



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

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## Article first published online

July 2021

## HOW TO CITE

Fasciani M. (2021). The Digital School Governance Through ICT, Italian Journal of Sociology of Education, 13(2), 311-316.

DOI: [10.14658/pupj-ijse-2021-2-14](https://doi.org/10.14658/pupj-ijse-2021-2-14)

# The Digital School Governance Through ICT

*Manuel Fasciani*

*[Review of the book: Digital Governance of Education. Technology, Standards and Europeanization of Education, edited by Paolo Landri, Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, London, 2019. ISBN: 978135006447]*

The book provides a relevant opportunity to reflect about the current debate on the increasingly digital governance of education in European countries and in Italy, driven by the overall principles of “transparency”, “standardization” and “accountability”. Since the treaty of Lisbon (2000), the introduction of information and communication technologies (ICT) in education has been a priority of the European institutions and also of the Italian political agenda. The OECD and the European Commission continue to claim that digitalization has become a driving force in economic productivity. In light of this shift, they encourage member states to foster the development of new digitalized learning environments and ICT infrastructure to ensure national education systems are up to date.

The shift towards ICT is characterized by phases of important infrastructure investments, alternated and, in some cases, integrated with other attentions dedicated to training teachers and improve students’ digital skills. This issue is challenging also several European countries, where in the last decades the market orientation has introduced competition between schools and, by consequence, standards of efficiency and methods to measure schools’ performance. In the last decade, within the “La BuonaScuola” law (Law n°107 in 2015) and the National Digital School Plan<sup>1</sup>, various actions have been dedi-

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<sup>1</sup> The whole of politics, laws and actions enacted, from 1985 up to now, by governments to foster the introduction of technologies in Italian schools.

cated also in Italy to the educational use of technologies in the classroom and in schools' governance.

The book aims at providing a descriptive and interpretative reflection on the spread and the use of ICT in schools' governance, in Europe and in Italy, to make them in agreement with common standards. The overall aim of the study was to verify whether, the technology's and digitalization's promise of changing the space and time of education, should be kept, considering that digital technologies and infrastructures are seen "essential ingredients" in contemporary forms of schooling aimed at improving educational performances and making scholastic structures more accountable and sustained.

The overall purpose of the study, exposed in chapter 1, is to highlight questions that concern, therefore: the socio-materiality of the digital governance of education, the interplay between the current wave of standardization and the digitalization of education and the morphology of the school, the dilemmas of transparency. The process towards transparency, means to make education systems more visible and transform schools into, with Landri's words, "houses of glass", open to being inspected and described. The book displays, more than once, that transparency is a never-ending condition, and that digital mediation is inevitably a limited, partial and politically driven representation of a specific way of seeing education practice.

Landri highlights also that to apply the concept of standardization to the scholastic environment could be problematic: it involves focusing on educational performance indicators (inputs, processes, outcomes) and on the centralization of the curriculum. There is, therefore, a weak agreement about a common definition of "standard": the fluidity of standards and their many enactments in diverse contexts, reveals a space of productive tensions and allow to engage critically with standardization, without being limited to a sterile and harmful denouncement of their risks and dangers (de-professionalization of teaching, reduction in the opportunity to learn for marginalized and unprivileged students, etc...).

The concept of socio-materiality is the theoretical ground and the point of departure of the research: objects and, more precisely technologies and so on, are not inert instruments but they shape the conditions of possibility of an action, and have a "power" in shaping human conduct. This concept helps in describing the concrete conditions of the digital governance of education. The digital instrumentations, therefore, are not merely technical: they are socially produced and have an active role in building (and partly reconstituting) the ecology of education policy and practice. Landri adopts the infra-language of actor-network theory (ANT) to follow the assemblages of people, technologies and policies of the digital governance of education. The story of actor-network theory is not stable, and it is possible even to find in it various periodizations: it is initially associated with prominent progenitors, like Law,

Callon and Latour, who have contributed to shaping its direction, up to Edwards and Fenwick. It is important to remember that ANT is not interested in what a text or an object means. Rather, it focuses on what it does in connection with other entities (humans and nonhumans), forming assemblages that sometimes are considered “actors”. Following ANT’s suggestions, researchers can understand that standards can be enacted in different ways; they can be embodied practice in classroom, quasi-statements in a local consultation website or a list of statements in a panel of experts. The sensibility of ANT suggests, therefore, that we have to pay attention both to the conditions of production of the education standards and to standardization in practice. In particular, by Landri’s perspective, we are witnessing the becoming “topological” of schools, that is, their transformation in a field of increasing interconnectedness. Digital technologies open larger spaces and enact a multiplicity of new relationships among humans and nonhumans. In these terms they tend to change the enclosures of the form of school into “topological” spaces.

Tracing the socio-materiality of digital governance of education, chapter 2 identifies three policy assemblages to analyze closer: the ETM 2016, regarding the European space of education, the web platform Scuola in Chiaro and the National Plan of Digital School in Italy. The chapter is an articulated illustration of the following case-studies aiming at exposing the methodological approach of each of them. According to the author, it is not possible to describe the policy assemblages with the same set of methodological tools. So the first policy assemblage, concerning the transnational space of the EU, was analyzed by drawing on a policy historiography and a semiotics analysis on the ETM 2016. The second assemblage, regarding the construction and use of a complex data infrastructure in Italy, the web platform Scuola in Chiaro, that is the Italian gateway to a complex school data infrastructure, was disentangled by policy historiography, semiotics analysis and four, very explanatory, multi-sited ethnographies in Naples. The third policy assemblage analyzed regards the policy for digital schooling in the EU and Italy, which has been investigated by policy historiography and a school ethnography (“Arcum School”). Overall, this composite methodological approach, with – as admitted by the author – its unavoidable limitations, draw a complex, articulated and, in some passages intricate, research plan.

Chapter 3 goes into the first real effective issue and illustrates how digital technologies are mobilized to sustain the constitution and the regulation of the European space of education and pays attention to the contemporary strategy of monitoring the progress of EU member states. It describes the processes of fabrication of the European space of education, from Treaty of Rome in 1957 to the definition of the Education & Training 2020 strategy. Then, a semiotics analysis shows how this space is made visible on the internet through the interactive maps of the ETM. Its logic is to describe the

situation at EU level and to furnish data and information at the country level. As a whole, this part of the book, seems in some passages a little redundant, in showing how the European space is enacted as a space of commensuration, where each national education system is measured against common agreed and measurable benchmarks.

The conclusion of this first socio-materiality is quite predictable. The process of standardization it is not yet oriented rigidly. It can be rather characterized as a “flexible standardization”: while it is assumed that some standards will be adopted universally, others may be applied differently. The achievement of the European benchmarks is therefore combined with the declaration of national objectives to fulfil.

Chapter 4, maybe the heart of the book for the aspects touched upon, focusses on an intra-national fabrication of a school data infrastructure for self-evaluation, by looking at the emergence and the consolidation of a school data platform, *Scuola in Chiaro (SiC)* in Italy. In reshaping the education system, Landri highlights how this socio-materiality is following the principles of the school autonomy and decentralization, and how the fabrication of systems of evaluation is oriented towards educational outputs. The author here pinpoints how the shift from opacity to transparency is not straightforward: it requires, massive datafication and digitalization of school life, and in particular, the mobilization of complex assemblages of people, technology and policies. School data infrastructures are, therefore, not “neutral”, and are far from being “mere” transparent representations of schools. They embody choices about what to display and what to hide, and have a constitutive role in establishing the “right” method of schooling and in underlining conceptions on what is a “good” school performance or not, and what is a good school or a failing school.

Landri, in order to demonstrate empirically these assumptions, pays attention to the actual configuration of *SiC*; he draws attention to the history of the platform, and in particular, to how the present configuration emerged. He tries to reconstruct, through an articulated and in some passages a bit dispersive analysis founded on public documents, interviews, semiotics analysis, the game of transparency and opacity among school administrators, head teachers and the private technical partners of the ministry.

As result of the research the chapter concludes that the knowledge base of *SiC* could be of help in making informed school choices by parents and students; it moreover promotes a policy of school self-evaluation, by involving schools in a process of assessment of pedagogical choices. As a limit of this attempt of making governance transparent, Landri brings to the surface that the autonomy of each school, in deciding how many and which data insert in the platform, could come into conflict with the comparability of schools in a national overview.

Chapter 5 focuses on the enactment of the school data infrastructures and the use of digital data, discussing the diffusion of national standardized testing, large-scale survey assessments and the promotion of policies of self-evaluation in the school governance. In particular, the author illustrates how the school data infrastructure has been enacted and mobilized by the central office of evaluation of the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research and by some schools in Italy. The current problematization of school performances and activities and the dynamics of school improvement, are analyzed and further explored analyzing the case of the Dashboard, a digital formation aimed at the meta-evaluation of school self-evaluation reports. The history of Dashboard and the description of some of its features is maybe the most heavy and plethoric part of the book, but it is useful to understand how the “deluge” of data in education may stimulate the unfolding of algorithms and reinforce the processes of standardization. Critically, Landri concludes that, in some cases, “more than opening for reflection, here the digital governance is oriented to favour the design of policy instrumentations for discipline and control”.

A very interesting part of the chapter regards instead the findings of a research in the field conducted through four ethnographies in Naples. These multisited ethnographies in four primary schools (‘Equitas’, ‘Migrantes’, ‘Astra’ and ‘Spartacus’) highlight various strategies in the enactment of school data-based governance. In particular, researchers identified four ideal types: alignment or compliance, muddling-through, fabrication and opting out. In my opinion these case studies are the most incisive part of the book because they suggest deeply how teachers, students and parents understand and employ the digital devices in reshaping their own daily activity.

Chapter 6 tries to analyze the transformations linked to ICT by zooming on three areas of investigation: the intersection between the Europeanization of education and digitalization, the educational policymaking in Italy regarding digital schooling, and the socio-materialities of a digital school. Chapter 6 illustrates, and describes the networks of expertise that are involved at the national and EU level in the reshaping of school topologies. In particular the EU is elaborating an overall strategy, the DSM, that measures the level of digital skills across the European member states, while the policy for the implementation of the digital school enacted in Italy and observed by the author is “Piano Nazionale Scuola Digitale”.

The chapter succeeds in discussing possible next directions for research and the methodological challenges of researching the digital governance of education. It summarizes the main findings and gives answers to the research questions presented at the beginning. The chapter argues that the role of critique is to contribute to thinking and to study standardization and the digital governance of education differently and to consider them open to many

possible alternative politics. Here Landri acutely recommends again that it could be helpful to consider that digitalization, like any technological mediation, is not a neutral representation: the shift towards digital spaces implies a movement towards new regimes of visibility that translate many aspects of education practice often considered “tacit” or left as “implicit”, in “explicit” and clear. Consequently, pedagogically speaking, there is a tendency to focus on what is measurable, for example on the learning outcomes, and to make education practice more traceable and mobile.

In the final chapter the collected empirical materials are summarized in the writing of cartographies, critical tools intended to map both the shifting power relations in the governance of education and the possibilities and the risks of the related policies and practices.

As a whole, thanks to the wide range of aspects and the several methodological approaches adopted to investigate the role of ICT in the digital governance of education, this book provides a variety of outlooks about this subject and succeeds in giving a more problematic view of the phenomenon. The author gives a significant and up-to-date contribution to the debate on standards of efficiency and methods to measure schools’ performance and, at the same time, gives attention to examples of organizational policies that conceive standardization as the current priority of education systems.

In my opinion, a weakness that affects this volume could regard the lacking attention given to pedagogical principles implied in these policies and to the concrete practices of teaching and learning, to the daily behavior enacted in the everyday classrooms life. The digital governance of education, in fact, necessarily involves concrete practical activities in teachers and students, and can represent a motivational factor in learning. As mentioned briefly by the author, personal and immeasurable skills of teachers and students hardly find a place in these new practices of standardization and should be more considered. Furthermore the book sometimes tends to become repetitive, indulging on the same concepts in different chapters. Repetitions of course can be helpful in spread some issues, but they risk to reduce the reader’s interest, slowing down and making dispersive the whole discourse.

Despite these weaknesses, this book deserves to be read not only by experts in the field, but also from people interested in understanding more deeply how the Italian and European school system works and will potentially evolve. Indeed, it provides a relevant opportunity to reflect about the future of the concept of education and would be particularly valuable for policy-makers who have accepted, in some cases uncritically, the “accountability-standardization-transparency” paradigm, that currently looks so successful and suitable for the current political agenda, both in Europe and in Italy.