

# **A Temporary Eclipse of Bureaucracy. The Circulation of School Autonomy in Italy**

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*Abstract:* The article addresses the circulation of school autonomy in Italy, that is the translation of the 'winds' of decentralization in education fields aimed at the construction of school organizations (the managerialist rhetoric). It is suggested that this passage has occurred because of a *temporary eclipse of statist legacy* which has opened a *process of pluralization of the modes of governance* of the educational field. The essay analyses how that translation has happened in practice as well as the dilemmas and the paradoxes accompanying this change.

*Key-words:* Bureaucracy, Education Policy, Practice

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## **Introduction**

The article analyses the deployment of the policies of school autonomy in Italy, that is, the translation of the set of policies aimed at the creation of school organizations during the last decade. These policies are a consequence of reforming education by following the 'winds' of decentralization. The inclusion of Italy in the South European Welfare State Model is helpful in detecting additional similarities of this group of European countries in the field of education (Ferrera, 1998; Landri, 2008). These common characteristics may be summarized in terms of: a) *low*

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*performing systems of education* with enduring difficulties (with notable variation inside this sample of nation-states) in aligning with the policies and technologies of European Union, and in particular with performativity regimes of the Lisbon Strategy, b) a similar institutional architecture, identified with the tradition of the *statist legacy* (Green, 2002; Prokou, 2008), and c) a certain degree of *school elitism*, measured through a rather extended area of weakness in school performances and reduced areas of school excellences, which reflect school institutional regimes of practices still reluctant to a full democratization of education. These long-term features have at the beginning of the last decade partly solicited the set of policies and attempts at transformations that have introduced a *decentralization of the educational field through school autonomy* in Italy.<sup>2</sup> The policy of school autonomy tends to transform 'schools' into 'organizations', by importing discourses, practices of managerialism, and the logic of market within the educational field according to what has been considered elsewhere as a set of elements of a neo-liberal agenda (Ball, 1998). The article suggests that this passage has been made possible by a *temporary eclipse of statist legacy* (the educational bureaucracy as a dominant circuit of regulation of the organization field; Benadusi & Landri, 2002), which has had the effect of opening (at the least in principle) a *process of pluralization of the modes of governance* of the educational field whose possibilities are far from being completely translated in practice. In what follows I will present an analysis of how this transformation has happened in practice, and in particular, how school autonomy has circulated in *action-nets*, that is in socio-technical assemblages of discourses, texts, subjects and objects. In presenting this analysis a relevant displacement is suggested at theoretical level from the 'surface' to the 'body' of the socio-technical networks for grasping the circulation of school autonomy. Here, this would imply the specification of neo-institutionalism's themes (Powell & Di Maggio, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 2006) with a *practice sensitivity* (Schatzky, Knorr Cetina, & von Savigny,

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<sup>2</sup>Other countries of the Southern Welfare Model have followed different strategies albeit those trajectories seem to be shaped by the tradition of the *statist legacy*. The reference to the notion of 'statist legacy' should not lead to underestimation of the many instances of this legacy and the importance of the form of the state for analysing the governance of the education fields. By the way, for a complete description of these strategies in the case of the countries of the South European Welfare State see Landri's recent contribution (2008).

2001; Nicolini, Gherardi, & Yanow, 2003; Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Landri, 2009). Such an approach is useful to describe the tensions and the conflicts implied in the restructuring of practices, to understand the learning and knowing processes developing in situated settings, and to give a dynamic view of change as it occurs in a relevant field of practice. The article unfolds as follows: I will firstly specify what is implied by specifying neo-institutional themes with a sensitivity to practice, then I will address how this helps in analysing the circulation of school autonomy in practice, and finally I will discuss what this temporary eclipse has implied in terms of dilemmas, paradoxes, and exclusions.

### **The translation of policies**

Neo-institutionalism in organization studies represents a significant theoretical framework to understand the logics of implementation of innovations and reforms in school. Schools and universities have often constituted the empirical cases whereby this approach has found the source of the conceptual resources and then extended to more general reflections about the nature and the dynamics of organizations and societal sectors (Powell & Di Maggio, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Bachrach & Mundell, 1995; Meyer & Rowan, 2006). Here, the concept of *institutional isomorphism* is useful to comprehend how organizations arise by including highly legitimated institutional pillars which have the effect of making organizations highly similar in a particular organizational field. It still helps in understanding how this occurs through *coercive* forces, that is, due to the changing constraints of rules and standards (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000), through mechanisms of *imitation* of successful solutions to particular organizational problems, and through the *professionalization*, that is to say by the spreading of knowledge, expertise, and personnel, of highly evaluated professionals. In underlining the organizations–societies links, this theoretical framework would interpret the abovementioned policies of school autonomy as a consequence of the adoption and diffusion of the globalization of the neo-liberal agenda inside educational fields all over the world. While this approach is important to point out the possible macro-trends and the relevance of the institutions in moulding organizational structures and processes, it often fails to describe properly the complex

dynamics of change, that is, how the restructuring takes place, the emergence of the institutional settings, and their reproduction once they are stabilized. This simplified version of the institutional change seems to depend on the dominance of a diffusionist model of change in neo-institutionalism (Czarniawska, 2000) producing compliance for the trajectories of transformation, and a not-problematic attitude towards the institutional classifications (micro-macro). As a result, change appears to be associated with the emergence of new ideas usually carried by powerful actors, the spreading of ideas is not problematized, and the contextualization results in being interpreted in terms of growing isomorphism within the organization field, without considering the possibilities of alternative or creative solutions. In order to complexify this vision, I complement the neo-institutionalist approach with a *practice-based vocabulary* (Nicolini Gherardi & Yanow, 2003; Gherardi, 2006) in analysing policies, which instead looks at the situated conditions of change. Here, the diffusionist model is substituted by the key concept of *translation* taken from actor-network theory (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2005; Gherardi & Lippi, 2000). 'School Autonomy', accordingly, comes to be interpreted as a translation process of an idea, a set of dispositifs, and the shaping of new subjects in new institutional, organizational, and pedagogical practices. This passage implies the (re)assemblages of action-nets made of discourses, objects, and subjects in new convergences and homologies (Callon, 1980; Czarniawska & Sevón 1996). That re-presentation draws attention to the materiality of change and proposes a vocabulary to analyse the policies and their fabrication. Key notions in that respect are 'action-nets', 'translation', and 'intermediaries/mediators'. 'Action-nets' (or 'actor-networks') reveals that a policy implies a contingent and unstable assemblage of heterogeneous elements (bodies, texts, technologies, tools, etc.). This way it is possible to describe socio-technical networks connecting in practice distant and in some way different organizational settings, and understand their *modes of ordering* (Law, 1994) or circuits of regulation. At the same time, the details of 'action-nets' permit the acknowledgement of how the 'social' is a circulating entity which has to be continuously made and remade (Latour, 2005) and the policies contribution to this work of production/reproduction. By 'translation', we get the understanding of how the assemblages of actions occur, that is, of the strategies of translation, which implies a process of *interéssement* of humans and non-humans. The

materialization of change depends in that case on the successful enrolment of others which can obey or align to the strategies of translation or can displace the settings of change by betraying it (the famous motto 'translation/*trahison*'). Here, 'translation' is equivalent to establishing a linguistic correspondence, yet also to the displacement of something/someone from a non-human, for example, to a human (Law, 1997). The assemblages are accompanied, developed, and embedded in 'intermediaries or mediators'. These latter concepts consider the socio-materiality of policies and recognize those texts describing and disciplining actions (such as acts, regulations, and the like), the tools and the technologies shaping reform ideas, and the distribution of competences among humans and non-humans.

The three notions ('action-nets', 'translation', and 'intermediaries') of the vocabulary of practice I have so far considered focus on how school autonomy has circulated in terms of objects, knowledges, and subjects, and has represented a challenge for the statist legacy of the Italian education system. In the next section, I will draw on a set of research projects I was involved in (Benadusi, Landri, & Viteritti, 1999; Benadusi & Serpieri, 2000; Serpieri, 2002; Benadusi & Consoli, 2004; Landri & Queirolo Palmas, 2004; Landri & Serpieri, 2004; Benadusi, Giancola & Viteritti, 2008) during the decade in order to illustrate what the temporary eclipse of the education bureaucracy has meant in terms of restructuring of organizational knowledge of schools as well as what kind of closure has reached the socio-technical networks in practice, that is, the specific combinations and dilemmas these transformations have carried out and left open to further discussions and developments. I will illustrate in the next paragraph how the re-assemblage can be described as a) a *displacement from ideas to texts*, b) the *reshaping of technologies of control*, and c) the *constructions of new agencies*.

### **The circulation of school autonomy**

The idea of 'autonomy' has circulated in some initial discussions and thoughts about reforming the Italian education system since the middle of mid 1970s at a time of earlier changes regarding school governance. These transformations coincided with the full democratization of the schools, and

led to the opening of a basically 'elite institution' as well as an extension – at least in principle – of the participation in school decision-making (Gigante, 2001; Delle Fratte, 1991). Later on we had many interpretations of 'school autonomy': a) some considered that idea a way to introduce a quasi-market of schools (like, for example, social movements of students against privatization, see Semeraro, 1996); b) some instead interpreted 'autonomy' as an opportunity to redefine institutional boundaries and improve the efficacy of the educational provision at the local level by considering the limits of the centralism of the Ministry which in some cases failed to recognize the innovation where it emerged (Riboldi, 1987; Frabboni & Pinto Minerva, 1991); c) finally, some appreciated the effects of school autonomy in terms of the rationalization of public spending, that is, the possibility of saving and controlling state funding in a coming age of difficulties because of persistent deficit spending. In any case, public debates scarcely confronted the diffusion of the data of international enquiries of assessment (PISA, IEA, PIRLS, etc.)<sup>3</sup> as well as the academic literature which critically examines school autonomy and educational performances (Bottani, 2000). Those data and many educational researches have pointed out that the democratization of instruction resulted in significant improvements in participation at the level of schooling and performances at the level of pre-primary (the Reggio Emilia's pre-primary schools and primary schools). However, many findings of different research programmes converged in acknowledging an overall displacement of the social selection towards a higher level of the secondary and tertiary levels of education and registered persistent difficulties in aligning with those aims suggested by the Lisbon strategy (a distinctiveness shared with other Mediterranean European countries). Further, the ordinary description of the education system is described with metaphors of 'immobility' ('sistema ingessato'; Riboldi, 1997), images of difficulties in decision-making (Benadusi, 1987), descriptions of waste of resources and inefficacy with regard to the relationship among means and ends (Biggiero, 2000; Cavalli 2000). The translation of school autonomy in policy rather reveals a mimetic logic (*mimetic isomorphism*). It occurred during the second half decade of the 1990s when the idea of autonomy became popular and was

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<sup>3</sup>Those data have now been publicly debated, and have become more relevant in accompanying and justifying notable cuts in state spending for schools

able to produce a widespread compliance among all those working within the educational field (Cavalli, 2000). It was a highly legitimized perspective and represented from then on a common background for educational policies, which still resists also the change in political orientation within the government (of either centre-left or centre-right). At that time, school autonomy was inscribed in normative texts (acts, decrees, etc.), reflected, and was accompanied by the alignment of many action-nets: a) the contemporary process of changing public administration and the shape of state in social policies, b) EU policies of knowledge society, c) a time of 'strong government' (Ventura, 1998), that is, a rare condition of decision-making in educational issues (with the exception of more authoritarian periods), d) a set of experimentations and programmes that anticipated this reform and required a solution in terms of institutionalization, and e) the epidemic of decentralization in many European and Western countries which revealed the presence of a common trend of globalization in education as an effect, according to some, of a neo-liberal agenda (Ball, 1998). The alignment has produced a short but intense period of writing normative texts intended to reform school governance. Those normative texts considered school autonomy (DPR 275/99), school management (DPR 59/98), the role of local government in the education field, the reform of state government, and so on. A shift of discourses towards the rhetoric of *organization* can be noted along with some attempts at exploring other organizational models (like those of the private companies) that emphasize the strength of the organizational links, the relevance of school management and school staff, the definite establishment of the organizational boundaries, the importance of defining the organizational identity in terms of mission, and so on. In other words, the rhetoric of organization introduced all those elements of the traditional management thinking not usually at the forefront of educational discourses, yet now considered of relevance for improving the quality of school organizations. In reading those texts it appears that the centralism of the old bureaucracy comes to be substituted by the renowned importance of schools which gain the centrality of the educational system, and the different 'blocks' of the bureaucracy are being redefined in terms of performing forms of management by objectives. The movement from words to texts implies a process of stabilization, so that 'autonomy' starts to lose 'equivocality' (as expressed by Weick, 1979). The inscription into texts

eliminates peripheral interpretations and allows the enrolment of those agencies which are destined to add reality to 'school autonomy'. The texts attribute new identities and roles: principals become 'school managers'; 'headteachers' transform into 'school middle managers'; 'schools' are considered as 'organizations', and so on. This objectification means a stabilization, that is, those who have to face 'school autonomy' have to cope with those texts that start to be obligatory points of passages for school organizing. The stabilizations are contingent and temporary, meaning that they can be changed (at least in principle) as long as other trajectories of translation are activated. It is relevant to say that these normative texts have on one hand an effect of reduction of ambiguity and on the other hand stimulate the production of other interpretations and new texts and the unfolding of diverse ambiguities. One can note in addition how the abandonment of the old bureaucracy requires quite paradoxically an intense application of the sphere of administrative law, that is to say the same knowledge which accompanied, until then, the fine regulation of the educational government. The re-assembly of action-nets also concerns the *redefining of the instruments and technologies of control*. School autonomy signals a movement towards a devolved environment, or as we have already said, the development of modes of management by objectives. The governance at a distance implies diverse modes of control – not necessarily of a formal-normative kind. Here, we have the introduction and acknowledgement of many knowledges for coordinating and managing school (sociology of organization, management studies, statistics, informatics – to mention but a few), and accordingly the proliferation of new objects. The circulation of school autonomy meant basically an increasing crisis in school objects of management. In that respect, we have had the development of school plan ('POF'), the Provision Charts ('Carta dei Servizi'), the manuals for the assessment and for the (self)evaluation of schools, and the spreading of the new technologies of information and communication. Those objects are relatively *new*, present a wider *opening* with respect to the old bureaucratic objects for organizing (the rule, the ministerial programmes, etc.) and can be considered as *quasi-objects* since they can be inscribed and re-inscribed many times. They are inscriptions of organizational processes in order to produce an effect of coordination and control; they represent school processes and activities with the aim of restructuring organizational texture, and make them accountable for the

different school stakeholders (Landri, 2001). These objects themselves have had a history since well before 'school autonomy' became the core-organizing principle of the educational system. They have been shaped in past experiences and projects that represented those links whereby management knowledge has circulated among diverse organizational arenas. A list of these links (not exhaustive) includes: the 'Quality Project', a project of collaboration between the Ministry of Education and 'Confindustria' (the corporatist organization of the big Italian companies) (Vairetti, 1995); the project which leads to 'Carta dei Servizi' (Rusconi, 1996), a project of collaboration between the Ministry of Public Administration and the Ministry of Education; and some projects between the Ministry of Education and the EU, where some manuals for the self evaluation of the school have been developed and have then become standards in most literature of the field (Castoldi, 1998). An important remodelling of the school management materiality has been carried out by the spreading of technologies of information and communication which reinforced the process of redistribution of power and competences triggered by the school autonomy. Here, the policy of school restructuring has been accompanied by the construction of intranet within the Ministry linking schools as well as an opening to the Internet with the setting up of the official website of the Ministry and the many school websites, which changed the form of institutional communication by configuring a sort of 'virtual ministry'. In some respects, the presence of the 'Ministry' is less in paper-form and becomes a distributed entity within schools, a digital intermediary which distributes information and knowledge about the 'state' of the system and on educational policies, as well as on the aims of the Ministry of education (Landri & Serpieri, 2004). At the same time, we have had the notable diffusion of objects and web based technologies which implies the setting up of many connections among schools and between schools and the many institutional stakeholders. Those relationships mean the fabrication of a network sociality allowing the distribution of the practices of governance and more complex forms of coordination and control. This expansion in terms of the space of flows leads to rethinking the institutional boundaries (which are less definite than before) and to considering the implications in terms of school governance. The circulation of school autonomy has, finally, occurred through the *construction of new agencies*. Here, we refer to the process of *subjectification* (Hasselblad and

Kallinikos, 2000) and to the emergence of a novel assemblage of subjects-objects networks (individual and collective agencies). School autonomy implies a disciplining process of bodies and human agencies. In that respect, the novelties are the 'school manager', and the 'teacher with managing tasks' which have been widely analysed in literature of the field. A similar analysis can be done for the 'administrative manager' (the former administrative secretariat). As for the individual agencies, here the rhetoric of organization has led to the rethinking of the role of the headmaster and to the creation of intermediate management for the school. The headmaster has been defined in terms of 'school manager' through a process which regarded the reshaping of all the public management (DPR 59/98). Interestingly enough, the headmaster was firstly excluded from this reform because of the distinctiveness of school as organization. 'School managers' have been trained then by diverse national agencies which have collaborated with the Ministry with different conceptions of the school as organization and of the management training philosophies. Those activities have resulted in a number of dedicated publishing series and texts which have created a literature (Costa, 1999; Ferricchio & Bombelli, 1999, to cite but a few titles) that was at first scarcely developed, with some notable exceptions (Romei, 1986; Ghilardi & Spallarossa, 1986). In that respect, Serpieri (2009) has described how school managers emerge in the midst of a war of four discourses (bureaucratic, managerial, professional and neo-professional) which contrast but partly suggest the unfolding of a morphogenesis that is far from being completed. Those discourses accompany the development of school management practices and represent also different forms of practical knowledges which translate into objects, texts, and technologies of control. This contested terrain implies the persistence of a repertoire of knowledge embedded in the 'old' yet not completely abandoned modes of governance and the hybridization of management knowledges not always recognized and explicitly valued in practice. A parallel trajectory regards the creation of the intermediate management. Here, we have the shaping of the school teacher with managing or education tasks – elected within the school staff (first 'figure obiettivo' and then 'figure strumentali') – and the definition of 'school teacher collaborating with the school manager' chosen by school managers (collaboratori). In that case, we have teachers who have different tasks and who are expected to play roles as project managers, middle-managers, and

the like. While these tasks have been in part run by teachers well before 'school autonomy', the reform in school governance implies also their institutionalization in roles and organizational structures. The creation of those individual agencies occurs through texts and in-training courses as well as on the job with the aim of developing the inscription of the competencies of the school autonomy. 'School autonomy' in that respect has been circulated in terms of organizational differentiation within an organization field so far characterized by a low development in terms of organizational hierarchies (Fisher, Fisher, & Masuelli, 2002). The creation of novel assemblages concerns also the development of collective agencies like those which follow the decentralization of power and competences from the state to local authorities (Grimaldi, Landri, & Serpieri, 2006) – not to mention the rethinking of the Ministry (we described some transformation in this field in Landri & Serpieri, 2004). While in fact the main attention of the educational fields has been devoted to 'school autonomy', those attempts at introducing modes of ordering like those usually classified as 'social partnership' remained in the background (Green 2002). This trajectory would probably have implied the definition of a strategy of coordination with the decentralization of state (like in case of Spain, where in some way school autonomy has been accompanied by the decentralization of state towards local communities; Landri, 2008). This side of autonomy leads to the development of a fully devolved environment, where we have the setting up of a social partnership among schools, local authorities, state, companies, and all the relevant stakeholders in a joint governance of educational policy-making. This shift suggests a relevant change in power relations between the local government and stakeholders, and in particular between the schools and the local authorities. This task becomes in practice to set up *heterogeneous networks* (a new composite entity in the field of practice) *in between the organizations of the field of practice*, namely like monitoring systems, or in some cases, conferences with the relevant stakeholders. The research on that topic (Grimaldi, Landri, & Serpieri, 2006; Serpieri, 2009; Landri, 2009) documents how these attempts at introducing novel assemblages are still in progress since it overlaps with the general rethinking of the decentralization of the state and reveals the contemporary presence of parallel circuits of governance.

## **Conclusions**

The analysis of translation of the idea of 'school autonomy' depicts a complex process of *re-assembly of discourses, texts, technologies, and people*. It unfolds as a mimetic trajectory where a highly legitimated idea has produced compliance in education fields and starts the restructuring of the action-nets of the education system. Here, the idea of school autonomy draws mostly on the rhetoric of *organization, a highly legitimated discourse of reflexive modernization*. This rhetoric supports the logic of managerialism within a neo-liberal educational agenda (Ball, 1998) and participates in the wider discourse of the New Public Management (Gherardi & Jacobsson, 2000). That discourse tends to the construction of organizations which have a definite identity, a management staff, and a rationality (Brunsson & Olsen, 1993) without considering the specificities of the public sector and of the range of organizational possibilities (agencies and organizational arenas; Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). The shift towards school autonomy occurred during a time of temporary eclipse of the bureaucracy, that is to say in a period of problematization of the form of the state which led to a wide restructuring of power and competences among state, region, local authorities, and so on, and regarded the education field as well. In the following paragraph we will summarize the effects and discuss paradoxes and dilemmas of the circulation of school autonomy.

### *Pluralization of modes of governance*

The temporary eclipse has favoured the *pluralization of the modes of ordering of education field*. Here, the dominance of central bureaucracy was challenged and accompanied by an increasing exploration/hybridization of discourses and forms of controlling and governing the education field ('managerialism' and 'social partnership'). However, the re-assemblages have not provoked the complete demise of the educational bureaucracy and have not stabilized devolved environments along the line of the mode of social partnership. These tensions could limit the processes of restructuring with the apparent paradox of having at the same time aspects of centralism and autonomy in the same education

system (for similar considerations in a state with a different tradition see Woods, in the case of the UK, 2009). The pluralization of the forms of governance seems also to produce a certain degree of friction among parallel and partly overlapping circuits of regulation (see Grimaldi & Landri, 2005; and the case of lifelong learning policies, see Landri, 2009) so that education can become a site of conflicts, and not a place for a joint social partnership.

#### *Circulation of objects and knowledge*

The translation of school autonomy has implied, as we have seen, the introduction of new objects. In that respect, one can say how school autonomy results in a *crisis of organizational materiality* and is accompanied by the references and the circulation of diverse organizational knowledges. Here, autonomy draws on knowledge and technologies able to face network-like organizational landscapes. School autonomy meant also the passage to new objects of school management ('POF', 'Carta dei Servizi', 'Bilancio') and coincided with the restructuring of socio-technical networks and the spreading in that field of new technologies of information and communication. Here, we have had a tendency to the standardization of the school governance with the result of accelerating the *projectification of school*, that is, the diffusion of 'project' as a mode of organizing, and at the same time the extension of web-based technologies. Studies on materialities of schools through the biography of the school plans (the analysis of their construction, stabilizations, and uses in different schools (Landri, 2004; Benadusi, Giancola, & Viteritti, 2009) reveal how the rhetoric of organization and the discourse of managerialism end in simplifying organizational texture, and lead to leaving in the background those elusive and partly tacit organizational dimensions which do not have a secondary importance for educational processes.

#### *Differentiation of the professional field*

The circulation of school autonomy has meant an increasing *differentiation of schools' professional fields*. This can be read both as the acknowledgement of identities and competences already in place and as a trajectory of development and creation of new individual agency through the inscription of new competences. Those sides of school autonomy have been particularly relevant since they have implied the successful enrolment

of those who have the responsibility of supporting the increasing workload of the governance of the school autonomy. It has implied the creation of school managers and of teachers with managing responsibilities with the respective activation of action-nets of discourses, texts, and people. Differently from other countries (like the UK or Sweden, for instance), here, the strategy of translation has opted for exploiting knowledge and competences (March, 1991, cited in Gherardi & Lippi, 2000), that is to say the use of the local wisdom and of past learning with some add-on knowledges imported from social worlds external to school. This option – probably more in tune with the tradition and statist legacy of Italy – has delineated a difficult pathway of transformation which seems to increase the risks of not including the possibilities of exploration of acquiring new competences, objects, and people to reduce the perspectives of restructuring.

#### *Fragilities of School Autonomy*

School autonomy appears to be an *obligatory point of passage* of Italian educational policy-making. Discourses, technologies, and people are aligned in schools around an idea still popular after a decade and continuously supported regardless of the change of the political phases with its inclusion inside the Italian Constitution. Notwithstanding this anchoring to those durable elements of institutional practices, the complex re-assembly of discourses, texts, and people is still accompanied by fragilities. I have already mentioned those regarding the contemporary presence of diverse modes of governance and the circulation of objects and knowledge as well as the differentiation of the professional field. Questions should be added concerning the funding of school autonomy, which sees a decrease in state-funding, and the increasing participation of the local authorities in school funding (Landri, 2008). This decrease represents a real challenge for school autonomy in times of need to get the deficit state spending of the countries in the EU under control. However, I should refer briefly to two further issues which still remain to be addressed: the reform of curricula and the problem of equity. With respect to the former, the strategy of concentrating on school autonomy brought to the forefront the organizational dimension of school, and relegated to the background the reform of the curricula. Curricula have become the focus of different attempts of reforms ('Riforma dei Cicli') by government of the centre-left

and centre-right intended to align with a pedagogy by objectives where the notion of the competences and EU debates about the core competences for knowledge society are more or less the major references. Unfortunately, few changes have been carried out on these topics, so that school autonomy lacks objectives and perspectives. When it comes to the latter, it can be noted how the rhetoric of organization pushes almost naturally toward a condition of quasi-market competition among schools with emerging issues of streaming of the 'difficult students' and orientation in catching the best students, that is, with a resulting increase in the level of inequity of the educational systems. Those fragilities seem to diminish the restructuring effect of school autonomy and end in being reflected in low school performances which register improvements, yet still highlight the permanence of a distinctiveness with regards to the Lisbon strategy.

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