

A Cinderella or a Princess? The Italian School Between Practices and Reforms

by *Assunta Viteritti*¹

Abstract: What has really happened in the Italian schools in the last few years? One of the main issues for the Italian school is to answer a series of seemingly simple questions: what is the improvement in the performance of students and teachers brought about by these reforms? Do these reforms contribute to improve the students' learning abilities? Do these reforms make the school better? The objective of the contribution is to closely examine the effects of the school reforms ten years after the beginning of the Autonomy season, by focusing on the daily practices performed by many Italian schools.

Key-words: School Autonomy, Reform, Education Policy

The Italian School: a Cinderella aiming at being a Princess

One of the main issues for the Italian school – which has undergone many reforms, in particular with regard to autonomy, decentralization, regionalization, equality of schools, rationalization, “*the smock, the sole teacher and the behaviour mark of 5*”² – is to answer a series of seemingly simple questions: what is the improvement in the performance of students and teachers brought about by these reforms? To what extent does this

¹ Dies, Via Salaria, 113 - 00198 - Roma (Roma). Email: assunta.viteritti@uniroma1.it

² This was one of the slogans used in the public communication to define some aspects of the recent school reform promoted by Berlusconi's Government and by the Minister of Education Maria Stella Gelmini.

change enhance the quality³ of educational processes? Are such processes also an indicator of equity⁴? Do these reforms contribute to improve the students' learning abilities? Do these reforms make the school better? The objective of the research is to closely examine the effects of the school reforms ten years after the beginning of the autonomy season, by focusing on the daily practices performed by many Italian schools. The research refers to a neo-institutionalist theoretical framework (Czarniawska 2000; Meyer and Rowan; Powell and Di Maggio 2000), as well as to the translation approach (Latour 1998) and to the studies on the work practices (Gherardi, Nicolini and Yanow, 2003; Gherardi, 2006; Gherardi 2009; Landri 2009). The school world is not only a system of actors and organizations acting on the basis of rational criteria. Schools are self-governing subjects, and so are their actors (principals, teachers, students), who act jointly within the institutional context where they work. This chapter focuses not only on the pressures coming from institutions, but also on the mutual relations between local organizations and national institutions. As the analysis will show, some schools have isomorphic responses (Meyer and Rowan 1978) and tend to make similar choices because they belong to the same institutional context. However, even if they comply with the same institutional expectations (Powell and Di Maggio 2000), at a local level, schools are characterized by a variety of different practices (Landri 2006).

The Watchwords of the Reforms

What has really happened in the Italian schools in the last few years? As testified by many studies⁵ and public debates, the Italian school has undergone many changes. The watchwords used to label the reforms

³ For a wider examination of the quality issues in the Italian school, see, among the others: Various Authors 2007; Allulli 2000; Baldacci 2002; Checchi, Belloni, Bongarelli 2007; Breman, Shah 2000.

⁴ For a wider examination of the equity issues, see, among the others: Benadusi 2000; Benadusi 2006a; Benadusi and Bottani 2006; Checchi and Ballarino 2006; Dubet 2004/2006; GERESE 2005; Giancola 2006/2009; Schizzerotto 2002.

⁵ Among the studies focusing on topics related to the Italian school in the last 10 years, see: Benadusi, Landri, Viteritti 1999; Benadusi and Serpieri 2000; Benadusi and Landri 2002; Benadusi and Consoli 2004; Benadusi 2006; Benadusi Mara 2007; Bottani 2002; Biorcio 2006; Cavalli and Argentin 2007; Della Ratta Rinaldi and Ricotta, 2005; Benadusi, Giancola and Viteritti 2008; Fischer and Masselli 2002; Landri 2000; Landri and Serpieri 2004; Landri and Queirolo Palmas 2004; Serpieri 2003/2009.

carried out in Italy since 1997 are various: autonomy (with particular regard to organization, didactics, financial resources and research), decentralization, regionalization, excellence, equity, leadership⁶, relations with the local territory, educational planning, assessment, local decisions, organization, innovations in teaching, and so on. The Italian school has been literally overwhelmed by these words, most of which have remained just old and new labels, alternating among managerial rhetoric, innovation attempts, ritualism and new bureaucratic procedures. In many cases, these topics have interrupted or changed the traditional bureaucratic centralization of the school system. However, as a Cinderella aiming at being a Princess, the Italian school still fails to succeed. It is relegated to the most critical positions in the OCDE/PISA⁷ rankings, with first-rate and second-rate students and schools, with differences and inequalities (Giancola 2009) among various areas (North, Centre, islands, South, North-East) and high rates of school non-attendance⁸. However, the Italian school still has and develops large dynamic areas, which are weakly connected to each other, according to the theory of the *Loosely Coupled Systems* developed by Karl Weick (1976).

Since the Nineties, the Italian schools have been *moving around* in the complex (and chaotic) territory of the *governance* (Benadusi, Consoli 2004), being affected, in their daily practice, by a variety of ambivalent factors:

- The centralization trend coming from an “*Evaluating State*” that aims to steer policies, to use and rationalize the resources (both economic and human), and to regulate, even if slowly, recruitment and assessment measures;
- The pressures of the “*Almost Market*”, with the entrance of new decision-making actors: users, families⁹, other schools intended as “*local competitors*”, economic and associative resources from the local area;

⁶ For an in-depth analysis of the school leadership see the studies carried out by Serpieri 2003/2009.

⁷ On these topics see: OCDE 2001-2002-2003-2004-2005-2006; OCDE-PISA 2001-2003-2004-2005.

⁸ On the issue of school non-attendance, see, among the others: Benvenuto, Rescalli, Visalberghi 2000; Gulli, 2003; Perone 2006.

⁹ The relationship between families and school has been examined, in particular, by Luisa Ribolzi (2002).

- Energies and resources coming from school *networks*¹⁰ and from local, regional and international inter-institutional networks, which constitute the new *glocal* context in which schools are embedded.

Schools Under Strain and Ordinary Resistance

In this continuous process of change, schools are *always under strain* (Landri and Queirolo Palmas 2004), but, in spite of this, they keep trying to activate and perform new experimental practices at a local level. What emerges from the studies is that, in the last few years, the changes introduced in the school system by the reforms – with regard to didactics, research, organization, and so on – have influenced the ordinary practice and discourses of schools, promoting a difficult “day-by-day” educational practice (Landri 2009). As many Italian studies show (Benadusi and Consoli 2004, Landri and Serpieri 2004, Queirolo and Landri 2004, Viteritti 2005), autonomy emerges, even if with great difficulty, in the ordinary practice of teachers and principals who are able to activate experimental projects in their teaching methods, curricula, organization, management of financial resources, management of human resources, relations with the local territory (with families, associations, institutes of research, local institutions, and so on). Despite the continuous pressures for rationalization and cutbacks coming from politics and mass media, the Italian schools live in a world of *ordinary innovation* (Landri 2000), a world where the transformations *induced* by a variety of reforms are assimilated, sometimes nullified or badly tolerated, in the daily school life, and where the role of teachers and students – as the French sociologist Dubet points out – is increasingly *deinstitutionalized* (2008).

This paper intends to focus on the concept of *ordinary active resistance* performed by all the actors involved in the Italian schools. In their daily life, in the succession of weeks, terms and school years, the Italian schools have developed a series of practices that allow them to experience the various dimensions of innovation (introduced by the recent reforms). They are immersed both in an ordinary and extraordinary temporality where inequality and equity coexist (Benadusi, Bottani 2006), together with attempts to innovate educational processes and old pedagogical standards. All these processes are carried out by teachers (Bottani 2002), who are

¹⁰ On the topic of school networks see, among the others: Viteritti, Valentini and Manariti 2002; Manariti and Giancola 2008.

often tired and unmotivated, but still aware and attentive as they are engaged in the difficult day-by-day practice of translating the reforms into their daily activities. Such combination of inertial and propulsive energies makes the Italian school system an interesting case study.

Waves of Innovation and Research Field

A Decade of Reforms

What was the development of the reform programme of the Italian school system in the last few years? The Autonomy Reform promoted by the centre-left government¹¹ at the end of the Nineties had started changing the institutional, organizational and didactic profile of the Italian school system. At the base of this reform there was the idea of devolving significant resources and authority to local school communities (to principals, teachers and local territories). Resistance to change was very strong: many headmasters were not ready to be principals, and many teachers were not prepared to manage educational projects and didactics autonomously. However, also thanks to the Autonomy Reform, the various components of the school system have undergone a slow but profound cultural transformation, shifting from a centralized bureaucratic model to a culture of local and regional autonomy. From 2001 to 2006, the Centre-Right Government put the idea of autonomy aside, and promoted the concept of the school as a *firm*, along with the idea of equality between public schools and private (state-recognized) institutes, and the assignment of a new role to families in the school decision-making processes. Afterwards, from 2006 to 2008, with the establishment of the new Centre-Left Government, school went through a new wave of reforms and announcements. Autonomy was not an issue anymore, even if an institutional reorganization was still underway, and the attention was instead focused on topics such as economic rationalization, cutbacks and austerity measures. In 2008, the current minister of the Centre-Right

¹¹ Minister Luigi Berlinguer, who was the promoter of the Autonomy Reform during the Centre-Left Government, was in office from 1996 to 2000. From 2001 to 2006, Letizia Moratti was the Minister of Education during the Centre-Right Government. From May 2006 to 2008 Minister Giuseppe Fioroni was in office for the Centre-Left Government. In May 2008 Maria Stella Gelmini was appointed Minister of Education during the last Centre-Right Government.

Government introduced new regulations for all educational levels, from school to University. In its first stage, the reform involved the elementary school, with the slogan of *one teacher per class* and the real risk to compromise the quality of the elementary school, which has always been in the forefront of the Italian school system (as shown by statistics and comparative data). Recent legislative proposals have focused on higher education, with the reform of the high school system and measures against the excessive fragmentation and differentiation of programmes (mainly with regard to professional education). From an institutional point of view, concerning regulations and policies, the Italian school has undergone significant changes with regard to institutional forms and educational programmes. What emerges today is a school going toward a new centralist logic, which seems to retrieve a *Fordist* view of knowledge, with a clear division between high schools (with the primacy of theory) and professional institutes (the school of doing). The Autonomy Reform has been put down and forgotten before it was even put into practice.

“Resistant” Innovations

What is left of the innovations announced by the Autonomy Reform? The decade of reforms started in 1997 introducing three fields of innovation: an organizational, a didactic and a financial autonomy. Even if it has recently been put aside, autonomy still represents the main field of innovation introduced by the reform at the beginning of the last decade.

In the first experimental stage of autonomy (from 1997 to 2000), the organizational aspect was fundamental and the Italian schools started adopting new organizational tools and practices, such as:

- The increasing decision-making role of the managerial staff, with particular regard to the management of human and financial resources;
- The diffusion of managerial responsibilities among teachers, with the assignment of specific coordination roles in various working areas (didactics, students, teachers, and so on), and the establishment of a proper organizational system for the supervision and coordination of educational activities (composition of classes, internal communication, relations with families and external institutions, and so on);
- The development of managerial skills in administrative offices, which started playing a major role in supporting the financial decentralization processes;

- The development of working tools for educational programmes and communication. In this regard, the P.O.F. (Educational Offer Plan) was the most significant practice, representing both an instrument of institutional identity for every Italian school and an educational and organizational plan.

After the organizational autonomy, in 2001 the financial autonomy started taking priority, even if it remained confined to limited contexts. With regard to the financial autonomy, the main sources of innovation were two: the use of ICT and the ability of the schools to find additional financial resources beyond the ordinary funds provided by the Ministry of Education. Thanks to the use of ICT, great part of financial administration and many functions that used to be centralized at a ministerial level, or covered by regions and provinces, are now directly managed by the schools: the use of new information systems is changing the management of administrative flows and represents a new field for practicing a managerial autonomy (Landri, Serpieri 2004). Today, the ICT has become a support for the ordinary work of administrative offices and is also increasingly used by teachers – both in class and outside – and principals.

The research of additional financial resources represents, for the schools, a second field for practicing a financial autonomy. Being more and more embedded in the territory and having developed networking skills at an institutional level (Grimaldi and Serpieri), as well as European projects, schools are able to attract financial resources to support a wide range of *extracurricular* activities.

The third field of innovation is the didactic autonomy, which has been developed along with the other two. With the planning, at a local level, of an autonomous part of educational programmes (Ajello and Pontecorvo 2002), as well as the modularization, the development of didactic projects, the assessment of the educational offer, the assessment of competence, the use of new interdisciplinary forms of didactics, and the increasing presence of extracurricular educational activities, schools have become autonomous promoters of didactic innovation¹².

External Factors of Change

¹² Today, due to the reform proposals promoted by the Centre-Right Government and the cutbacks in financial and professional resources, many innovations that were underway have been put on hold or suspended.

The three levels of innovation brought about by the Autonomy Reform in 1997 have produced changes in the daily practices of the Italian schools over the last ten years. Schools now work by didactic objectives and experimental projects, and use technological instruments, with different disciplines working together according to local needs. Even if schools have been putting a lot of effort in this change, the impact of these innovations has been fairly limited, due to a lack of coordination among professional knowledge, educational practices, administrative procedures and organizational models. At a local level, schools have experienced an *overlap* of reforms, which has produced inefficacy and chaos. Beside the impact of these reforms, changes in the social and cultural environment where the school is immersed have also been crucial. The Italian schools have been subject to increasing pressures coming from outside the school walls. As Dubet argues (2008), school is becoming desacralized and its founding myths lose relevance as social changes, new cultural forms, politics and new systems of knowledge break into the daily practice of the school activities. Schools are experiencing a process of deinstitutionalization, being affected by new cultural, cognitive, political and social forces that destabilize well-established routines. These factors operate jointly, and in a multifaceted way: some of them are political; others belong to the social and cultural sphere.

Political factors are related to the reforms and regulations that, in recent years, have produced in Italy an uninterrupted chain of contradictory measures, adjustments, delays and overlaps among autonomy, decentralization and new forms of centralized control. These factors have brought about winds of change along with more traditional and persistent old bureaucratic models. New and old watchwords mix together in the Italian school system, such as the idea of a school market, the competition among schools for the recruitment of students, the need for a greater involvement of families in educational choices, the equality between public and private school. These are the factors that, in recent years, have produced a greater vulnerability in the local school contexts and in the whole system, also due to the succession of Centre-Left and Centre-Right governments, which have failed to identify common institutional and cultural objectives.

Social and cultural factors are the most profound, and involve the new role of expert knowledge and the cultural and social changes introduced in the school contexts. In recent years, the Italian school has been an

experimental field for testing new teaching methods (such as cooperative learning or real-world application of knowledge), and assessment models (among which, the assessment of competence). This was the ideal field, for scholars, consultants and experts from University and other institutes of research, to introduce new teaching models and new instruments to develop and enhance the professional skills of all school actors. At the same time, changes occurring in the family, new forms of interaction among peers, the increasing influence of the media, the educational impact of the world of consumption (Codeluppi 2005), and changes in the agents of socialization (Besozzi 2006), are producing deep consequences in the school, whose effects are still to be determined. School is not a neutral field for politics: it is a social context of learning (Ajello, Pontecorvo, Zucchermaglio 2002), a cultural context of interaction (Fele, Paoletti 2003), an anthropological context of learning (Benadusi 2008), a political context of conflicts (Landri and Queirolo Palmas 2004). School is *under the pressure* of social and cultural changes. It is this school that we intend to analyse, starting from the daily practice of the school activities. Given the social, political and cultural factors to which the school is exposed, we have chosen a wide research field able to show the multitude of actors and factors involved.

The Research Field

The analysis focuses on schools located in the metropolitan context of two large cities, Naples and Rome, which are emblematic of the South-Central regions of Italy,¹³ and include all kinds of Italian schools – from the schools of excellence to the most problematic ones, schools operating autonomously or in network environment, schools open to changes and schools that have difficulties adapting to their changing environment. In these cities, we have chosen to examine the schools located in the suburbs, which are interested in having a good reputation in terms of efficacy, but have to face socio-cultural problems such as non-attendance (Perone 2006), and are willing to seek excellence. In the case studies examined, the objective was to grasp the peculiarities of different *local school stories*, with particular regard to two aspects: to what extent, and how, local actors (principals and teachers, in the first place) are able to interpret political, organizational and didactic changes; and to what extent, and how, every school is, or becomes, or struggles to become, a learning community able

¹³ The objective of the research is to examine the Central and Southern regions of Italy, which are regarded as the most critical areas in the comparative international studies.

to produce innovation successfully. In the examination of these case studies, different levels of analysis have been combined.

Our aim was to identify levels of connection, or disconnection and misalignment, between organizational and teaching practices, between the activities carried out in class and outside. According to an ethnographic perspective (Marzano 2006; Fele and Paoletti 2003), we tried to make the practices of observation as less intrusive as possible, establishing direct and spontaneous relationships with the actors involved, by using interviews as well as informal dialogues and interactions. The aspects taken into account in the analysis of the case studies were various:

- Organizational and institutional contexts (Board of Governors, Teachers' meetings, Staff meetings with the management, and so on);
- Didactic activities (Parent-Teacher meetings and classroom activities);
- Informal social interactions (students' recreational moments, atmosphere in the school corridors, informal groups of teachers, and groups of teachers and students).

Apart from the observation in the field, all school components have been interviewed: principals, managerial staff, and teachers. Everyone was asked questions about their perception of the reforms underway and about how it is possible to combine innovation, equity and quality in their daily practice.

Where the Italian School is Going According to the Results of the Research

How are the schools examined by the research? What kind of pressure do they face and how do they manage to find their way in the maze of innovation, quality and equity? As already said, we have chosen to focus on *normal schools* as exemplary cases of the Italian school in general, and of its lights and shadows.

Towards Local Governance

What emerges from the case studies is the establishment of an idea of *local governance*. At a local level, schools seem to cooperate with each other and with local resources. The organizational and institutional innovation of the school networks, which is more or less established, is

associated with attempts to combine equity and quality of learning. The schools examined are engaged in projects aimed at fighting the school non-attendance, at improving the educational quality of programmes, and developing a wide range of relational skills. Located in the suburbs of two large cities of the Centre-South, these schools mainly aim to keep young people at school, and to motivate them to develop personal and social skills, along with cognitive skills. In general, whereas the idea of innovation has become part of the daily practice of school professionals and principals (schools are today engaged in a series of projects, coordination activities, curricular planning, institutional communication, and so on), equity and quality are still neglected and are experienced more in terms of negative results than as “positive” practices. This is the case of technical and professional institutes, which have innovated organizational procedures and methods, and show self-governing capacity in managing their financial resources, but have to face the risks of an *education reduced to the bare minimum*, both in terms of equity and quality, and have to cope with students mostly coming from low social class backgrounds. However, the school contexts examined are promoting an increasing grassroots autonomy. Compared to previous studies (Benadusi, Consoli 2004; Landri, Queirolo Palmas 2004), this research shows with much more evidence that schools have established themselves as *autonomous political actors*. School actors – principals and teachers – have a great ability to deal with the issues related to the local school identities, and feel part of a changed and ever-changing macro-institutional frame, which is rich in contradictions and uncertainties. However, the different local specificities are not dispersed and confused in a fragmentary *chaos*, but, even if with different speed, they fit into the general frame of the transformation of educational policies at a national and international level. Autonomy is still the institutional and cultural environment where schools are embedded as local institutional actors with their own identity. Some organizational routines start establishing themselves, such as the presence of a managerial staff, the development of internal and external communication systems thanks to the use of ICT, and a greater integration between organizational and administrative domains. What emerges from the observation in the field is the existence of schools that, apart from establishing institutional networks with other schools, try to find financial resources, seek to create alliances with other local components (associations, experts, university, municipality, province, and so on). At a local level, the school seems to get

full of society, becomes more and more a political actor, establishes learning strategies with external experts, and is able to translate external knowledge. The model established in the schools examined is that of *micro-politics* (Ball 1987), which include P.O.F. (Educational Offer Plan), educational planning, school's assessment, assessment of learning, relations with the local territory, and so on. Principals and teachers' communities focus on segments of policies and promote and implement them. However, as it emerges from the case studies, sometimes there is a sort of overabundance of functions for some groups of particularly dynamic teachers: in many cases, this seems to produce *the school of the activism of the few*, who become interpreters, and sometimes Cassandra-like prophets, of the difficult implementation of a shared transformation. What emerges from the case studies is a great development of extracurricular activities and projects focused on the issues of school non-attendance, quality and special needs educational programmes. Aimed at establishing a balance among innovation, equity and quality, these crucial projects risk to be regarded as minor activities, being less structured and having low institutional visibility. Moreover, the weak integration between curricular and extracurricular educational activities risks to create a school based on two parallel lines that never converge.

Traces of Quality in Educational Practice

A *second point* emerging from the observation in the field is that in the schools where the grassroots innovation is stronger, there are *traces* of practices aimed at developing quality and efficacy of learning as well as processes of social equity. In some of the schools examined, in fact, the curricular models established show some connections with the issues of quality and equity of learning. These processes are expressed, in particular, by the following activities:

- *Modularization of didactic activities*, which creates modular paths of learning and makes teachers and students more aware of the programme to be carried out, and of how to reach its expected objectives;
- *Interdisciplinary paths*, thanks to which teachers from a variety of disciplines work together on common themes to be dealt with from different disciplinary perspectives, in order to encourage a holistic approach to learning, rather than a sequential and fragmentary one;

- *Development of open classes*, which has allowed to outline learning paths addressed to various kinds of groups created on the base of interests and objectives of learning;
- *Flexible curriculum*, which has represented a special innovation for the school autonomy, allowing the schools to dedicate part of their didactic programme to specific disciplinary areas and competence according to their local needs;
- *Innovations in the assessment of students' learning*, with the establishment of models focused not only on the assessment of the knowledge acquired, but also on the competence developed by the students.

Beside these innovative teaching practices, which are aimed at reaching objectives of quality and equity, in the discourses and practices observed, the topic of quality was often associated with measurable topics such as rationalization of resources, organizational efficiency, assessment of school's efficiency, and satisfaction of users and families.

The Bare Minimum of Equity

As for the equity issue, the discourses and practices observed were mainly focused on the measures against school non-attendance as the only explicit practice aimed at ensuring *the bare minimum of equity*. The two basic and non-integrated concepts emerging from the analysis of the case studies are quality intended as efficiency (which is the result of a managerial rhetoric) and equity policies exclusively referred to strategies against marginalization (which is the result of a concept of equity reduced to the bare minimum). With regard to the equity issue, it is possible to identify some crucial *didactic routines* that can turn into hidden instruments of inequality¹⁴ if they are not analysed critically and made explicit. These routines refer to the following activities:

- Composition of classes (which sometimes produces first-rate and second-rate classes *according to the social capital of the students' families*);

¹⁴ In an interesting study carried out on the empirical cases presented in this research and included in the volume "Uguaglianza ed Equità nella scuola", edited by Benadusi and Bottani, Landri (2006) identifies four aspects to be considered in order to closely examine the equity issue: image of the school, kind of users, equity strategies carried out by the school, equity in the ordinary practices (composition of classes, didactics and assessment).

- Teachers' assessment of students, which can be affected by some sort of prejudice;
- The ritual of good and bad marks, which can actually reproduce pre-existent inequalities;
- The persistence of traditional teaching methods based on frontal lectures, which risk to reinforce the exclusion of students who are weaker, in terms of educational and social capital, and may have difficulties facing an exclusively cognitive transmission and non-interactive teaching model;
- The use of punishment practices (suspension, black marks, remarks against troubled students), which is likely to reinforce at-risk behaviours. Even if some sort of connection is established between equity and quality, a real integration is still to be established.

Both as an objective and a practice, equity can be mostly experienced in extracurricular activities, where it is intended as a fight against school non-attendance, whereas in curricular activities the social construction of inequalities *risks to prevail*. Quality is mainly related to projects of efficiency that are still quite detached from the teaching practices. This risks to create what Coleman (1990) defines as *micro-foundation of macro-phenomena*, which turns the small daily local inefficacy into a systemic inefficacy. The school innovation is neutral, but the meanings attributed to it, and the practices through which it is implemented, produce social effects, of one kind or another. We can say that when quality is pursued separately from equity, when the efficacy in the use of resources is accomplished independently from the learning results achieved by all kinds of students, the innovations introduced produce negative effects and reinforce inequalities.

School as a Project Factory and Limits of Innovation

Other risks are involved in the practices of this sort of incomplete autonomy. The greater risk is in the pulverization of projects, which lack of a common strategic unity of effort. There is a proliferation of projects dealing with all kinds of issues: from the safeguard of the environment to the recycling of waste, from multiculturalism to healthy food, and so on. This idea of an *all-rounder* type of school certainly increases the expectations and generic satisfaction of families, but the effects on the students' performance are still dubious. What seems to emerge is a stronger managerial style, along with a greater awareness of the complexity and problematic nature of the school organization, and a participative approach

aimed at establishing a cooperative programme with all school actors. Teachers also feel part of the development of educational and organizational coordination processes. These practices definitely don't *involve majority groups*. However it is not just a matter of small elites of teachers against a large majority of indifferent and careless persons. Principals and teachers are given new methods of work (educational planning and assessment instruments, software and didactic tools, multimedia supports for teaching, and so on), which require new abilities (Perrenoud 2002) and greater cooperation and involvement both in class and outside. What emerges from the analysis is a weak integration between organizational and didactic level, between educational and institutional practices, which can be regarded as a disconnection (Di Maggio, Powell 1991) between political and educational level. The Self-Governing school outlined by the discursive rhetoric of politics was supposed to be a school able to innovate itself by combining quality (in the use of resources, in the management, in the teachers and in the students' learning) and equity (in order to reduce inequalities within the schools and among different kinds of schools). Once translated into practice, quality and equity have continued to be misaligned: quality is currently intended as a need for rationalization of human and financial resources, whereas equity is reduced to the bare minimum and merely intended as a social problem in schools having issues of non-attendance and behavioural difficulties. The Italian school is still not enough efficient and fair in the opportunities provided and in the results accomplished, and when it promotes quality it is not able to associate it with policies of inclusion and reduction of inequalities leading to successful learning results.

Challenges, Criticality and Possibilities for the Future of the Italian School

It is possible to say that the Italian school is a changing environment, which however lacks of an integration and stabilization of the systemic results of the reforms. In the ten years since the start of the Autonomy Reform, the overlap of different views and approaches has produced destabilizing effects. The Autonomy Reform was supposed to be implemented and developed according to a long-term programme, but the Italian political events have often deviated from it. The schools examined

in this study are in the trajectory of an autonomy still to be fully developed. Due to other regulations, which have put a halt to the autonomy programme, these schools are facing new and greater uncertainties. In short, it is possible to list some of the critical points and problems underway that could be turned either into opportunities for innovation or into risks of further destabilization.

The risks of polarization

A *first critical point* is the *polarization* among different kinds of schools. What emerges in the watchwords of the changes brought about by the succession of regulations introduced over the last 10 years is that the ideas and practices of innovation based on a separation of the concepts of equity and quality do not produce significant changes in the educational practices. The Autonomy Reform was intended to point out the need for innovation of educational and organizational processes, and was based on the assumption that innovation can't happen without taking into account the issues of quality and equity; otherwise it produces a *polarization* effect (Landri 2006). The risk is to produce a weak local management of education, with schools having increasingly *different levels of reputation* and attractiveness for the students. After producing its most evident effects in the change of local school *structures*, the Autonomy Reform has been impaired by political interests without having time to fully develop educational efficacy and equity practices. The Italian schools still have many faults and failings, which can be analysed separately but are however strictly related. Despite the many reforms, which have started out with the best intentions, the Italian school has not improved its performance in comparison with other European countries. The negative effects are evident, especially in the higher education, with a strong opposition between high schools (with the primacy of theoretical knowledge) and professional institutes (with the sole primacy of the rhetoric of doing). The polarization among different kinds of schools risks to be even stronger in the comparison between high schools from the North of Italy and professional institutes from the South. The differentiation between first-rate and second-rate schools, between schools from the South and schools from the North weakens the Italian school system. Beside a few excellent high schools across the country, there are a lot of schools that fail to achieve satisfactory levels of efficacy. As for the equity issue, even if scientific debates and empirical practices show much more attention to the need for a

greater equity in the school (Benadusi 2007), its implementation is limited to ensure a bare minimum of equity. In order to avoid the risks of polarization, it is necessary to improve the performance of schools, improving the abilities of school professionals, enhancing their motivation and the quality of teaching, so as to improve the performance of students, regardless of the kinds of schools.

An incomplete Autonomy

A second critical point is the incomplete implementation of autonomy. This also depends on a ten-year overlap of reform projects and announcements all having different results. In the last ten years, the school of the bureaucratic and centralized routines, “the school of the circulars”, has been opposed by two processes: on the one hand, by a long series of solutions only announced but never adopted, a multiplicity of innovations only partially implemented, experimented, located, and implicit, which have not been integrated into a consistent system; on the other hand, there is the risk implied in new bureaucratic measures, in the restoration of traditional elements (such as the return to the myth of the sole teacher, the annulment of the modularization of teaching programmes, the reintroduction of numerical marks, the use of behaviour marks to discipline students’ misbehaviour, which often becomes an instrument of stigmatization and leads to an increase in the number of failures). Moreover, along with the chaotic pressures coming from the “Almost Market” (with an increasing competition among schools in attracting students and families), in the perspective of a new centralization, the Ministry of Education is promoting new regulations that impair the horizontal decision-making processes and autonomy of the schools. The result is the deinstitutionalization and de-legitimization of traditional roles, without any real process of institutionalization able to incorporate and establish new cultures of innovation.

As for the change in the professional roles, on the one hand many principals have not been able to develop managerial skills, having a paternalistic and centralist view of their managerial role and weak coordination abilities, on the other hand the obsolescence of professionals’ knowledge and their need for continuing education have become more critical (currently, the average age of teachers is over 50!). The Autonomy Reform has failed to establish itself as an enduring system of institutional, organizational and educational practices, thus remaining a promise

unfulfilled. From a financial point of view, the reforms outlined, announced and started, have been carried out at zero cost, or by making resource cutbacks. The reforms promoted in Italy have been developed by overlaps and adjustments, according to two opposing logics: on the one hand an incrementalist view, and on the other a total discontinuity between the Autonomy Reform and the most recent regulations. All this produces an incoherent institutional framework, as well as demotivated professionals and little attention to students. The challenge is to let the reform processes establish themselves, in order to enhance the quality of professionals and encourage them to get into these processes, to interpret their meanings and translate them into practice.

A School Resistant to Social and Cultural Changes

A *third critical point* is the weak ability of schools to interpret cultural and social changes. The Italian school is still characterized by a high level of *cultural impermeability to changes*. It is a self-referential system defending itself from the socio-cultural processes characterizing the so-called post-modern society. School doesn't seem to have enough understanding of some macro-social phenomena such as the cultural integration, the knowledge of global phenomena, the role of media and new media for the new generations. In addition to this cultural weakness, there is also a traditional view of knowledge and learning, with the primacy of old Fordist-based visions of knowledge and disciplines, and an insufficient search for innovative methods of teaching and learning. Young people spending much time at school experience two kinds of worlds: the world of their own, which is affected by significant changes in the culture, in the use of technologies, in the relationship with families, in their idea of work and future, and so on; and the school world, which is often obsolete and unable to connect to, understand and communicate the changes underway. No reforms have addressed the issue of motivating the students or have taken into account their centrality as emergent social actors.

Reforms Without Organization

A *fourth critical point* is the weakness of the organizational issues included in the reforms. The autonomy frame seemed to be focused on topics such as school organization (principals, managerial staff, educational planning, assessment of teachers and principals, and so on), innovation in learning and de-privatization of educational practices (Louis, Marks, Kruse,

1996; Ajello and Ghione, 2000) (open classes, interdisciplinary modular programmes, continuous cooperation among teachers and with local communities). Today, 10 years after the start of the Autonomy Reform, the organizational issues have been put aside by new Ministerial regulations to be replaced by a more established practice focused more on a new individualization of teaching, rather than on an interdisciplinary coordination among teachers outside the class. Processes of organizational learning are not sufficiently promoted and established. What emerges instead is the development of individual and private practices performed by teachers who struggle to find their way through the maze of regulations, while becoming more and more demotivated and frustrated. Rather than being actors of the processes of implementation of these reforms (Gherardi and Lippi 2000), school professionals are lost in the legislative uncertainty, between risks of rationalization and the tangle of contradictory and discontinuous policies.

Under the strain of political pressures, the Italian school is therefore affected by logics of privatization of educational practices, and by old paternalistic professional views, with limited connection with the complex social and cultural processes occurring in the world where young people actually live and are going to live in the future.

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This paper focuses on some of the topics included in a wider research project, *Scuole in Azione: Equità e qualità nelle pratiche educative*, edited by Luciano Benadusi, Orazio Giancola and Assunta Vitteritti (2009). Starting from a comparison with the most recent international studies, the volume reports a wide and articulated quantitative and qualitative research carried out between 2004 and 2006 in many Italian schools. The volume firstly examines how innovation affects educational policies at a local level. The analysis of reform policies is associated with an in-depth analysis of the OCDE/PISA research on equity, quality and efficacy of the European educational systems. The volume also presents the results of two extensive quantitative studies on students and teachers from various Italian schools (about 1200 students and over 200 teachers). Quantitative research methods are associated with qualitative analysis on different kinds and levels of schools. The study also examines particular examples of school networks established in metropolitan areas, and presents some case studies of schools located in two large cities of the South-Central regions of Italy: Naples and Rome. The schools examined represent exemplary cases, and at the same time ordinary stories, of the variety of school settings in Italy. They are just ordinary

schools facing the challenge of combining innovation and daily practices while trying to pursue educational efficacy, social inclusion and respect. The observations reported in this paper refer, in particular, to the results of the qualitative analysis presented in this volume.

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