The Multi-Speed and Non-Linear Process of Decentralization of Education: a Look at Italy

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Abstract. Increasing attention has been paid to the vertical and horizontal dimensions of education in recent years. The vertical dimension refers to the decentralization of powers towards intermediate public and non-public organizations. The horizontal dimension refers to school managers' and teachers' power to create school networks and peer relations among schools. National and supranational governing bodies, based on the increasing legitimacy of polycentrism in assessment measures, are adapting their approach to a decentralized decision-making process, creating a link between local and core systems. Focusing on a specific study of decentralization in Italy, a review of the main laws and directions regulating the evaluation system will be introduced to describe the main actions implemented at a decentralized level to support schools in the process of self-assessment and improvement. Specific attention is paid to the definition of the objects and main activities of funded projects, enabling us to identify the main areas of attention in schools in reference to the outcomes, processes and main activities developed in the field. The documentary analysis of both web portals and funded projects shows the complexity of the improvement process due to the articulated ways in which schools proposed it.

Keywords: decentralization, school autonomy, school networks, school regional offices

Introduction. Polycentrism in the educational system[1]

Education systems across the world have undergone many reforms and changes in the modalities of governance over time. These developments vary across countries, but common threads, according to Au and Ferrare (2015), are a shift from central government towards more decentralized governance so that the responsibility for governing is increasingly taken up by public-private partnerships, appointed managers and other bodies comprising state and corporate leaders instead of by elected state bodies. The government still has a role in governance (Joseph, 2010; Wilkoszewski & Sundby, 2016; Eddy-Spicer, 2017) but primarily through producing the legislative and regulatory framework that defines 'a broader configuration of state and key elements in civil society' (Theisens, Hooge & Waslanders, 2016, p. 5) and is composed of 'the governance of multi-level complex education systems' (Hooge, 2016; Michel, 2016). In a polycentric system, networks of schools and their stakeholders play a prominent role in defining, regulating and shaping school quality. Decisional intermediate centres and school networks assume an important role in polycentric systems in defining, regulating and modelling school quality due to their flexible structures that reflect the complexity and discontinuity of modern social development (Black, 2008; Giddens, 2001). Network systems, in particular, need decentralism since they are not organized in a pyramidal structure and need to keep all the internal relations and interactions active in order to reach a common objective or gain an advantage (Reezigt & Creemers, 2005). The dialogue among the actors involved both at intermediate and central levels represents one of the most important elements identified through school effectiveness and school improvement approaches that can help to create a positive effect on school improvement (Hargreaves, 2010; Schildkamp et al., 2012; Scheerens, 2015). The territory is a key element in school effectiveness and school improvement theories, and the territorial context is considered fundamental in promoting educational success. It is therefore necessary for school dialogues with the various subjects present in the territory to share the social value of educational action and create a supportive and participatory community to address school problems (Scheerens, 2015; Burns & Köster, 2016).

New policies and significant changes in the Italian educational system have been processed within a framework of weakly implemented decentralization. Conflicting discourses (bureaucratic, professional, managerial and democratic-critical) are shaping the "transformation" of schools' actors,

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[1] This paper is the outcome of a joint research project. In the final writing, paragraph 1 is by Donatella Poliandri; the Introduction, paragraphs 3 and 4 and subparagraph 5.2 are by Consuela Torelli; and the Conclusion, paragraph 2 and subparagraphs 5.1 and 5.3 are by Brunella Fiore.

allowing new forms of inequality to emerge (Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2009; Fornari & Giancola, 2011). The growth of networked governance needs to be seen as a space in which cooperation and coordination must be constantly negotiated and managed through a mix of particular policy technologies and constant work by policy actors to maintain connections and coherence in re-spatialized governing relations (Ozga & Grek, 2012; Ball, 2017b). Overall, the processes of school autonomy and decentralization are strictly linked to the various forms of school evaluation; thus, policy implementation is a non-linear, conflictual and contradictory process in which different points of view and interests struggle and conflict (Pandolfini & Palumbo, 2016; Benadusi & Giancola, 2016).

The following chapters describe the process that lead to school autonomy, focusing on Italy and the subsequent decentralization in that country from decisional centres to intermediate organizations and schools to promote self-evaluation, school evaluation and improvement. An analysis of all documents referring to school improvement plans financed by the Ministry of Education will be presented, and finally, the authors will reflect upon the decentralization process in the conclusion.

The study

This study represents the procedures for regulating the school evaluation system and identifies the main initiatives that have been realized at a decentralized level to support and help schools in the process of self-evaluation and improvement.

To understand the features of the decentralization process, we developed a study aimed at understanding the decentralization process in Italy, with special attention to the evaluation and improvement actions adopted by schools. We focused on the actions carried out by school regional offices and school networks. In particular, we examined on mid-level decisional centres, which stand between the most centralized education systems and school institutions.

Documentary analysis is the main methodology applied to the study, and both qualitative and quantitative analysis were applied. In particular, we opted for a content analysis approach focused on the text. Indeed, content analysis attempts "*to characterize the meanings of a given body of speech in a systematic and quantitative way*" (Kaplan, 1943 p. 230). The analysis techniques used refer to a study of "quantitative semantics" based on the assumption that "the frequency of a certain word or key-symbol is an indicator of the interest of the text or texts analyzed" (Tipaldo, 2014; Pandolfini, 2017).

The analysis is based on two data sources: the first source is a systematic collection of information available on the official websites of the school re-

gional offices. The second source is a collection of documents of the Ministry of Education and Research (MIUR) on the accountability process that started after the issuance of MD 435/2015. The MD guarantees public funding to schools and school networks to implement improvements. More specifically, regional school offices, school networks and school institutions, in pursuing their activities, produced the institutional documents that were analysed. The institutional documents are identified in all the documents that offer feedback on the object of interest, in this case, the actions supporting school evaluation and improvement that were promoted at a polycentric level (Hinds, Vogel & Clarke-Steffen, 1997; Losito, 2007; Arosio, 2010). The document analysis underlines to what extent the Italian regions and their regional school offices support the National Evaluation System (NES) and school improvement. At the same time, it provides a framework for the development of school autonomy in Italy. The documents provided the opportunity to collect information that was not influenced by researcher intrusion since they had aims that differed from those of the research itself (Webb et al., 1996).

The document analysis was developed through three main stages and in different ways to analyse both the qualitative and quantitative elements of the documents and, in some cases, how they were drawn up.

First stage: Document analysis of official regional school office websites

The first phase of the research was a systematic review of the materials present on regional school office official websites. The review consisted of an analysis, synthesis and examination of the work underlying all the documents that were found on the websites that were related to the main activities promoted at a regional and local level. The qualitative analysis list presents the most important themes of the documents. The review distinguished between the initiatives that were carried out at a ministerial level (ministerial guidelines, training conferences, documents on MD 435/15 and MD 663/16) and the other initiatives from the regions, regional school offices and school networks so that we could study the typology of each proposal and who managed the entire action. As part of the qualitative analysis, the work has developed a structural analysis of the documents found on the websites to understand in which modality these initiatives were developed (Tuzzi, 2003). In particular, the document analysis was focused on regional school offices and how they interpreted the ministerial guidelines, whereas through the analysis of the regional and local initiatives, we aimed to analyse the types of proposals, the final user characteristics and the professionals who carried out the actions (university or ministry professionals, regional internal or external experts, teachers, etc.). Paragraph 5.1 is about the results

of the analysis and presents the links of the most significant experiences carried out by the regional school offices, which differ from the ministerial offices. The analysis provides information about the regional staff and facilitators and the presence of school networks. Another important element is the layout of the official websites and the spaces they reserve for promoting school evaluation and improvement (spaces, banners, portals). This element could provide feedback on the extent to which each single regional school office is involved in this issue (Tab. 1).

Second stage: Analysis of the main school networks supporting the actions of school evaluation and improvement

The analysis of the official websites was of particular interest in relation to school networks and their contributions to and support of the NES. The study of school networks is oriented to the most consolidated school institutions that were able to elaborate a reflection and intervention plan on support for school evaluation and improvement. The school networks were qualitatively analysed based on the organizational characteristics: the name of the network and the related acronym, the number of school institutions involved, the beginning and expiration dates, the theoretical model of reference and the link to the official school website (Tab. 2).

Third stage: Analysis of the account of the improvement plans financed by the MD 435/15

The second part of the analysis is the review of the improvement plan documents that were produced and returned by 534 school institutions after being financed by MD 435/15. The analysis extracted the documents produced by the schools to define

- the object of the plan and
- the main activities that were carried out or were nearing conclusion.

The analysis was carried out through a quantitative study: the documents were composed into categories to reduce their complexity and variety. Through the coding, we aimed to identify key words or conceptual categories from specific parts of the document text.

The quantitative analysis was developed using a large number of documents offered by the 534 schools that were financed. The analysis was carried out with the support of the statistics tool IBM SPSS v.24.

The authors are aware of the risk of using predefined categories that, by their intrinsic characteristics, offer a vision that refers to a specific interpretation of the power system in a given space and time. Categorization necessarily excludes some aspects and hides other dimensions that would trigger a different interpretative model (Grimaldi, 2019; Ball & Junemann, 2012; Ball,

2017a; 2017b). Consequently, the use of categories is open to non-linear interpretation and complex discourse that extends beyond them.

In this contribution, the categories are identified according to the definitions included in the Rapporto di Autovalutazione (RAV), which is the School Self-Evaluation Report, and to the theoretical-conceptual reference framework of the RAV, VALSIS. However, it is important to emphasize that the coding for the analysis is focused mainly on the interest areas of the schools; therefore, the categorization results are not always in line with the model of reference. Moreover, the categories identified are not exhaustive and exclusive since the aim of the work is to comprehend how the schools have interpreted their plans. VALSIS was chosen for the categories because it was the same framework provided for MD 435/15 that required the "congruence of the project and its actions with the results of the self-evaluation process and in particular in relation to the priorities and objectives identified in the Self-Evaluation Report" for the school projects.

The categories were identified based on the results and the process actions. Therefore, the categories are as follows:
- RESULTS: educational success, standardized tests, European key competencies and citizenship competences, long-term results, Italian language and math, foreign language, language, history, technology competencies, school dropout, and cognitive competencies (Tab. 4).
- PROCESSES: curricula, didactic innovation, new technologies, laboratory didactics, competency didactics, validation of competencies, shared evaluation criteria, inclusion, self-evaluation and improvement, school personnel upgrade, territory relation, and human resources (Tab. 5).
- ACTIONS: training, self-training, consulting and collaboration with external experts, seminars, work groups, laboratories, web platform, classroom trials, action research, evaluation and monitoring instruments, cultural exchanges and school visits, front office and counselling offices, diffusion of the produced materials, and parent committee (Tab. 6).

The statistical analysis shows the frequency with which each category occurs. In addition, it indicates the number of categories that were identified in relation to each result, process and action and the total number of categories that were indicated in the three areas. The nature of the financing, the average, the mode and the median of the school projects related to DM 435/15 and MD 663/16 are described in paragraph 2.

School autonomy process: a look at Italy

Since 2000, educational institutions in Italy have had organized autonomy under art. 21 of Law 59/1997, according to which they can plan and realize interventions in education, training and instruction, adapting them

to different contexts in line with the objectives of the National Education System. Autonomy in the Italian school system means that each school can create its own annual educational offerings to be presented to pupils' families in the enrolment phase. Schools are allowed to adopt flexible schedules and activate individual educational plans (for example, to integrate disabled pupils or non-Italian speakers), to create training programmes in response to the special needs of the territory and to choose methods and instruments in line with the training/teaching opportunities and offerings. Autonomy refers to freedom in teaching and the indicators and objectives established at a national level by the MIUR. Far from a simple process, the translation of the idea of 'school autonomy' has been a complex process of the re-assemblage of discourses, texts, technologies, and people in a weakly implemented decentralization effort (Landri, 2009; Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2009).

In recent years, the national school evaluation of primary and secondary schools has reflected an integrated approach that combines accountability for evaluation and estimates of performance with a learning approach for school institutions. The aforementioned constitutional reform has triggered a change in the management of power and promoted a model that is oriented towards decentralization and involves a plurality of actors. The objective of the reform is to develop a participation and responsibility process at different decisional levels while defining and elaborating politics. Autonomy enables the decentralization of decision making; on the one hand, it is possible to have a bureaucratic system that is more interested in the local context, and on the other hand, there is the risk that the identified power centres could disappear. The decisions assumed to be at the root of the entire system that are made at levels closer to the schools, such as local and regional authorities, could be more appropriate to the needs of each individual school, as those authorities know the schools well. However, some decisions that are assumed to be at a central level have the important task of offering a unitary vision. The more the system is decentralized, the more likely it is that these common frameworks are weak; in fact, the autonomy process of schools requires strong energy, organizational capability and responsibility of the involved actors (Bottani, 2002; 2014).

A decentralized system needs to be accompanied by a strong evaluation/self-evaluation system to be efficient and effective. In the decentralization process, MD 11 of September 2014 made self-evaluation compulsory for each school after the 2014/15 school year and required that the improvement objectives should be defined during the self-evaluation process At the root is the idea that a school is able to reflect on itself and to implement its own improvement actions. Nevertheless, there are different studies demonstrating that the self-evaluation process is not necessarily a direct effect of these processes (Neave, 2012; Klerks, 2013) if they are not properly supported. Minis-

terial circular 47 of October 21, 2014, supporting the self-evaluation initiatives, announced the beginning of a training and information campaign on the "instruments and operational ways of the self-evaluation process (with particular attention to the Self-Evaluation Report), the characteristics and the functions of the improvement plans, the content and the objectives of the evaluation procedure". The regions have realized these actions through a series of ministerial conferences intended to promote the diffusion of school self-evaluation and improvement culture. At the end of 2014 and throughout 2015, the conferences that were organized at a central level and supported by the regional school offices were focused on the launch of the evaluation system and its legal references based on the analysis of the RAV and possible improvement actions. MC 47/2014 assigns the regional school offices the task of establishing regional staffs to support the NES with the aim of providing information and training in the specific territories. The regional staff represent different competencies related to the evaluation theme: the regional school offices, school managers, managers and other actors with specific competencies (experimental projects, school networks, etc.). They are involved in the regional coordination process, which is the means of sharing strategies, instruments, resources and operational methodologies. To create a link between the national Territory Support Center (TSC) and other national projects, a member of the TSC was elected to each regional staff. The regional staff could be organized in small units of intervention, usually provincial units (provincial teams) composed of a manager, two to four school managers and the representative of the regional school office who specializes in territorial initiatives and school counselling on demand to guarantee the flow of information. The provincial support teams promote coordinated actions and operational strategies. They identify the focus of intervention, and create synergy competencies, resources and networks.

MIUR financing for the improvement plans

In 2015, the Ministry of Education made available 3 million euros, of which 2,6 million euros were designated "for school projects on improvement plans" ("A" type projects) and 400,000 euros were designated for training for school managers and evaluation teams ("B" type projects). The division of the resources for each region was based on the number of schools present in each territory. Directorial Decree 937 of September 15, 2015, established the division of the financing for each region, and the regional school offices were in charge of defining the requirements and characteristics of the projects that would be funded. The objectives established in par. 3 DD 937/15 invited schools "to plan innovative projects to define and implement the improvement actions, eventually with the help and support of Indire and/

or through collaboration with universities, research centres, and professional and cultural associations to identify, plan and realize operational models and strategies for improvement plans that are developed on the basis of the self-evaluation process". These actions are intended to promote the evaluation culture, since it is considered part of the virtuous educational evaluation process towards improvement, through actions targeting both the school managers and professionals who constitute the internal evaluation teams. The same decree, in par. 4, defined the requirements for funding as follows:

- Coherence of the project with the results of the self-evaluation process, in particular with the priorities and objectives that are identified in the Self-Evaluation Report;
- Presence of innovative actions that are inspired by the methodology of research;
- Presence of indicators of the monitoring and evaluation of the actions; and
- Formal commitment to documenting the results and making available the research materials and the methodologies that are realized, which are the property of the administration.

Specific attention in the selection of the projects was paid to the co-financing forms with local territorial bodies, cultural and professional institutions and associations. The reason was to encourage the development of networks to realize projects, the presence in the network of private schools and the availability of materials produced in relation to the use of new technologies.

In 2016, the MIUR made 4 million euros available to fund school improvement planning projects. The new DD of 2016 underlined "the promotion of the processes of self-evaluation and improvement as shared actions". To determine the distribution of the funds, "integration with the training plan and the presence of training unities with the aim of promoting and sharing the planning" was introduced. Par. 27 of MD 435/15 provided funds for 555 schools, 534 type A and 21 type B. MD 663/16 funded 640 schools, 615 type A and 25 type B. According to the review of the accounting documents, 72% of the projects funded by MD 435/15 were for schools in networks, compared to 77% of the projects funded by MD 663/16 (Tab. 2.1.2 and Tab. 2.1.4). The median financing for the project was approximately 4.867,15 euros for MD 435/15 and 6.440,88 euros in relation to MD 663/16. These values were higher for regions that had a greater number of financed projects for schools in networks: both ministerial decrees, in fact, placed a limit on the financing of 2.500 euros for individual schools and 10.000 euros for school networks. Therefore, many schools (except for some documented cases) received 10,000 euros.

School networks

School networks are formed to respond to problems and difficulties arising from different situations and can even involve informal actors. The networks are considered intermediate associations with two main functions: to build the sense of belonging that characterizes the "culture" of each individual school and to support the professional and personal needs of each individual teacher and each individual school institution. The analysis of the role of school networks in improving the quality of educational services is based on their influence on the learning context, as they can facilitate learning or make it more difficult. This influence affects not only the students but also the teachers, who operate in a school that is considered a community of practice and who not only teach but also learn and develop the skills to plan efficient strategies to meet the students' needs. The main theories that support this belief are a) constructivism, under which learning is contextualized and everything in the community of practice has a shared significance and aim, and b) the cooperative paradigm, which underlines the importance of cooperative actions within educational organizations (Ribolzi, 2004; 2017). Therefore, a school network could effectively plan the in-service training of its teachers, organize more expensive initiatives and, most importantly, provide a wider environment for educational projects that were useful in the past in other areas (King, 2010). Another strength of school networks is their capability of being efficient mediators with local bodies: this allows them to support school actions with better instruments, in particular in specific situations such as those regarding inclusion or integration (Putman, 2000).

In 1999, "Guidelines Laying Down Rules on the Autonomy of School Institutions" made it possible for schools to organize networks to reach common objectives. Law 107 of 2015 reiterated the importance of networks and the rules, objectives, contents and administrative tasks of network agreements. In particular, the goals of a network are a) the enhancement of professional resources; b) the common management of administrative activities and functions; and c) the realization of projects or didactics and sport or cultural initiatives related to the territory.

Therefore, school networks, based on the guidelines, are intended to enhance the autonomy of school institutions through cooperation and the use of common resources to reach the specific school institution objectives described in the Piano triennale dell'offerta formativa (PTOF), the Three-Year Educational Plan. The networks should be capable of perceiving educational, planning and administrative needs. Therefore, a network is constituted with the aim of offering the necessary support to school institutions to strengthen and improve their research and development abilities and to find the resources that are useful for the schools. Law 107/2015, through the area and

objective agreement, offered schools the possibility of acting by sharing one or more actions in the PTOF to enhance their own experiences. The network represents a cooperative instrument among autonomous school institutions that, by signing a specific agreement, implement a common programme, mutually collaborate by exchanging information and realize several actions with their shared resources. School networks represent an example of co-operative practice that actively involves the schools that belong to them by contributing to the growth and responsibility of the schools and by promoting efficient projects on school innovation and education. Law 107/15 encouraged this aspect by supporting dialogue among all actors in a territory, from families to local bodies and companies.

The document overview

The response of regional school offices to ministerial initiatives: the analysis of the official websites

Before the beginning of the NES, many regions had already started initiatives to support school self-evaluation and school improvement. In particular, Lombardy, Veneto, Piedmont, Campania and Apulia started a series of evaluation processes that anticipated the actions of the NES (Pedrizzi, 2016). Some school networks, for example, developed the contest-input-processes-products (CIPP) model in reference to international projects (Centre of Education Research and Innovation). This model has been accepted and reworked in the present national evaluation model structure (Poliandri et al., 2010). Starting in the 1990s, the CIPP model was used to identify the process indicators as variables to connect them to learning results (Scheerens, 2015); many school networks have, over time, adopted this perspective (De Anna, 2011). The Certification Quality ISO 9001 and the following Vision 2000 were introduced first in Lombardy in Mantua Province and subsequently as the "Polo Quality" project of Milan, a project by Assolombarda and Superintendence. An accountability model was also first applied in Lombardy, between 2007 and 2008, when a group of school managers, after a period of training, started an experience of accountability model in their schools. This training and experimentation initiative was later incorporated by Friuli Venezia Giulia and Emilia Romagna (Paletta et al., 2011; GBS, 2016). In the end, again in Lombardy, the common assessment framework (CAF) model, which is linked to the theoretical framework of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM), was developed. This model spread to other regions, such as Tuscany, and the Quality School Award of Veneto was promoted by the regional department and in the regions financed by PON 2007-2013 (Sic-

ily, Campania, Apulia and Calabria) under the name of the CAF Education Model (Pedrizzi, 2016).

Currently, almost all official regional school office websites show the presence of school networks that have contributed or are still contributing to the development of the school evaluation and improvement culture.

Based on the information published on the official websites of the regional school offices, the regions, through these offices, have interpreted the initiative proposed at a central level in different ways: in general, it is possible to identify two main types of answer to the Ministry of Education initiatives. The first type is represented by various actions implemented in different contexts. Regions of this type had already implemented various school evaluation initiatives and were able to re-launch, propose and interpret the ministerial framework according to the characteristics and needs of the territory. This was the case for Veneto, Lombardy, Piedmont, Liguria, Emilia Romagna, Marche, Toscana, Abruzzi, Lazio, Campania and Apulia: these regions published and to a great extent reworked the initiatives proposed by the Ministry of Education. The other regions (Friuli Venezia-Giulia, Molise, Umbria, Basilicata, Calabria, Sicily, and Sardinia) proposed their initiatives based on the models established by the ministry itself: the regional school offices displayed on their portals the dates of the training conferences and all the formal requirements in reference to the announcement for funding by MD 435/15 and MD 663/16 (Tab. 1). All the official websites displayed responses to the issues associated with the main ministerial actions, and almost all the portals contained materials related to ministerial training conferences and documents regarding funding under MD 435/15 and MD 663/16. This information appeared on the portals of the regional school offices of Piedmont, Lombardy, Emilia Romagna, Tuscany, Lazio, Umbria, Apulia and Basilicata. The regional school offices that have adopted the ministerial directions have a website banner for these initiatives that is continuously updated to reflect sub-regional initiatives (school networks initiatives, initiatives for representatives of school institutions, and interventions by local experts) and trans-regional initiatives (network initiatives, trans-regional school or ministerial initiatives and interventions by external experts). It is the case, for example, of Veneto: the regional school office official website recalls the themes of the NES and is linked to a further portal that is entirely dedicated to and articulates additional specific areas. In contrast, the portals of Sardinia and Molise, for example, have a separate banner on which the ministerial interventions and initiatives of national NES experts are displayed. In other cases, the regional school office publishes responses to ministerial initiatives in the "News" section, as in the case of Calabria.

Veneto has many elements in common with Lombardy, which has carried out its school evaluation interventions mainly through the aid of its

regional school office internal representatives (managers, school managers and a few teachers) who had participated in experiences that preceded the introduction of the NES. Veneto analysed and examined the previous rules from the central level and underlined the most important points; an example is monitoring the self-evaluations of over 656 teachers.

Other regions, in particular Piedmont, Emilia Romagna and Apulia, paved the way for a detailed analysis and incentives that were promoted by regional, national and international experts and experts from outside the school area. The request for intervention came from the school networks, which were actively involved in promoting meetings through the regional school offices. In this case, the external interventions were integrated and reworked to create specific objectives for school evaluation and improvement. In Piedmont, synergy with INDIRE has led to the implementation of improvement actions on didactic innovation, which is the main area of expertise of the Florentine Institute. Piedmont has formulated in a structured way the support of the territory evaluation teams and has made a specific section available on the portal on the NES. Some regions (e.g., Liguria and Tuscany) have structured an annotated plan on the management of evaluation and improvement actions according to the characteristics of the territory.

Network activities

Many school networks have developed a process of reflection on evaluation and the analysis instruments of self-evaluation. Some provinces and regions have created very organized internal/self-evaluation models that, through the definition of common criteria and the use of the same instruments, enable them to compare the results of the schools that are part of the network. The aforementioned theoretical frameworks are business-like certifications (ISO 9000, EFQM, CAF), regional accreditation for professional training, or theoretical models from the international education literature (school-based review, peer review, CIPP models). To develop a theoretical reference framework for schools and school evaluation systems, the National Institute for Education System Evaluation (INVALSI) used the contributions of these territorial experiences of school internal evaluations or self-evaluations as well as external evaluations such as Monipof (CIPREF 2001). After the introduction of Law 107/2015, many active networks and other brand-new networks (Valutazione in progress, PRO.VA.MI, Lisaca) focused on the model at a national level with a series of educational and information diffusion initiatives. AVIMES and FARO networks, after the issuance of Law 107, switched their attention to the initiatives of the NES. Moreover, it is interesting to point out the initiative of the Rete delle Reti network, which represents a joint agreement of the SIRQ, AU.MI.RE, FARO and AICQ Nazionale networks; the agreement is intended to enhance actions that sup-

port the development of school evaluation and improvement according to the NES model.

These school network experiences have contributed not only to spreading the use of networks but also to creating models and new instruments for school quality evaluation and improvement and to defining common indicators for an objective comparison, which is an important element of self-evaluation since it prevents from becoming a self-referential process. Over the years, some of these networks have developed interaction and exchange forms with the regional school offices, which offer support for spreading their actions, as, for example, in Piedmont, Lombardy and Campania. The development of these networks represents the dynamism of school autonomy in efforts to determine group forms for solving innovative tasks that could not be solved in isolation. Tab. 2 represents the main characteristics of the networks that support school evaluation and improvement actions in collaboration with the regional school offices, hereafter described according to their date of origin.

The projects of schools to support school evaluation and improvement under DM 435/2015

The aforementioned analysis of the projects funded by MD 435/15 involved 534 national territorial projects, which was proportional to the number of schools present in the reference region. The drafting of the financed projects must match a series of legal criteria. In particular, under these criteria, the planning action needs to be coherent in terms of the self-evaluation process and in particular the priorities and objectives identified by the RAV.

The analysis that was carried out to categorize the results indicated that 40% of the schools had reported one (30,1%) or two project results (9%) under the project object. Forty percent of the schools defined the results through the interpretative categories of the RAV. In coherence with the categories of the RAV, 8,6% of the schools reported the educational success of students as the main objective of the project, 20,8% showed a preference for standardized tests, 27,1% reported key and citizenship competencies and 5,9% reported categories related to distance outcomes. Competencies were the main area of attention, since more than 61% of the schools mentioned these types of categories. It is important to emphasize that the concept of "competence" does not necessarily refer to an outcome since it is not articulated in relation to a goal to be achieved. However, the analysis indicates that work on competencies is considered by many schools to be the aim of the project. The analysis underlines specific interests in math (20%) and Italian (8,2%). Interest in competencies related to other disciplines is present but marginal. The processes that were identified based on the objects of the accounting files reveal a greater concern with outcomes. In general, 78% of the projects

identified at least one process area; specifically, 39,4% of schools identified one only process, 22,8% identified two, and 16,1% identified at least 3 (Tab. 4). As mentioned in previous studies (Fiore et al., 2017), the schools focused mainly on didactics and on process areas that, in reference to SER categories, fall under the realm of "curricula, planning and evaluation" (Cambi, 2002). The schools usually focused on areas in which they had been accustomed to reflect and intervene with greater success. The areas related to "curricula, planning and evaluation" were represented by the following categories: "curricula, competencies didactics, competencies certification and shared evaluation criteria". These areas represented 36.8% of the categories present in the processes (Tab. 5). The category "curricula" included in particular the "planning of vertical curricula". The category "competencies didactics" referred to areas such as planning, scheduling and transversal competencies. The definition of "shared evaluation criteria" included all initiatives (standardized tests, tests in common) that teachers and school managers had adopted to produce and use shared models in school institutions and, more frequently, in school networks. In the process area of RAV named "learning environment", it is possible to include the categories "didactics innovation", "new technologies" and "laboratory didactics": these categories were chosen by 27,1% of schools. Didactic innovation to create learning environments for active learning and teaching processes was most often articulated and varied in its definition. In these categories, it was possible to identify the following models: peer education, cooperative learning, active learning, learning by doing, flipped classroom, spaced learning, digital didactics, multimedia innovative didactics, active learning, situated learning episodes, problem solving, all actions carried out in meta-cognition with the involvement of the participants as a community of practice, project work, centred learner methodologies, and blended learning processes. The definition of "new technologies" included digital innovation instruments, such as tablets and online platforms.

The areas that provided distinguished and personalized paths for students, such as inclusion, enhancement and remedial work, included 11,3% of the aforementioned categories; in particular, areas related to training teachers to work with students with special needs, take remedial actions, and prevent school dropout and bullying fall under the category "inclusion" (7,2%). Of the preferences, 10,4% were focused on self-evaluation, evaluation and improvement actions. This category includes the evaluation culture; planning competencies that are useful for identifying, managing and analysing all the actions intended to produce efficient improvement and RAV plans; support actions; common evaluation models among schools; communication among schools; planning models and formats of improvement plans; the production of evaluation materials (evidence-based education); training

projects for school managers and internal evaluation teams; and information initiatives on the rules and the implementation procedures of the NES. The relationship with the territory (families and other stakeholders) accounting actions, including social accounting, was preferred by 7,2%. In addition, 2,7% of the choices were related to the development of human resources.

The categories in reference to "actions" were related to the synthesis of all the information that described, at an operative level, the necessary ways to build processes and achieve outcomes. The schools had to complete a required form for ministry accounting to explain the actions that were carried out and those nearing completion. Therefore, it was possible for a large part of the analysis project to identify at least an action area of the project for almost 68% of schools. In particular, 30,8% of schools indicated one action area, 21,9% indicated two, 10,7% indicated three, and 4,5% indicated four or more (Tab. 6). The training of teachers was absolutely the most preferred choice for achieving the processes of interest: 223 schools of 534 (34,9%) chose this modality (Tab. 3). Self-training or peer training was a seldom-selected practice (0,8%), as it often requires the aid of external experts, such as university or ministry experts or managers or teachers with specific expertise. In addition to training courses, schools organized training seminars that could occur at the beginning of the project activities, during the implementation or at the end of the project. The use of work groups was usually limited, 11,6% in the case of networks, to coordinators or a restricted number of teachers or school managers for larger networks. Action research was another common choice of the schools (7%) with projects involving group work practice among students in open classrooms. Laboratory activities for both students and teachers were also frequently chosen (11,8%). The schools indicated many training trials, group work projects, seminars, and online and in-person laboratories through the use of web platforms (1,4%). Many indicated trials in classrooms with students (peer tutoring, one-to-one teaching, meta-didactics, trialogic method, e-learning, coding). Some initiatives had a particular reference to distance outcomes by creating student portfolios through placement offices or information-training paths. Only 66 schools of 534 clearly identified actions for evaluating and monitoring activities, and only 52 schools of 534 specified how they disseminated the documents that were produced during the project. Among the actions related to evaluation and monitoring were the definition and production of columns, expert tests, common tests, authentic evaluation tests, questionnaires, evaluation grids, guidelines, observatories, datasets, and GIS databases. The documents focused mainly on the issue were spread through websites, seminars, conferences and, among the most original initiatives, TV talk shows, theatrical representations, photography exhibitions and a web diary. The analysis carried out on the data underlined that many of the schools developed their

own improvement actions in synergy with school networks, confirming the aforementioned theories; that is, actions that are developed in networks can enable schools to better meet their responsibilities and thus to grow, develop, and improve in facing different problems by establishing strong relations and determining the best offerings for students. Projects for schools in networks represented approximately 72% of those funded by MD 435/15 and 77% of those funded by MD 663/16. Therefore, school institutions can identify leading schools and make agreements among the schools themselves or associations, external experts, universities, and local and private bodies by establishing interdependent relations that are useful for sharing and enhancing knowledge, information and improvement actions and building communities of practice with wide-ranging and rich social capital (Coleman, 1988).

Conclusions

This work has analysed a series of elements that show how improvement is articulated in a framework of actions and initiatives operating at different levels of the school organization, from those more centralized to those related to an individual school institution. The collected documents and the analysis underline that the evaluation and improvement process is not irreversible and certain (Mousung, Seashore & Anderson, 2012; Schildkamp, 2012; Altrichter & Kemethofer, 2015). Furthermore, the findings indicate that the decentralization process, even in the same legislative context, can have a different impact in different territorial contexts (Viteritti, 2009; Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2009). The funding offered by MD 435/15 and MD 663/16 represents growth opportunities for schools, and these opportunities are useful for the actions of school networks. School networks, in fact, can build valid instruments of reflection for school institutions, which can improve by sharing instruments, methodologies, evaluation outcomes, etc. The actions of networks were strongly supported initially by Presidential Decree 275/99 and then by Law 107/2015. Networks have represented a very important point of reference for all institutions in search of orientation, even at a centralized level, and of the definition of evaluation and improvement models and instruments (Mulgan, 2009). The actions of networks have contributed to the spread of the culture of evaluation and have determined the growth of social capital by supporting schools in self-evaluation and improvement processes. Local networks are efficient in solving common problems without strong centralized control (Ostrom, 1999). The analysis, at the same time, underlines the importance of structuring the process through common and shared theoretical frameworks: detailed studies on the improvement plans under MD 435/15 demonstrate that the plurality of initiatives from different schools could run the risk of excessive dispersion in planning. A positive

example of a structured model that is capable of guiding schools in planning their own project is the RAV. Forty percent of schools have developed their own project models based on the concept categories in RAV, which clearly identify the differences between the outcomes and processes. The majority of the actions are concerned mainly with didactics and innovative methodologies, since schools wish to improve their operations in these areas. Wider homogeneity appears in the articulation of concepts and operative definitions in areas in which schools are usually not accustomed to work, such as distance outcomes or accounting and the overall coherence of the proposed project. The plurality of virtuous experiences that emerged from the analysis of the improvement plans demonstrates that this process is complex and articulated and that it must be followed, monitored and managed at different levels. In addition, the economic, cultural, social and human resources that are useful for the implementation of the processes must be applied (Viteritti, 2009; Janssen & Ehren, 2015; Ehren et al., 2017).

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