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The assessment of the school outcomes in Italy: Waiting for Godot?

*Paolo Barabanti**

Nowadays the interest in the delicate subject of school assessment has risen in the International and European public opinion, especially after the first PISA survey (Programme of International Student Assessment) in 2000 published by the OECD about the scholastic performance of fifteen-year-old students. Year by year, the pressure has grown so that the assessment procedure of school quality can be systematically introduced into the public education system.

In Italy, this process has developed more slowly than in other countries and with quite a few obstacles. Regulations controlling the National System of Assessment (DPR 80/2013, published in the Official Gazette on 4th July 2013) are evidence that the Italian school system has entered a new phase, at least at the normative-institutional level. However, official regulations are not enough to reform the system and to spread an assessment culture homogeneously. Actually, the belief that assessment is a fundamental instrument for school improvement is not wholly shared among stakeholders: for some people, assessment is the main key to open the door to meritocracy, to recognize high-performing students, and to optimize public resources; for other people, it is a way to prove how unfair and ineffective schools are; for yet other people, it is the opportunity to generate new controversy and opposition, for fear that this tool could be used to negatively affect particular professional groups, already targeted by claims of unfitness and poor credibility.

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There are several questions that remain unsolved (for instance, should we assess to reward, to punish or to monitor? Should we employ internal and/or external assessment? Should we assess procedures or outcomes? And should we assess school, students or teachers?) especially in Italy where this theme has never been systematically confronted.

Three books, published from 2012 to 2014, are useful to investigate these themes from different points of view.

The first book, *'School Assessment. What it is used and why it is necessary for Italy'* (Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli (2014). *La valutazione della scuola. A che cosa serve e perché è necessaria all'Italia*. Roma-Bari: Laterza), is a sort of compendium for interested people in issues regarding Italian assessment approach. It does not contain practical advice but it represents an introduction to the topic and it presents a careful reflection on the most controversial aspects. The favourable opinion of the authors is clear: assessment is *condicio sine qua non* to improve the school system (Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 2014, p. 4).

The authors discuss the meaning of assessment, the players/stakeholders involved, the aims and benefits of such a complicated process; furthermore, they specify the tools at disposal, with their strengths and weaknesses, in particular in the Italian situation.

Also the second book, *'Assessment Challenges'* (Bottani N., Checchi D. (Eds.) (2012). *La sfida della valutazione*. Bologna: Il Mulino)¹, tries to underline the importance of assessment as a tool for school accountability towards any stakeholders: not only educational authorities, teachers, and policy makers, but also students and families. It is a sort of deeper and more shared 'service charter'.

But if the assessment is only considered as an accountability instrument, the risk can arise that it can be used as a form of ministerial control, not consistent with the schools' principles of autonomy. So, it is necessary to consider it as tool for cognitive improvement and education². But this is not sufficient. Schleicher and Hanushed, in essays edited by them, identify a tight link between cognitive skills and economic growth, also in terms of

¹ The book collects papers presented at the conference organized by 'Fondazione per la Scuola' in May 2011, titled 'La sfida della valutazione'.

² This purpose is defined by Palumbo (2001) as 'learning'.

growth of the GDP as a result of school improvement. Therefore, these changes can result in advancements in the economical and political sphere.

Another unresolved question is the preference for internal or external assessment (asking, for instance, which is more useful and bearable). Authors from the Fondazione Agnelli propose a new perspective: from '*aut aut*' to '*et et*'. Either internal or external assessment is incomplete if not integrated with each other, because both forms of assessment are complementary. External assessment allows for the comparison with other schools, but its instruments, such as large scale tests and inspections, do not shed light into the 'black box' (particular situation) of each school. On the other hand, internal assessment, thanks to its qualitative approach, can go beyond the quantitative data (marks, the percentage of admitted students, the total of hours for a particular project, etc.) but it introduces the risk of self-referentiality without aiming at common social goals.

External assessment relies on two tools. The first one, based on visits by inspectors (direct observation in class or during group activities, interaction with students, talks with teacher and school staff members, meetings with students and their families) can ensure a more neutral and less self-referential view on the school's progress³. The second one consists of the use of large-scale tests, that can be used to compare the results at the district and national levels.

The third book '*School Self-Assessment. Models and practical tools*', (Allulli G., Farinelli F., Petrolino A. (Eds.) (2013). *L'autovalutazione di istituto. Modelli e strumenti operativi*. Milano: Guerini) deals with internal assessment and, in particular, school self-assessment. It addresses those who have an organizational and decision-making role in the school (such as the headmaster and the assessment committee); thus, it could be used as a practical manual as well. The idea of school assessment arises as a necessary consequence of the reform on school autonomy. Italy, terribly behind in comparison with other European countries (for example, the UK, France, Spain and Germany), began in 1999 with the establishment of INVALSI (National Institute for the school educational and learning system assessment). Before the National Regulations (in 2013, as already

³ The volume proposes the English model (Her Majesty's Inspectorate) which has been taken as inspiration for the reforms of the inspectorial staff not only in European countries, but also extra-European countries, such as the USA.

mentioned) there were trials and pilot projects in linked schools (for instance, Trento Assessment Committee⁴ and the activities of Quality Pole in Naples). The aims of the second part of the book is to provide to schools some necessary tools, both theoretical and practical, to carry out self-assessment actions (there are several forms and questionnaire that can directly downloaded).

The book deals in particular with the content of the assessment, that is the opportunity to choose what should be assessed. Some models are based on the assessment of the processes: Total Quality model, EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) model, and CAF (Common Assessment Framework) model; other ones focus on results, such as the CIPP (Context, Input, Process, Product) model; finally a third type, less well known, relies on peer review. The authors offer, in a critical key, drawbacks and potentialities of each one. For example, the model based on learning focuses on formative actions without considering the processes to reach these results and without describing the criteria to plan improvement strategies. On the other hand, models based on processes elaborate on the quality of managerial processes, but they put less attention on the context.

A further interesting differentiation of the products, not proposed in the book, is between outputs, outcomes and outreaches (Palumbo, 2001). Outputs are what operators directly produce, in the case of schools, they are the headmasters, teachers and all the school staff; outcomes are the changes in the students, caused directly by educational actions; outreaches – or impacts – are the transformations in a medium-long period on both those directly involved and the society as a whole.

The three books presented here are different, but we can find a common thread, that is the presence of national or international pilot projects and concrete situations, useful to prove the efficacy or the inefficacy of some methodological choices and to supply examples than can be applied in other fields.

For instance, the volume edited by Checchi and Bottani reflects on good practices realized after the PISA results, already after the first edition in

⁴ It is possible to retrieve and download the report 'Mettere a sistema le qualità delle scuole del Trentino' edited by the Provincial Committee of Educational System Assessment from: http://www.vivoscuola.it/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=e602d52b-5064-4ef6-9301-9310000ff3c8&groupId=10137.

2000, as an evidence of an assessment which generated actual improvements. Policy makers in Germany were disappointed by the outcome of PISA 2000. Therefore, they made some important reforms, driven by those results. For instance, they increased the number of schools with full-time service, they introduced pre-schools programmes for children with immigration background and they aimed at decreasing the number of grade repetitions.

In Switzerland, TREE research (Transition from education to work), conducted in three phases (till 2003, from 2004 to 2007 and from 2008 to 2012) on a sample of students who completed the first PISA survey in 2000, monitored training development procedures at the end of compulsory schools, to adjust students flows into different types of school to smooth the transition into the working life.

Only other European countries are in the forefront? In fact, there is an Italian case too: the case of Apulia (Puglia). Apulia is the only region that, from PISA 2000 to PISA 2009, improved, and it also reached the highest score among Southern Italy regions, outstripping some Central Italian regions, such as Lazio and Umbria. Lucrezia Stellacci shows that the outcomes in Apulia are the result not only of public resources for the school, but also of a good governance in the school management.

Other virtuous cases are reported by the Fondazione Agnelli referring to Italian trial regarding the assessment of single schools, such as the VSQ project (Assessment for the school quality development), the VALORIZZA project and the current VALES project. Even if, nowadays, these projects are only voluntary experiments⁵, they can teach us some valuable lessons:

- It is not possible to perform assessments without the support of teachers. , that is, the assessment project, after having clearly defined its ameliorative aims, needs to be shared with and supported by the teachers⁶.
- The connection between assessment and reward does not necessary lead to meritocracy because it hides some side effects (especially if the bonus is limited to an individual teacher rather than to the school institute); for

⁵ VALES, a three-year experiment, involves 300 schools, selected by the Minister of Education, among those that voluntarily made the application/applied.

⁶ Colombo (2013) suggests to take up jointly the standards both for the collection and for the analysis and the interpretation of data.

example, a possible split in the teaching staff (with consequences at the pedagogical and organizational levels), an educational planning based on 'teaching to the test' and even tampering of test outcomes.

- The main assessment tools (standard tests, inspectorial visits, self-assessment reports) can be considered neither miraculous solutions nor instruments of sorrow, but ways which needs to be tested, calibrated, and adjusted.
- The assessment cannot be based on improvisation. So, auditors have to be professional people properly trained, the purpose for the school assessment has to be clear and, above all, the project, despite the alternation of Ministers of Education and INVALSI presidents, has to be constant and be able to last for a suitable period of time (such as five years), so that it can be completed and be used to indicate future improvements.

In conclusion, let's go back to the themes introduced at the beginning of this article. Even though Italy has been talking about school assessment for twenty years, it is definitely late in comparison to other European countries⁷. This delay is caused by an assessment culture that has difficulty in permeating the Italian school. Of course, the absence, for many years, of a solid framework is one of the main reasons, but we can find other ones.

The teaching staff (and its union) often offer strong resistance, especially if they are being assessed. For instance, any year, around the time of the INVALSI survey, newspapers tell stories of complaints, boycotts, and hostility by a part of the teaching staff. Because teachers feel often criticized, in last decades they have taken a defensive stance, probably for fear that they might lose further credibility.

However, there is also strong pressure towards an assessment system, based on the impossibility to postpone it. Quite a few international comparative surveys, in particular PISA survey by OECD (Bottani, 2013), are a tool not only to assess the efficacy of the school system but also to prove empirically the decrease in social inequalities in the school system. The European Union has focused on the importance of assessment and has

⁷ The United Kingdom, for example, was one of the first countries with a well-organized assessment system, but we can mention France, Netherland, Belgium, Germany, Sweden and Spain, as well.

issued some important urgings and communications⁸. Finally, the demand for quality has become particularly evident and the sense of urgency is felt throughout the system⁹, including the political one¹⁰.

We can find positive examples in the INVALSI surveys and in other pilot projects (such as in Trento province). The fact that, during this school year, all Italian schools have to activate or continue their self-assessment is another positive step. These signals suggest that Godot, so long-awaited but never arrived, is getting closer at long last.

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⁹ Castoldi (2008), following Scheerens' example (2003), underlines that the push for a high quality in the school system is caused by the necessity of accurate financial reporting of the whole school system, by the social control expected by the social community, and by a need for professionalization.

¹⁰ Some weeks ago, the Renzi Government published a report entitled 'La Buona Scuola' (retrievable and downloadable at <http://www.governo.it/backoffice/allegati/76600-9649.pdf>) which also deals with the assessment as an opportunity for transparency, understanding, and improvement.

- http://www.vivoscuola.it/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=e602d52b-5064-4ef6-9301-9310000ff3c8&groupId=10137.
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