Reflecting on English educational accountability

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Abstract: The English education system offers meaningful examples of how some aspects of education reforms concerning school autonomy develop and what their implications are. In a way it provides a test bench for many ideas which policy makers are trying to introduce in many other systems. It is therefore interesting to consider it, in order to gain a broader perspective from which to frame Italian school autonomy. This paper focuses on the complex scenario of English educational accountability, one which attracts the interest of researchers from all over the world and originates a continuous debate among practitioners, researchers and policy makers. The broad literature concerning English educational accountability makes available a variety of interpretations, reflections and points of view. The paper intends to consider this scenario mainly from the perspective of English headteachers. The objects of the analysis are the voices of headteachers and policy advisers, collected through interviews where they have been asked to report on their experiences and perceptions or, in the case of policy advisers, to put themselves in the headteachers' shoes. It is argued that while policy makers from many countries look at the English accountability framework with interest, ready to borrow hints and tools from the orderly atmosphere of regulation it performs, English educational professionals experience strong contradictions and struggle with the hardness and the sharpness of the system.

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Introduction

Accountability in the sense of a set of formal and informal mechanisms making schools answerable to different constituencies interested in educational results, represents one of the major challenges schools - and headteachers in particular - are dealing with. It is a perspective rooted in the most recent reforms in almost all the educational systems in the world as a consequence of greater institutional autonomy, which in several contexts is made concrete by practices sometimes considered overwhelming, and which are the object of intense debate.

It is a typically English word: while broadly used in the Anglophone contexts, many languages have difficulties in translating not only the word but the notion itself. However, the set of policies, strategies and procedures inspired by accountability represent one of the most intensively "travelling" trends, across reforms in different countries. (Dimmock, 2003; Fullan, 2001a; 2001b; Leithwood, 2001; Portin, 1998; Riley, 2000; Wildy and Louden, 2000; Withaker, 2003). A cluster of phenomena are embedded in the idea of accountability, originating from different sources, where sometimes opposite viewpoints and interests are at stake, creating clashes, and giving rise to the risk of misunderstandings that can even lead to the questioning of some of the most important educational values.

In this respect policies and practices of accountability pull school leaders to many different directions simultaneously (Leithwood, 2001), so that they are "caught in the middle" (Portin, 1998, p.385), confronted with "competing demands of meeting local needs and complying with centrally imposed directives" (Wildy and Louden, 2000, p.181). As for instance Adams and Kirst observe, with respect to the situation in the US:

> The cast of principals[2] who make accountability demands is long, too, comprising electorates, politicians (legislators, governors, mayors); educational politicians (chief state school officers, state boards of education, school boards); judges; bureaucrats; business and professional associations; interest groups; textbook and test publishers; educational administrators; teachers; and parents. Multiply this list by federal, state, and local levels,

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[2] "Principals are those who establish an expectation (regarding a task to be accomplished) and to whom an account is owed: agents are those of whom performance is expected (in accomplishing the task)" (Adams and Kirst, 1999, p. 467)

and recognise that principal-agent roles in education shift depending on the context of the interaction – electorate-school board, school board-superintendent, superintendent-school principal, school principal-teacher, teacher-student, even student-parent - and the complexity of principal-agent relations in education becomes apparent. (Adams and Kirst, 1999, p.474).

The notion accountability has a rather long history, and its relationship with education is not a recent phenomenon. Becher and colleagues (1981) identify a standpoint in the development of a renewed interest in accountability in British education in the 1960s, when different sources of pressures, each rooted in long-term traditions, converged, creating expectations that "accountability of schools to parents and to the general public should be more visible and more clearly defined" (ivi, p.1).

In particular Becher and colleagues identify five phenomena at the origin of the new scenario of accountability that started to develop in the 1960s. First, a growing interest of parents in pupils' life at school appeared, supported by research results emphasizing the influence of parental involvement on learning and achievement. Second, the teachers themselves began to give increasing importance to participation in school life and considered it part of their task to enhance it. On the other hand, and the third point, the concept of the public itself was developing within a consumerist perspective: the population was increasingly being regarded as composed of consumers with their needs and their rights, rather than of people simply using services. Meanwhile a double-edged tendency became evident: the concern for public spending and the idea of having "value for money", which introduced a dangerous parallelism between the school and industry, and a growing general distrust towards public authorities which involved the educational world. Finally, a new interest in educational standards started to develop, based on the assumption that reliable measures of attainment could lead to an understanding as to whether schools where doing a good job or not.

Becher and colleagues' framework was, at the time, strongly criticised by Kogan (1986), who disagreed with its broadness and preferred to stick to a narrower, more bounded conceptualisation, which resulted in his well-known and still widely quoted definition of accountability. Here accountability is seen as:

a condition in which individuals role holders are liable to review and the applications of sanctions if their actions fail to satisfy those with whom they are in an accountability relationship" (Kogan, 1986, p. 25).

More than two decades later, Becher and colleagues' dimensions reveal the need to be updated to a considerable extent. However, in the light of the most recent debates, the broad and varied map they trace seem to offer an interesting basis on which to capture the complex relationship between the most crucial issues intertwined in the notion of accountability and the set of practices, events, perceptions it can include. The label "accountability" does not always appear openly as such and being accountable does not always refer to dealing with visible interventions.

This article approaches accountability from headteachers' viewpoint, it deals with how they experience and perceive it, how it shapes their professional life among continuous ups and downs of struggles, compliance, resilience, resistance and adaptation. It is derived from a broader, qualitative crosscultural study where the voices of headteachers from three different EU countries were collected and analysed (Barzanò, 2007).

The English educational system is now well known for its "high stakes" accountability processes (Carnoy et al., 2003), "one of the strongest accountability systems in the English speaking world" (Southworth, 2002, p. 192), a system which is "radically different from that adopted anywhere else" (Wilcox and Gray, 1996, p. 33). Therefore the English experience is a very meaningful example, which may say a lot to the countries which are struggling with reforms and new autonomies. Its analysis allows for a deeper understanding of the ways accountability penetrates the policies and is enacted, of how it is rooted in the historical, social and cultural characteristics of education systems. England may be considered as a "policy laboratory" (Fassari, 2009) which allows to illuminate the paradoxical nature of accountability: the source of dangerous distortions of educational values, and also a potential tool of democracy and a powerful litmus test of the mechanisms which work today in education.

The study

Two approaches to data collection were used: the analysis of legislation and published policy documents and related comments which allow for the portrayal of the normative and institutional frameworks of education and the way they are interpreted by key actors and stakeholders; in depth semi-structured interviews with a number of key informants in each country, including headteachers and high-ranking officials or experts involved in national policy formulation or implementation. The interviews were run in the schools and offices after site visits and were then interpreted with the support of field notes. In England, as in the other countries, seven key informants were interviewed, five primary school headteachers and two policy advisers: a high ranking civil servant and an academic who had been involved in educational decision-making processes on behalf of the central government.

The small number of interviewees and the criteria which inspired their selection therefore do not allow for any generalisations based on their accounts, however their perceptions of reality and their narratives provide insights into examples which illuminate the context of educational accountability.

The nature of the issues investigated and the aims of the research suggested a qualitative approach in that particularly suitable to observe and describe the meanings attributed to experiences and the ways they are perceived and portrayed. More specifically an "interpretivist approach" was adopted, which sees "people and their interpretations, perceptions, meanings and understandings, as primary data sources" (Mason, 2002, p. 56). As Mason observes, in this approach not only are people seen as a primary data source, but their perceptions are sought capturing their "insider view", rather than imposing an "outsider view".

A major representative of the interpretive tradition is Denzin, who defines his perspective, among the variety of interpretive approaches, as "interpretive interactionism" (Denzin, 2001), combining in this expression "the traditional interactionist approach with the interpretive, phenomenological works of Heidegger and the tradition of hermeneutics" (ivi, p. 34).

Interpretive interactionism "attempts to make the world of lived experiences visible to the reader" (ivi, p. 34). It implies an emic perspective, to the extent that it seeks to study experience from within,

uncovering the conceptual categories people use when they give meaning to their experience, in terms of intentions and consequences, particularly with respect to problematic situations. It also values the interaction which requires symbolically taking the viewpoint of another and acting from that viewpoint. Denzin suggests that researchers use an interpretive interactionist approach "only when they want to examine the relationship between personal troubles and the public policies and public institutions that have been created to address those troubles" (ivi, p. 2).

Nevertheless, the interpretive interactionist perspective has been regarded as particularly suitable to the aims of the study, in that the research focuses on the way policies are designed and experienced and produce effects and implications for professional and personal life. To the extent that accountability policies claim to have an impact on school quality improvement, they can be seen as "programmes"; thus interpreting the voice and the experience of the actors becomes an important means to understand their functioning (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Warren, 2002). Besides that, in the perspective adopted in this study, the concept of accountability is seen as linked with that of responsibility. Describing and understanding this link on the basis of individual perceptions and meaning making of key actors was a main objective of the research and, as Denzin observes, "meaning is interactional and interpretive" (Denzin, 2001, p. 53).

An overview of the English accountability system

School organisation and headteachers' profile and recruitment
English schools are overseen by a governing body which appoints a headteacher and some members of the leadership team (and other teachers) as vacancies arise. The headteacher creates such a team – a leadership team which, for a secondary school, would typically include a deputy head, and assistant heads - to lead the school and deal with the day to day management.

The governing body is a corporate body with legal and exempt charitable status, composed of nine to 20 governors and chaired by one of the non-staff members elected within it. The headteacher can choose to be a member by virtue of their office, but can withdraw and be substituted by a member of the staff. Places are allocated to different categories: some of them are elected (parents, staff); some are appointed by the Local Authority

(LA) or co-opted by the governing bodies themselves (community, foundation or partnership and sponsor governors). The proportion varies according to the size and the category of schools: community, foundation or voluntary aided or controlled schools. Within the range indicated by norms (1998 School Standards and Framework Act) each governing body can adopt the model of their choice, making sure that their composition reflects a balance of interests.

Governing bodies are officially still accountable to the LAs, but in the 1980s, particularly with the provisions of the 1986 Education Act and the 1988 Education Reform Act, they took over many responsibilities from them. The new relationship with headteachers, which followed, is considered one of the most important factors affecting headship in the 1990s (Earley and Weindling, 2004). The governing bodies actually hold the formal powers of governance in schools, playing a pivotal role in the accountability processes. They are responsible for the conduct of the school with a view to promoting high standards of education achievement (2002 Education Act) through setting targets and strategic direction, administering human and financial resources and ensuring accountability and monitoring of school performance.

One of the governing bodies' most demanding tasks is selecting and appointing the headteacher and other senior staff. For the recruitment of headteachers the selection procedures (Education [School Staffing] [England] Regulations 2003) establish that the position should be advertised throughout the country, following a job description based on the school's specific needs. A recruitment package is prepared by each governing body, containing the specifications and the documents which illustrate the situation to applicants. A recruitment panel of about three governors is nominated by the governing body to undertake the applicants' selection process, which is eventually formalised by the whole body and implemented by the LA, the official employer of maintained schools' staff, or by the governing body itself in the case of foundation or voluntary schools. The headteacher's salary is negotiated locally within the framework of a national scale establishing ranges. It may be estimated that it accounts for about 20% more than a maximum teacher salary.

Headteachers' recruitment is considered a crucial issue in England: the attractiveness of the position is low and several schools have difficulties in attracting qualified candidates.

English headteachers are therefore qualified professionals, appointed by each school's governing body. While until recently (2004) they used to reach the post largely by means of on-the-job training, through an apprenticeship model, today they need to hold a national qualification (Weindling and Dimmock, 2006). They are expected to have a good general preparation for the challenges of headship and to be at the same time specifically tuned to the needs of the school to which they are appointed. They act within a dual structure where the professional leadership team that they steer is faced by, and partly overlaps with, a voluntary team of governors, composed of predominantly lay people, which is in charge of setting the direction of schools in the perspective of raising quality and overall performance.

Grace (1995) observes how in England the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s introduced market forces which generated a "corporatist and consumerist rather than democratic" accountability (ivi, p. 200), causing work and moral dilemma intensification. In this context the school is seen as "a commercial enterprise with the school governors (as the directors), the headteacher (as chief executive), the parents (as consumers) and the teachers and pupils (as workers)" (ibid.). Yet, accountability founded on democratic values would require a model of schools which "is not that of the commercial enterprise but that of democratic community itself" (ivi, p. 201). Here the strong headteacher is not the exceptional individual, but the one who is "strong enough to open up the schooling process to the scrutiny and the participation of all citizens in the locality […and] to facilitate internal, democratic accountability in other than nominal forms" (ibid.).

The accountability scenario

English educational accountability is one of the clearest examples of "high stakes" accountability. The expression "high stakes", originally alluding to a high-rolling card game in which large sums of money are bet and participants rapidly split into winners and losers, is now widely used in education to refer to the direct consequences of accountability actions. In fact, it well suits the English accountability structure, which has its core in school inspections resulting in published reports, and in curriculum assessment through target setting and testing, from which the so called "league tables" are derived, ranking schools according to their performance in public examinations and national tests.

The origins of the present inspection framework date back to 1992, when privatised inspections were established for all schools and OFSTED was created. Before then schools were supervised by professional inspectors appointed by HMI. This national body of inspectors was founded in 1839 with the main aim of enhancing the development of primary education, providing support and assistance to schools, and assuring that grants awarded to schools were used properly. Since the birth of HMI their duties had to include inspecting schools aided by grants and enquiring into the state of education. Detailed instructions about what an inspection should include were published (*1840 Instructions to Inspectors of Schools*, quoted in Wilcox and Gray, 1996) which specified that inspectors had to report on a wide range of issues concerning the school and pupils in particular: mechanical arrangements, means of instruction, organisation and discipline, methods and attainment in different subjects.

It is also interesting to notice that already in 1862 (*1862 Revised code*, quoted in Wilcox and Gray, 1996, p. 24. See also: Hoyle and Wallace, 2005; MacBeath, 2006a) a system of "payment by results" was introduced, making a relevant proportion of the grant available to schools dependent on pupils' ability to reach certain standards in the "three Rs": reading, (w)riting and (a)rithmetic. The early introduction of this system led to the ideas of policy makers that improvements in the quality of education was associated with mechanisms of punishment and reward. To a certain extent high stakes accountability, although under different names, has far-reaching roots and inspection has always been its main instrument.

For a long time, since the creation of LEAs in 1902, inspection was implemented through a combination of national and local actions undertaken by professional inspectors permanently appointed by HMI or by the LEAs. Only a limited number of schools were inspected, the concern for the generalization of inspection to all schools was not a relevant issue. However, the interest for keeping updated the picture of the "state of education" through inspection findings and the confidence in collecting information on which to found initiatives for improvement was always present. The debate on the role of inspectors in this respect was continuous and continues to this day.

Due to the marketing orientation of the Conservative government and its commitment to raising standards, freedom and choice in education, in the 1980s the political pressure on inspection started to rise dramatically, creating the premises for the radical change. In 1992, when the Education

(Schools) Act came to pass, a new system for organising inspections was introduced and OFSTED was created. The Act inaugurated a four-year cycle of inspections to be carried out on a national scale by teams of independent inspectors. The inspectors' profile and the mechanisms of their recruitment were changed and the publicity of inspection reports, already inaugurated in the 1980s, was confirmed. All schools started to be inspected by teams of inspectors trained and accredited by OFSTED, commencing with secondary schools in 1993 and primary and special schools a year later.

A typical inspection in a primary school with some 200 pupils involved four or five inspectors spending four days in the school and observing a sample of lessons to judge the quality of teaching and learning across the whole curriculum. The inspection report, compiled on the basis of the observation and of the consultation of school's documents, including national attainment tests, became a public document available on the internet. As a result, the school's reputation would have been "either burnished or tarnished" (Southworth, 1999, p. 52).

Those applying to be inspectors did not need anymore to be experienced teachers and a new category of 'lay' inspector was created. They could be professionals from different fields who, once awarded with OFSTED accreditation after the training, became entitled to be contracted for individual inspections, without holding a permanent post. All inspection teams had to include a 'lay' inspector. External providers, working alongside OFSTED on a commercial basis, started to develop.

Since 1992 to the present day, various revisions have been undertaken to the "Framework for the inspection of schools", concerning the frequency, the duration and the handbook of inspection. The last, published in June 2005 and referred to section 5 of the 2005 Education Act, sets out the new principles of inspection and establishes relevant innovations with respect to the arrangements, but does not dismantle the global approach. The inspection (at the time of writing) was short notice (between two and five days, rather than months), shorter (two days) and more frequent (three-year cycles). Feedback is provided through oral interaction and a written report, which must be issued within three weeks from the visit. A new framework is expected in 2009.

The inspection report is published and aims at telling parents, the school and the wider community about the quality of the school and pupils' attainment. Significantly, it takes into account the findings of the school's

own evaluation and concerns (the Self Evaluation Form), the quality of education provided in the school, the extent to which the needs of the range of pupils in the school are met, leadership and management, resource management, educational standards achieved, pupils' spiritual moral and social development and wellbeing (MacBeath, 2006a). A relevant contribution to the inspectors' assessment is to be provided by the standard of achievement reported in the performance (league) tables as a result of the national attainment tests.

Unlike HMI, OFSTED was an independent body outside the Department of Education, its advent stopped the "hydra-headed" nature of inspection – both looking towards the system and inwards the needs of the Ministry to provide assistance, since any reference to policy concerns and help to the system disappeared (Perry, 1995, p. 36). In this way, educational policy too gave birth to its proper *quangos* (quasi-non-governmental-organisations), and the related "new ruling class of quangocrats" (Barker, 1982, p. 222), in charge of parallelising, and even substituting, the traditional ministerial accounting systems (Johnson, 1982).

The English education system shows therefore a strong confidence in the pressure of high stakes accountability to improve the quality of education and invests remarkable resources in complex mechanisms to implement it.

English headteachers confront accountability: the actors' experience

The climate of regulation

The expected atmosphere within which English schools operate is effectively depicted in a recent speech given by former Prime Minister Tony Blair:

> A strong Head Teacher. Well-motivated staff. Attention to the basics, but also imparting the thrill of knowledge. Discipline. Good manners and life skills. Schools succeed that have a powerful ethos, sense of purpose, pride in themselves and in what they do. […] of course some things have to be set to a uniform standard. It is wise to have a National Curriculum. To have inspections, albeit of a lighter touch. To publish results. To have some policies in common in every school (Blair, 2006).

It is interesting to note the emphasis given to the idea of the strong headteacher which is rooted in a far-reaching tradition of the English education system (Bottery, 2006; Grace, 1995; Bennett and Anderson, 2003). The use of the adjective 'strong', among the various possible ones, is revealing and recalls the idea of 'heroic' leaders and the 'heroic fallacy' (Woods, 2005; MacBeath, 2006a). It appears in contrast with the most recent developments in educational leadership, which, from different view points, underline the need to promote democratic, participative and distributed leadership and show the inadequacy of heroic leadership styles to the current contexts of education (Earley and Weindling, 2006; Gronn, 2003; Spillane, 2006; Woods, 2005).

Surrounding the 'strong headteacher' are the set of accountability policies for which England is well known throughout the world. The accounts of the key informants interviewed in this study bring to light several aspects of this climate of regulation.

Test results and the public availability of inspection reports was a powerful overarching mechanism which affected the accountability process. It links together its components, amplifying their effects and creating a variety of unintended if not perverse consequences. The call for transparency as a distinctive sign of the openness and the democracy which is at the basis of the education system is continuously reconfirmed by policy makers. However, the neat and simplistic logic performed by policy makers appears naïve when confronted with the complex scenario of implications described by headteachers. Indeed assumptions are measured with very different scales by professionals and policy advisers in this respect. Headteachers describe a broad range of concerns, emotions and frustrations, even of unreasonable fantasies produced by the context of publicity. None of the English heads interviewed found a single justifiable element in favour of publicity, yet they all pointed to the inappropriateness of the regime and the lack of confidence and trust it creates: "teachers put so much of themselves into the job that to fear public criticism, public humiliation, is really unfair" (Ken, HT).

The heads would probably subscribe with little hesitation to Hoyle and Wallace's claim that "the accountability procedures now in place have not only entered the 'secret garden of the curriculum', but have dug it over"

(Hoyle and Wallace, 2007, p. 20)[3]. What strikes heads most is the disclosure of information concerning their technical professional competence to audiences who, they argue, do not have the necessary expertise to judge them.

T*he assessment of pupil achievement through national tests appeared to be controversial and a meaningful testbed to grasp the core implications of accountability.* Heads showed a general appreciation for the idea of having benchmarks against which to measure the results of their schools. However many of them questioned the appropriateness and the reliability of the tools used. As mentioned above there was strong criticism of the use made of information derived by tests and in particular the public disclosure of results. Indeed, it was reported to alter the meaning of the experience. Moreover, some heads mentioned the lack of clarity about the technical characteristics of the tests and doubted the validity of the government's claims about school improvement. Their arguments, which are supported by the analysis of several scholars (e.g. Hilton, 2006; Tymms and Fitz Gibton, 2001), reveal an atmosphere of disillusion and scepticism for an intervention which could provide some useful information but fails to integrate into the school life constructively. As one head argued, tests end up "having a life on their own" (Rosa, HT).

The idea of learning behind tests was criticised in that they were seen as shaping the curriculum and prioritizing the cognitive aspects of education. To this extent maths, English and science, the tested core subjects, became privileged areas of concern, while other (foundation) subjects had a minor role: "when you choose where to spend more money… it will be in maths and English rather than perhaps in other subjects" (David, HT). Moreover the use of tests was considered questionable with respect to equity: it redirected resources to the key stage classes (Years 2 and 6), preventing schools from a fairer use of money: "Why these classes? Why not all the children?" (Greta, HT). In fact core subjects get priority.

'Teaching to the test' was often mentioned. Descriptions of the implications of testing were offered and the heads were very aware of the "tricks" used to improve performance and showed how they may influence

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[3] The well-known English metaphor of the school as a "secret garden" which needed to be open spread its influence over three decades and dates back to the Ruskin speech pronounced by the Prime Minister James Callaghan in 1976. This speech is considered a start point of the accountability era.

school policy. In fact tests are emblematic tools of the performative culture of which many scholars speak (e.g. Ball, 1994, 2003; Blackmore, 2004; Broadfoot, 2001; Thrupp, 2003). One of the more direct and frequent implications of performativity are "fabrications" (Ball, 2003), activities which are aimed at impacting on results to make them appear under the best possible light. Fabrications are not cheating, but diversions from normal practice implemented to improve results. While the English policy advisors had few doubts about the validity and usefulness of testing and target setting, the overall opinion of heads was that the way they are implemented was a missed opportunity with respect to authentic improvements in learning.

The pressure of continuous reporting was pointed out. The growing emphasis on documentation and paperwork implied in the accountability framework was reported as a burden, sometimes unbearable, distracting energies from more important educational work. As a head asserted angrily: "Paper, paper, paper, paper… My prioritising is affected by government bureaucrats… really, very much!" (David, HT).

The relationship between headteachers and stakeholders

Headteachers in England experienced various forms of pressure on the part of the main stakeholders involved in the educational process.

The governing body and the local authority (LA) did not represent strong sources of accountability even if officially, headteachers were primarily accountable to their governing body which appointed them. In practice, the governing body's composition, which consists of unpaid volunteers, makes it a body with disproportionate formal power with respect to its actual competence. As a head reported: "it is an assumption that governors do not know what they are doing" (Greta, HT). The real pressure heads reported was the concern to provide governors, and the consultant appointed to support them, with data which can inform their decisions, especially concerning performance management and salary determination. The task heads had to accomplish was that of orchestrating good relationships with governors, so that they could become partners, joint leaders even.

Headteachers had a clearly hierarchical relationship with teachers, of whom they were the (unofficial) employers. Teachers' employers vary in England depending on type of schools but legally it was usually the LA. Heads felt accountable to teachers to the extent that they feel responsible to

provide them with resources, support and feedback to improve the impact of their teaching: "I am responsible to make sure that they are happy and well trained… have feed back on a regular basis on what they do and… what they need to do" (Greta, HT). The relationship with teachers was also at the centre of OFSTED's accountability, therefore heads were particularly careful in being able to provide evidence of teacher quality. The hierarchical atmosphere of the relationship between heads and teachers (Grace, 2000) was particularly evident in the head's assertive statements about their role and function with respect to teachers. The awareness of their own power was always present, even in the expressions of appreciation for the quality of teachers' work or of concern for their well-being and workload: "I say: 'Go home! Go to your family, have a rest!'" (David, HT). Observed in the heads' accounts was a combination of authentic moral and pedagogical concerns with a more managerialist approach shaped by 'hard' human resource management attitudes.

Pupils were at the centre of a strong sense of moral accountability by heads: "I've got to stand in front of them and say I'm doing my best, I'm giving you a good deal here!" (David, HT). Expressions like this were frequent in the heads' narratives. In particular, the idea of educating the whole child was underlined as an absolute priority that heads were proud to announce. The very constraints imposed by the accountability framework and its implications provoked in the heads, by contrast, the need to clarify that pupils come first in any case, and they were not ready to compromise about priorities concerning pupils. They were proud to show how they worked "to safeguard the interest of children and of teachers in a situation which they judged largely inimical to both" (Grace, 1995, p. 106). These findings are consistent with other recent research on English headteachers (e.g. Bottery, 2007; Day and Schmidt, 2007; Gold et al., 2003; Moore et al., 2002).

Accountability pressures from parents was considered high and demanding by headteachers. First, parents had the right to choose the school, or at least express a preference. In an urban area with many options available, this had an impact and was empowered by other kinds of accountability, such as public testing which allowed for a comparison of results. Second, in the name of their right to know, parents as customers, were becoming very demanding about everything (especially middle class parents) and a firm approach was needed: "I made myself very approachable, but I put it very very clear what the school was about, what I

intended to do" (Hugh, HT). Third, parents often had difficulties in thinking in terms of "school" rather than just in terms of their own child (Bell and Stevenson, 2006). The headteachers interviewed were deeply involved in dealing with parents, following different strategies to enhance their involvement in the school and the child's education.

External accountability

In the English educational system, external eyes watching the school activities abound, leading researchers to speak of, especially for poorly performing schools, a "visitors overload" (Earley and Weindling, 2004). These external visitors included experts, advisors and consultants: to some extent they were all part of the accountability scene. Some of them had official roles, like that of the SIP, recently introduced to support school improvement. However, inspection was the overarching means of accountability, the one which dominated this scene. From the interviewees' accounts the following considerations can be derived.

Inspection was the end point of a complex social process which involved many actors, including external experts. External advisers and consultants took part in various ways in the "preparation" of inspection. This did not consist in concrete actions, but in a continuous alertness to figure out what would happen. The imaginary power of the inspection was such, that the question "What would OFSTED say of this?" appeared continuously in heads' minds (Bottery, 2007). Experts and consultants therefore often acted as partners in simulating and figuring out how this question could be answered. External experts were sometimes appointed autonomously by the school and sometimes sent to the school within a framework of a policy, as in the case of the SIP: "another little grey man from somewhere in the DfES… coming in from outside and grilling the headteacher…" (Greta, HT).

Inspection elicited overall more positive and constructive comments than testing and was considered part of heads' life. The positive aspects of inspection illustrated by heads concerned its ceremonial meaning of "blessing" what the school was doing (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), the stereotype of "an extra pair of eyes" (Wilcox and Gray, 1996, p. 113) that can offer new views useful for improvement, the hope for a passionate dialogue with qualified professionals. While some heads were clearly of this view and expressed their satisfaction with the inspections experienced, others, despite the very good reports achieved, gave voice to many doubts.

Their main concerns centred on the publicity of their inspection report, the blaming philosophy and the myth of objectivity underpinning the inspection process, the lack of connection between control and support and the detailed intrusive glances of inspectors. Heads also reported on cases of inspectors' misbehaviour, albeit not common, due to their bias against the school or their inflexibility.

The lack of connection between control and advice was considered a critical aspect of inspection. Headteachers were clearly in favour of a kind of control associated with support and advice. They found the split of these two functions unnatural and ineffective with respect to improvement. Moreover they found it disappointing, in that it prevented heads from experiencing a deep dialogue with professionals. As a head observed: " 'this is good… this is bad…'. They have gone and you have no follow up at all!" (Ken, HT). Heads deemed it important to continue the dialogue with the same persons who were undertaking the assessment, within a relationship of trust. Policy advisers did not agree with this concern. The metaphor of medicine was used by one of them, pointing out how the separation between the diagnostic and "therapeutic" phases was essential to improvement. This metaphor drew on the underpinnings of the inspection philosophy, the myth of objectivity, which regards standards and performances "as relatively unproblematic 'facts' about schools, which have to be identified by independent inspectors using objective criteria and methods" (Wilcox and Gray, 1996, p. 114).

The inspection process held important symbolic meanings. There is a broad literature on English inspection including research, reflections and proposals in a way which would seem inconceivable in other countries. However, listening to the voices of actors an equally broad "oral tradition" came to light. Inspections were narrated, commented upon, reported with rich details and were the object of great attention even in everyday talk. All the interviewees, while reporting on their own experiences, could not refrain from quoting and commenting on other examples and cases. In fact inspection, with its crude snooping into all the most secret corners of professional life, puts professionals in a situation where "there is no space to hide" (David, HT) from a very top down approach (MacBeath, 2006a). It touched the heart of professional identities, created an intense circulation of unbalanced power and gave the floor to a proliferation of emotions and symbolic representations on the part of the actors involved.

Concluding remarks

In England, schools and educational professionals have historically been granted with a large degree of autonomy, combined with a far-reaching tradition of testing and inspection, dating back to the beginning of schooling, in the second half of the 19th century. Consistent with this tradition, headteachers in this study declared they believed in the usefulness of standards and in the possibility to have points of reference to drive their action, through performance measurement and external inspection. They complained however, sometimes passionately, about the way accountability is implemented and in particular for result publicity, which threatens professionals' expertise, spreading technical information in contexts where there is not the necessary competence to understand its meaning.

English accountability, with its publication of performance tests' results and inspection reports, was regarded as indeed too "high stakes" for professionals and overwhelming. It was said to cause distress and to risk influencing the educational processes distorting practice and educational values. Nevertheless, the success of accountability as a means of improvement was deeply questioned.

Another interesting issue is linked with this scenario and concerns the accountability relationship between professionals.

In England heads have a clear hierarchical relationship with staff which is reinforced by their obligation to appraise teachers: teachers' appraisal is at the core of OFSTED accountability. English heads provided evidence of their struggle between the need to put pressure on their teachers in order to reach the best possible results in league table rankings and, on the other hand, their commitment to defend teachers from the intrusiveness of formal accountability, its perversions and the emotions and work overload it causes (Hargreaves, 2006). Their accountability to teachers could be seen as the way they tried to balance these two opposite needs. However, their attempts to defend teachers often showed a warm sensitivity, but also paternalistic overtones, with the risk of slipping into old "patriarchal" models of leadership (Grace, 1995), leaving little space for a more open and critical professional relationship.

These observations on English accountability may have several interesting aspects to understand the Italian context and to figure out its possible development.

Accountability, the English heads seemed to suggest although confident in the usefulness of standards, cannot be an issue of imposition of easily quantifiable targets from above, enhancing a context of unfair comparison and possible fabrication and cheating. Rather accountability processes, as a core expression of openness and democracy, should be founded on accounts where the voices of professionals have a real space. These voices require credible listeners, who are really interested in them and are there to interact, rather than just ticking boxes on predetermined grids.

It was interesting to see how accountability was also perceived by most interviewees as an internalised "professional right": not only a formal compliance to an external obligation, but, above all, a set of interactive processes which allowed for a deeper and more authentic dialogue between educational actors and between the school and the community. In that right, it was deemed to require support, opportunities and tools which could help guarantee that the school was able to describe itself and to represent and disclose the substance of its processes and results.

Many questions spring from the observation of English educational accountability scenario, that politicians, all over the world like to quote as point of reference (Jones, 2009), with its ambiguous nature of both a threaten and a right, it is certainly one of most demanding challenges today's education faces.

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