them in a different way... three administrations with three different approaches (Antonio, Dir. I).

Here an issue is highlighted that is very typical of Italian autonomy.(Fisher et al. 2002, 2009) As head of a large multi-site school with more than 1000 pupils spread out over 6 villages, Antonio must relate to three different municipalities, with different political leanings, mentalities and criteria.

The wealth of his school, above all regarding its more innovative projects and extracurricular activities, will depend upon his relationship skills. Or, as Carlo notes, upon his ability to turn the tables making the municipality accountable towards the school and its actors:

There is reciprocal accountability: they must be accountable to us and we must be accountable to them. We share a common project, we offer learning opportunities to our community. Two subjects who walk side by side and in the end we have to sit there... and we set ourselves and evaluate what we have done. When I tell you that I receive 100.000 euro from the municipality only for projects, it is clear that we must be accountable for what we have done! (Carlo, Dir. It.).

Testimonials such as this forcefully underscore the importance of strong negotiation skills and the significance that these can have in the distribution of resources that sustain the life of the school.

Sometimes - such as in the case of Antonio - a single headteacher leading a school with sites located in different municipalities is confronted with dramatic divergences due to the different criteria municipalities adopt to make available resources, and to their different political orientations and policies. Then there is “contractual” variability due to personal relationship between the players and the ability that the school, through its representative, has to be acknowledged as a qualified institution.

Table 3. Contexts of scholastic leadership

Contexts of scholastic leadership C		Primary schools and lower secondary schools		
	Italy	France	England	Portugal
<b>The school leader and staff</b>	Staff is centrally hired The <i>preside</i> is hierarchically superior to the teaching and non-teaching staff at the same time they are superior and peersto (Teachers College) the teachers. The new leadership qualification (2000) has widened the distance between leaders and teachers.	The <i>directeur d'école primaire</i> is a colleague of the teachers. <i>President de college e proviseur de lycée</i> are hierarchically superior to the faculty and staff, both educative and auxiliary (very relevant in France).	Staff is hired by the school The <i>headteacher</i> is the “boss” of the faculty and staff.	Staff is centrally hired The <i>Director</i> is a colleague <i>primus inter pares</i> with the teachers, who remain his or her “electors”.
<b>Accountability policies and the evaluation of school leaders</b>	The school is subject to a systematic financial audit. An evaluation system has not yet been created. The evaluation of the <i>preside</i> is foreseen, but has not yet been effected aside from pilot experiences.	The <i>directeur</i> are evaluated by inspectors; the <i>president</i> (and the <i>proviseur</i> ) are systematically evaluated by the rectors of the regional academies and are helped by the inspectors. On the basis of the evaluation there are a “ <i>contract d'objectifs</i> ” and a “ <i>lettre de mission</i> ”. The evaluation influences the assignment of the school and transfers.	The <i>headteacher</i> is subject to a series of evaluations-coaching on the part of colleagues, but above all is evaluated by the inspectors OFSTED when they evaluate the school (every 3 years) and give a rating on the leadership and the management (analytic and synthesized in points from 1 to 5), that are then published on the web. The rating is based as well on students' results on national tests.	The <i>director</i> is subject to a series of controls for conformity and a continual process of internal evaluation derived from the dynamics of the collegial bodies.
<b>Note</b>		The <i>president</i> and the <i>proviseur</i> are required to reside within the school district. Every school provides housing for school leaders, paid for by the municipality.		The norm on leadership of the schools referred to here went into effect in 2009 and introduced notable changes in the elections mechanism and the constitution of the governing team.

The capacity that the school has to exercise and demand accountability is very important, as indicated by the respondents, even if no specific models were indicated (Serpieri, 2008).

This double-sided variability is present in all of the contexts considered but has different histories; for example, unlike in Italy, in England, France and Portugal members of the authorities are present in the school governing body. In France the power of the *collectivités locales* in terms of the school is more indirect. Here a key instrument of autonomy is *deconcentration*, “the delegation of responsibilities to the lower intermediate hierarchical levels” (Troger & Ruano-Borbolan, 2006, p. 70). To this extent the school has greater support from the local government due to the latter’s relationship with local institutions via local agreements at various levels (Ben Ayed, 2009).

At the same time, however, a complex network of interdependencies seems to be operating, where three levels interact: the school, the devolved government bodies and those that are local and decentralized (Van Zanten, 2006). Even here, however, negotiating skills, knowing how to ask and give reasons and having a reliable model are strongly emphasised, primarily underscored through the physical resources and buildings acquired:

The premises, the furniture... everything belongs to the *Conseil General* that is our local community, therefore they are the ones who provide us with everything... they provided us with the technology... all the equipments which allows us to make our IT innovation happen come from them... We have a new IT laboratory... I had one in the school where I used to work in Bretagne and when I arrived here I asked them: Can we have one here? And there it is and it is getting better and better equipped (Genevieve, President, France).

In England the relationship between the LA and the school has been greatly re-scaled in terms of evaluative powers and educational planning. The governing body - in which however the LA are present - has the fundamental responsibilities for school life. However, the economic availability of the LA is an important characteristic due to the fact that the school budget also includes all expenses related to the staff, administration

and teachers. Greta’s narrative carries one to a world very far from the bureaucracies of France and Italy:

Here we have a very good Local Authority I have to say... you know? This LA, where I work... ok? Well, I just have to cut my clothes, you know if I haven’t got money, I suppose, I would look at the staff structure, I’d have to, if I couldn’t effort to pay salaries then would be redundancies [...] you know, go through all those troubles for making people redundant, ok, and I would have to change some of the jobs that people have, I would probably cut down support staff before the teaching staff. But I mean... we might be cutting down on other things like, you know, furnitures, the building... any project that you particularly do, you in a foundation stage, what ever, so you know, if you haven’t got money, you can’t do it. And now there was a government initiative to try reward teachers who are good teachers, ok, what they didn’t take account for is people moving up the upper pay scale, where do we get the money then? (Greta, Headteacher, England).

Greta stresses the importance of her good relationship with her LA, and the resources they make available, however her concerns about the school budget occur within a framework where the school’s responsibilities are much broader and include staff appointment and firing.

Also the Portuguese *autarquias* have notable economic responsibilities and the relevance of their relationship with the school is continually underscored. However, the take off of a real collaboration has not yet occurred. As Pinhal (2006, p. 112) observes “Municipal representatives’ participation in school assemblies is usually mainly considered as an opportunity to be closer to those to whom they can complain.” Mariana recounts:

We have a very difficult situation here... enormous problems! The ministry does not sufficiently support schools such as ours...and not even the municipality!...we ask for support and they give us the minimum possible and there is no possibility of having more [...] Yes, we have succeeded in building a support center for families, but we have had to do it all on our own, with a NGO (Mariana, directora, Portugal).

The idea of a school project on site, which fits the needs of the communities where it operates, is a common point in the four countries considered. Educational institutions are no longer seen as the perpetrators of a scheme set up elsewhere, but are rather "spaces of translation and the contextualisation of policies, institutions that can have relatively autonomous relationships with the surrounding social political environment" (Van Zanten, 2006, p.97). However, a real relationship of cooperation is far from being realized. Analysis of the factors troubling the enactment of autonomy is rich in perspectives. Two issues are frequently highlighted: the competences of local bodies and the processes of re-centralization, which are considered in the next few paragraphs.

#### *A question of competences*

Respondents from the four countries mention their Local Authorities as partners in school management, but their narratives shed light on the many problematic aspects of this partnership. Indeed in many contexts local bodies "are still linked to the model of mere providers of support services and co-managers of a design process" (Morzenti Pellegrini, 2006, p. 196). Therefore they also struggle to understand the basis on which to interact with the school:

Our Municipalities are not yet aware of having a say in the educational process... of being able to make us accountable... Take our Municipality: they don't ask... they don't put any real pressure on us. It's more our own initiative to provide them with accounts of what we do... because we feel it's our duty! It's a reason of professional pride for us to let them know... to provide them with the information we think may be useful (Teresa, Headteacher, Italy).

We have a sort of symbiotic relationship with the Municipality now... I have a full folder of special agreements and conventions there. I built up my POF [school plan] with the Municipality... I think it is important to coordinate things without overlapping. It was difficult and painful... but no change comes for free... I had to negotiate every single thing with them (Angela, Headteacher, Italy).

We work out our analyses on the developments of the school, seeking to show them to parents, the municipality. Generally there is

no type of reaction. The municipality is only there to distribute money in the end (Domingo, Presidente, Portugal).

I ask myself if there is really a difference between before and after autonomy. The school plan has been there for a long time. Does the headteacher have the possibility to truly negotiate what the school needs with the municipality? Has this really changed something? Frankly I don't think so. In fact I have the feeling that autonomy is evolving towards a model that more and more limits the institution, the work of the school. In a certain sense it is paradoxical, because then who will be able to understand? (Louise, Inspectrice, France).

Yes, we can say that there is an improved “legibility” of the institution. It means that from outside one can see better what happens in schools, whereas before all was a little bit foggy. Now, instead, we are obligated to open ourselves up, to speak of what we intend to do. But then, do you really understand? (Claude, Inspecteur, France interview conducted with Louise).

The assonance of these comments, coming from three different systems, is very interesting. What the French efficiently call *lisibilité*, legibility of the school's actions is a shared value in Italy and in Portugal (Lima, 2006). Explicating, making visible their work, being understood for what they really do, seems to be a common concern amongst the interviewees: a motive for professional pride. There is not the same interest however, and perhaps not even competence on the part of the municipalities, in reading and interpreting what the school does. Two different languages –it seems– are spoken inside and outside the school's walls (Ribolzi, 2006). The thick folders of Angela, the Italian school leader, are there to provide evidence of the work and sweat of building a common language with her municipality, each starting off from different assumptions, in order to reach project agreements of substance. Angela is proud of her work, of her efforts and results, but in some contexts these are probably still far off.

Also in England the competence of the LA, and of its representatives in the governing body in particular, has been called into question. Here Greta talks about her salary updating and illustrates the ways her Local Authority looks for support in private consultants:

for my performance... the performance management (external) adviser will talk to governors, OK... because I think it is an

assumption that governors don't know what they are doing... we get this feeling ..(*laugh*) that is why they need external persons to come in and give advice! And the conversation would go something like... you know... “How did you achieve these targets? What evidence have you to say that you have achieved that particular target?” And if an adviser can recommend to the governors and say that you have done very very well... maybe you get an additional point or two on the leadership (salary) scale (Greta, HT).

### *Mechanisms of re-centralization*

The issue of re-centralization of education systems and the pitfalls that are more or less hidden behind the autonomy screen is broadly discussed in the French literature (Barrère, 2006, 2008; Van Zanten, 2006). In Portugal Formisinho and Machado (2004) ask themselves what is the state really interested in doing beyond the rhetoric of school autonomy. They wonder whether it is really interested in providing citizens with a tailor-made service matching their local needs or if the opposite is rather the case. They show how weak the real powers attributed to the *autarquias* are, who find themselves in the middle of a strong imbalance between responsibilities and effective decision-making power.

England, with its high stakes evaluation policies is certainly the country where the mechanism of re-centralization is most evident. Schools are autonomous in terms of their budgets, personnel management, and organization. The LA offer their support, paying for consultants and projects. Nevertheless, what really counts for the life of the school are the test results and the inspectors' reports, two events that make the school extremely visible and exposed, according to criteria that are both quite clear and limited. Any interest or application disappears before the reports of OFSTED inspectors and the impact of the famous league tables where all schools are classified according to the scores of pupils in national tests, both published on the web:

You know, I have the local authority inspectors who know me, they come and see me, and they've got enough evidence to know quite easily whether my school is performing well or not. And if I will be seen as not performing well, I would like my local authority to say to me: look, you know, you need to do something about this, and do it! And then I will be expected to be responsible for that. But put it on websites, in the league tables... you are so exposed by that, you

know... I think they just went too far, when they just allowed people to see so much... I think that is a very poor way of dealing with people! (David, Headteacher).

David clearly illustrates what happens in reality, letting us understand how the gears of evaluation rapidly sweep away the Local Authority capacity, to enhance national targets, on which ultimately the identity of the school is based. According to Barrère (2008) the culture of evaluation is by now becoming everywhere an omnipresent prescriptive field and is in continual evolution also in France. The idea of external visibility is an important component that creates a strong conditioning upon schools.

*Hiring on the spot?*

English professionals would be astonished at the French or Italian centralised hiring systems. In many countries, in fact, local hiring of school leaders and teachers, as an alternative to centralized hiring, is part of a very controversial discussion. France is one of the countries where the debate has recently been more intense, but also in Italy the perspective has appeared :

It would mean running a business like managers... Headteachers would have their budget and would be free to appoint whoever they want. It would be a revolution in France, a lot of complaints... Indeed we don't speak about that in France... (Claude, Inspecteur, France).

I am very much against it, I must say. When we don't choose our team we find ourselves in the middle of very different people: different personalities, different ideas... Had I had the chance to choose, I am one hundred per cent certain that I would have never selected some of the teachers I am working with now... Nevertheless I am working very well with them, you know? We did our best to understand each other... It is very enriching... it wouldn't be like that if I had chosen myself... I would have selected people of the same kind... This is what engages me in this job... Left wing... right... young people, older people: we are very different, but we all share some core values, we all strive together to lead our pupils to success... That's the beauty of my job indeed (Camille, headteacher, France).

Here, in the Milan area, the political pressure on heads is strong... there have been mayors who have asked the headteacher to be removed, because they did not want to work with him... In this town we had a moment of crisis with the elections: there were eight mayor candidates... we didn't really know what was going to happen. I persuaded the school board to invite all of them to see how we are working here, just in case. We sent them a full description of the school and its activities... it was useful after all... a kind of objective account of what we are doing, striking the balance... figuring out many different listeners. We are alone here... can you imagine? For god sake! If the system goes further here... our evaluator could be the education counsellor here or the Mayor... I can't believe it! (Daniela, Headteacher, Italy ).

There is some disorientation in these comments and a logic animated by “historical” caution appears. Faith in good and wise central regulations, is evident, capable of guaranteeing a balanced gaze and adequate support. Camille's reflection is touching. The way she describes how the *republique's* umbrella is, almost ideally, capable of protecting variety and diversity, is striking. And Camille does not hesitate to insist on the idea that it is the task of the *republique* to assume responsibility for the choice. This responsibility - as she sees it – is an important inspiration for the work of everyone in her school, something that highlights the importance of their common efforts.

### **Concluding observations**

This paper has sketched some characteristics of school leaders and their relationships with their local communities in the autonomy scenario of four countries . Examples have been provided on how education policies can be problematized , deconstructed and re-read looking at the perceptions of actors who enact them in their everyday practice.

Gathering views and insights from different histories, cultures and institutional traditions can be very important in order to understand the roots of our reforms, analyzing the objectives toward which we aim.

Developing an international culture, knowing others in order to know how to position one self within the global scenario, should be considered an

essential condition for educators. Nevertheless, this condition can not rely on any sort of knowledge to reach “*una tantum*”. Rather, it is a dynamic process which implies tools and competencies, many of which are yet to be discovered and defined.

The ability to interrogate reality, its differences in particular, with a spirit of discovery and a desire for awareness is fundamental. Indeed making sense of differences is often more successful when the common aspects they contain is considered.

Big numbers can be interrogated, analyzed by statistical patterns, at different levels. Quantitative studies offer broad overviews that no one suggests should be abandoned (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Differences however can often be interrogated in a very significant way when individual actors are given the floor with their unique and minute stories: “making everyday reality of work appear” eliciting it from the many rhetorical barriers that hide it and give it their real value (Barrère, 2008, p. 2).

Some of the problems that have been described here clearly show how the narratives of lived experience within diverse education systems can put a new light on questions that have been dancing uncertain and monotonous dances on our tables now for some time.

School autonomy is still a work in progress, an architecture *in fieri*, “an exhausted form of the old control” (Meuret, 2007, p.107) and not only in Italy. Its development and its accountabilities should be the object of a continuous democratic monitoring undertaken through the voices of its actors : it is important to listen to the echo of history and its actors’ stories in order to understand where it is really going, what can be achieved through it, and what are its opportunities and constraints.

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