Governing by Standards: The Fabrication of Austerity in the Italian Education System

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Abstract
This article reflects on the fabrication of austerity in the Italian education system during the recent financial crisis and the resulting economic stagnation in the economic outlook. In particular, it describes the construction and emerging configuration of a mode of educational governance where standards, data analysis and performances play a growing and relevant role. By drawing on recent literature on a sociology of educational policy and practice (Lawn & Grek 2012; Landri 2012), the article depicts the dynamics of two policy technologies of austerity: standardisation and evaluation. The limits of the spending containment and of the standardisation underway are finally discussed in the article’s conclusion.

Keywords: economic crisis, standardisation, performativity, governance, Italy

Introduction
The financial crisis coupled with the stagnation in the eurozone’s economic outlook, difficulties in implementing lifelong learning policies, and the clear-cut orientation of educational policies within a neo-liberal agenda are producing several short- and long-run effects with regard to the everyday practices of educational organisations. The crisis has affected the ‘possibility conditions’ of educational practices and, more profoundly, had an impact on the space of definition and on the constitutive rules of what we define as ‘education’. In some respects, there is a simplification and a reduction of education to learning through the domination of the discourse of learning (Biesta 2006). On the other hand, a complex restructuring is taking place in education systems all over the world – suffice it to point here to the massive change in the circulation of knowledge and information – and has brought about unexpected transformations of educational policies and practices. In this article, we will reflect on the emerging configuration of educational governance in the case of the Italian school system by following a sociology of educational policy and practice (Lawn & Grek 2012; Landri 2012). I will empirically investigate how sociologies of educational governance are changing by asking to what extent has the economic crisis affected the socio-material assemblages of schooling, i.e. the heterogeneous and (un)stable
associations among humans, pedagogies, technologies, objects etc. making up the system of instruction in practice. The term sociologies is not intended here to refer to the academic discipline, but to denote collectives that include complex configurations of educational policies and practices related to academic, professional and policy worlds. This article argues that in the last decade a policy of austerity through governance by standards, data and performances has been reshaping the ecology of educational practice in Italy (Kemmis et al. 2012). In doing so, the article follows a sociology of standards to investigate the construction and effects of standardisation and assessment, the two policy technologies of austerity in Italy. Finally, the article concludes with some reflections on standard setting and the limits of the ongoing standardisation process.

The Socio-materiality of Standards

Standardisation concerns all elements of educational policies and practices. Standards and standardisation regard: a) educational inputs (structures, staff etc.); b) educational processes through which it is possible to select stable features to be replicable and that define their identity; and c) educational outcomes when it is possible to define learning objectives and develop means to comprehend the extent to which those objectives have been fulfilled. To some degree, standards define the positive conditions of performance and are usually accompanied by a positive attitude oriented to the ongoing improvement of working practices. However, standardisation also refers to the reduction of complexity and conveys dehumanisation and dark visions where the production of uniformity devalues the ‘goodness’ of practice by introducing external control and domination (Ritzer, 2000; who outlines the ‘McDonaldisation’ thesis). To problematise the naïve and neutral vision of the ‘standard’ and at the same time to give a richer account of standards and standardisation, it is necessary to develop a complex approach to the dynamics and effects of standard making (Timmermans & Epstein, 2010) by also taking on socio-material approaches that may provide a closer description of the way standards and standardisation work in educational practice and policy (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010). Standards create uniformities in space and time through the development of agreed-upon rules that allow the coordination and control of activities at a distance (Bowker & Star 1999). Standards usually enact a network of associations, organisations and states which support and implement them. As suggested in a very important study on standard and standardisation (Brunnson & Jacobson, 2000), they are both voluntary since standards require a more or less spontaneous agreement, and exist as an alternative form of regulation to professional and state control. In Europe and all over the world, notable levels of investment in standards and regimes of accountability have characterised the last two decades (Koyama, 2011; Lingard, 2010). In fact, standards and standardisation have helped form the European education space in the context of the nation-state and through the principle of
subsidiarity (Lawn, 2011). Standardisation processes concern benchmarks and performance indicators that are shaping (with respect to the Lisbon Strategy, and the recent documents of the Horizon 2020 strategy) the modes of governance of education systems. Standardisation is occurring and related systems have spread transnationally, like the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) that is moulding the European Space of Higher Education, along with frameworks such as the EQF (European Qualifications Framework) that concern the visualisation, transparency and portability of professional qualifications through models and dispositifs improving the mobility of education. The use of data and performance indicators, in particular, favours the development of a regime of performativity; a regime of governance where the measurement, comparison and judgement of performances is a mechanism to promote competitiveness and also solicit the ongoing improvement of educational and organisational school outcomes (Ball, 1998). Performativity represents a main principle of the neo-liberal agenda (in addition to the logic of free-choice, managerialism, and the quasi-market) aimed at modifying the function of education systems to connect with and, according to some scholars, subordinate education to the economic objectives of the knowledge society. This article will describe how these dynamics are developing in Italy, with attention to: a) how standardisation is taking place and which circuits of expertise are being mobilised; b) how standardisation is interweaving with the financial and economic crisis; that is, if standardisation has been triggered by the crisis or whether it developed before it; and c) the effects and limits of the forms standardisation has taken. The article is interested in the materialisation of standards and particularly in how they are conveyed through documents, texts and regulations and, moreover, how standards are fit inside circuits of expertise which attribute value to them (Fenwick & Edwards 2010; Fenwick & Landri, 2012). Further, the article will concentrate on those organisations and associations that support standard-setting activities, how standards are objects of contestation, and the bases upon which actors give voice to and keep open controversies about the adoption of certain standards. The empirical base of this research draws from: a) a collection of Italian documents and regulations; b) statistical data from a European Union (EU) investigation (EU, 2013) and OECD reports (OECD, 2013); c) documents retrieved from main websites dedicated to educational policies; and d) a secondary analysis of Serpieri’s research on educational leadership in Italy to reconstruct the policies of assessment and circuits of expertise enacted in the last decade within the Italian school system. In the following section, I will begin by analysing correspondence between Prime Minister Berlusconi and the European Union to outline a critical policy historiography (Gale, 2001) aimed at comprehending when the knowledge for standardisation was formulated to better understand the effects and limits of the standardisation. It is an ongoing research agenda that allows an insight into certain aspects of how standards, data and performance have helped to establish governance.
Correspondence with the EU

The economic and financial crisis that started in 2007 is considered the most serious crisis of contemporary capitalism and the most profound crisis since the Great Depression of 1929. Yet the perception and interpretation of the crisis may be quite different in various countries. Societies, and in particular, practitioners, politicians and scientific communities, may arrive at diverse understandings at different times and, accordingly, react differently to the crisis once the group in question comes to a common understanding of the state of crisis (Lanzalaco, 2012). In Italy, the dramatisation of the broader crisis and the event that accelerated the collective awareness of the crisis can be traced to a letter dated 5 August 2011 signed by President Trichet and Mario Draghi (the future president of Eurotower) the ECB (European Central Bank) sent to the then President of the Italian government, Silvio Berlusconi, in the midst of the financial markets turmoil. It was at that moment that, public opinion, the set of political communities and the scientific worlds realised that the sovereign debt was under attack and that the value of the ‘spread’ between German and Italian bonds appeared to severely exacerbate public Italian debt in the long run. After that, the Berlusconi government resigned despite efforts to continue and the task of governing was assumed by Monti in the form of a ‘technical’ government. It was a dramatic situation in which a call to strengthen the reputation of the sovereign signature was made via a renewed commitment to reforms in order to make public debt sustainable. The letter suggested a set of specific measures the Italian government should adopt to restore confidence in global financial markets. Some measures concern the public administration and, in particular, a reform to improve its efficiency. The targeted reform suggested the adoption and diffusion of performance indicators in health, justice and schooling. In this context, performance indicators are social technologies to reassure financial markets on one hand and, on the other, to reinforce the ‘sovereign signature’ weakened by various concerns about the sustainability of public debt. The letter compelled a reply, dated 26 October 2011, sent by Berlusconi to the President Van Rompuy of the EU Council and to the President of the European Commission. The letter agrees with the interpretation of the financial and economic crises (as a cognitive understanding it had up until then been denied or undermined by most politicians and by political parties supporting the government) and confirms a set of commitments and policies that would help the public cope with the crisis. Regarding schooling, the letter maintains that:

Schools’ accountability will be enhanced (drawing on INVALSI² testing), by defining for the 2012-2013 school year a programme of restructuring for the schools below acceptable outcomes; it will valorise the role of the teachers (by elevating the educational commitment and the level of salaries in a five-year period); it will introduce a new system of selection and recruitment (Letter from Berlusconi to EBC, 26 November 2011, my translation).
The letter reassures its readers and, in particular, financial markets, that in the next school year: a) schools would be more ‘accountable’ (the Italian text uses exactly the English term “accountability”) through the INVALSI testing (standardised assessment tests at the national level) and that policies will be devised to restructure those schools with low performances; and b) teachers would work longer hours although they will compete for merit-based awards (in the letter, the verb is “to valorise” which actually implies a more neutral attitude) and thus start a new system of selection and recruitment to improve the school system’s overall efficiency. Accordingly, performance indicators become, in that discourse, an obligatory point of passage or a lever to transform an ineffective system into an effective system. Moreover, it establishes a strong link between school accountability, the quality of teachers (measured with reference to the INVALSI test scores) and the sovereign signature of the country. The measurability and objectivity of the INVALSI testing came to be mobilised (among the other reforms the government committed itself to implement in its reply to the ECB) to increase the reliability of the school system. As the economic crisis has become more acute, it has materialised in the two letters and been translated into a policy advocating the standardisation of educational practice and may be read, to some extent, as a way to deepen the neo-liberal agenda in Italian schools (Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2012). Standardisation, here, is a signal of the increasing control over educational practice and its respective costs, and tends to be more visible, responsible and accountable in schools’ black-boxes. To some extent, experts see educational governance moving towards what has been defined as a new transition of the Evaluative State where standards of assessment are destined to play a relevant role in the Europeanisation of Higher Education and, more generally, we may add in the construction of the European space of education (Neave 2009; Benadusi & Consoli 2004). Further, there has been a reduction of education to learning; that is, reducing formal education in favour of a type of learning that can be measured by standardised tests. Learning is becoming the dominant discourse and, as such, education is disappearing from the political agenda (Biesta, 2006). This displacement of the devices of control is developing into a dynamic of dismantling the professional envelopes of school, and of what – to use a different language – has been defined as the welfarist model of the school.3

(New) Educational Standards for Containing Spending

The dramatisation of the events triggered by the letters reveals an overall transformation of the organisational field of education, one described through the data presented in the EU’s publication *Funding Education* (EU, 2013). In particular, Italy, among major European countries in the last decade, appears to be the country that has seen the biggest reduction of economic and human resources directed to the school system. This policy of austerity has encompassed the overall public sector and has not spared the education system, partly due to the extent of public debt and the
low economic growth. In fact, while the tendency to invest in public education has increased by 10 percent in 27 EU countries, Italy kept a stable level of funding from 2000 to 2007 and, between 2008 and 2010, considerably reduced this financial commitment. Such a public financing trend also developed in Sweden, Denmark and Finland (countries of the Scandinavian welfare regime). However, those countries display levels of spending that are traditionally higher than in lower ranking countries like Italy and the countries of the Southern model of welfare (Landri, 2008).

The reduction of public funds stems from Law 133 (2008) that envisages: a) a 1 percent increase in the student/teacher ratio over three years; b) a 17 percent reduction of administrative, technical and auxiliary staff; and c) a complete restructuring of schooling through new criteria for class formation, a redefinition of the curriculum at different levels, a change in the educational organisation of primary school, the resizing of schools, and a redefinition of centres for adult education. Law 133 presents educational reform as a means to carry out the ‘objectives of rationalisation’ intended to save no less than EUR 456 million in 2009, EUR 1.650 billion in 2010, EUR 2.538 billion in 2011, and EUR 3.188 billion in 2012. Further, the same act establishes a fund for the professional development of teachers, including merit awards, that was to be increased by 30 percent through the savings made on spending.\(^4\) The reduction was realised through standardisation of the developed educational practice by reprising some policies suggested in the *Quaderno Bianco sulla Scuola 2007*, a strategic document of the previous Prodi government. *Quaderno Bianco* was elaborated by a group of experts and executive managers from the Ministry of the Economy and Finance and the Ministry of the Public Instruction, led by Minister Fioroni, at a time when the country was not under attack by the financial markets and the crisis was not playing a role. In fact, this document is one of the most important of that decade because it contains the knowledge base of the standardisation process and the strategic vision for how the evaluation would be assessed through standards, data and performances. It is the result of a circuit of expertise where knowledge of quantification, classification and measurement and, more generally, of the development of assessment models is mobilised (statistics, economics, quantitative sociology, evaluative pedagogy etc.). This is visible in the composition of the work group put together to support the realisation of *Quaderno Bianco 2007* and, above all, in the type of academic disciplines enrolled in the construction of the national system of evaluation – especially in the network of expertise concerning the assessment of head teachers (Serpieri, 2013). The implementation plan that follows Law 133 significantly affects the ecologies of educational practice and, in particular, starts: a) a revision of the school curriculum; b) a restructuring of the distribution of schools in the territory; and c) a rationalisation of professional and human resources.

Regarding the revision of the school curriculum, the syllabuses of the different levels of instruction have been ‘essentialised’ and the respective timetables reduced.
Accordingly, some educational and organisational innovations are losing their organisational infrastructure and thus cannot be reproduced over time. In the case of primary school, the teaching team with the standard model of three teachers in two classes (‘i moduli organizzativi’ – Landri, 2000) that was considered an important teaching and learning innovation in the past has clearly been devalued; in primary schools, a recent preference has been to employ a single teacher for 24 hours a week and then developing, in cases of demand, by allotting one teacher for 27 to 30 hours a week.

In relation to the policy of school resizing, after ten years of school autonomy both an updating and a rationalisation are envisaged (Law 59/2000). The rationalisation of school sizes is aimed to reduce redundancies, and address the inefficient distribution of schools in the territories, as well as to cope with the socio-demographic dynamics. The aim is to bring the sizing of schools back within the standards of school autonomy, envisaging student numbers of between 500 and 900. This policy draws on the need to have a school organisation of a ‘medium size’, relatively speaking, in order to set up an efficient learning environment and, on the contrary, to determine how small-sized schools with less than 50 to 100 students might not reach national standards regarding cultural development. The immediate effect of the policy has been a reduction in the number of schools through closure or merger with other schools (there were 10,760 units then and now there are 1000 units less) to reach the threshold set by regions, while the local educational authorities have been given the task of making decisions about the distribution and plurality of educational provision.5 The plan also suggests the pedagogical model of the comprehensive school for primary and lower secondary schools. This model “responds better at the didactical level, and allows a better organization of the resources, by guaranteeing more incisive continuity, a vertical curriculum, and a better scholastic and professional guidance” (Cerini, 2011). 6

Finally, the plan concerns some policies for teaching and non-teaching staff. These policies have reduced both types while increasing the student/teacher ratio by 0.10 percent in the following school years (2010–11 and 2011–12). Still, the plan reduces financial support to team teaching and, in particular it: a) includes teaching English as a duty of permanent teachers in primary school (rather than hiring specialists); b) states that all teachers can lecture for 18 hours a week; c) assigns the number of teachers in adult courses with reference to students who attend rather than to students who only register for a course. The resizing of schools has entailed a restriction on the number of non-teaching staff to be distributed throughout and paid for by diverse school sites. Law 133 and its plan for implementation took the place of a set of regulations and translated into the political choice of reducing syllabi, schedules, school sizes, and teaching and non-teaching staff.

The passage to the Monti government in 2011 did not change the policy of austerity, the trajectory of rationalisation, or the stabilisation of new governance – whose detrimental aspects include performance indicators and the discourse of
standardisation in educational practice. In the background, it is also possible to trace some assemblages of politicians, experts and practitioners that depict, sometimes with attention and sometimes in a peripheral way, new sociologies of education.7

**Standardised National Tests and the Creation of the National System of Evaluation**

Beginning in 2008, the standardisation of educational practice has significantly impacted the introduction of standardised national tests and, in a particular way, the establishment of the national system of evaluation. It is a significant step in a longer story that started at the end of 1990 when the reform that initially granted school autonomy led to the setting up of the National Institute for the Evaluation of the Educational System of Instruction and Training (INVALSI in Italian) that replaced the CEDE (European Centre for Education), the institute that had represented Italy during its participation in the large-scale assessment surveys. In 2001, three pilot surveys on learning outcomes in schools were completed but only among a limited sample and on a voluntary basis (with the acronyms PP1, PP2, and PP3, respectively, in 2001, 2002 and 2003). In 2004, INVALSI assumed the task of managing the systematic and recurrent evaluation of the learning outcomes of the system of instruction and professional training (Decree 284/2004). That year and for the first time, INVALSI carried out a compulsory survey of all primary schools by following the procedures of the previous pilot studies. However, that survey was strongly criticised and it revealed the need to define a more robust research protocol in order to generate more empirically reliable findings. At the same time, INVALSI was put under temporary receivership and there was a re-orientation towards the mobilisation of knowledge and expertise in quantification, classification and standardisation. At the same time, there was a decline of the presence of pedagogical knowledge. In 2007 and in tandem with the elaboration of Quaderno Bianco, Law 296 (2006) also prescribed that head teachers were to be evaluated. Quaderno Bianco 2007 configured the type of evaluation that INVALSI was asked to realise: INVALSI standardised learning outcomes to be measured through standardised national tests so that schools may have a point of reference to best orient their educational work, counter the dynamics of social reproduction as well as the risk of an increase in social inequalities that are inevitably related to schools working without a national anchorage. To support this strategy, the document mobilises empirical findings and knowledge where the efficiency and equity of education systems depends on a balance between school autonomy and standardised national tests (Wößmann’s research that analyses TIMMS data of 77 countries is cited here) (Wößmann, 2003).8 The mobilisation of knowledge and the development of external control over teachers’ work also receive normative legitimisation from the democratic principle of defining the “essential levels of performance” of the schools (Art. 117 of the Italian Constitution). It is argued that the lack of a national evaluation system risks obfuscating the “essential levels of
performance’, or making them equal to a list of educational provisions or to the topics of the national curriculum (pp. 80–81). Further, there is the need to anchor in a robust way the certification of competencies since school marks are not useful for guiding the choice of families in the search for a school or of companies looking for workers in the labour market. Quaderno Bianco suggested in this case the development of a national system of evaluation and, accordingly, the consolidation of the role of INVALSI as a key actor in future governance of the system of instruction. Since 2008, national standardised tests (normally known as ‘prove INVALSI’) concern language and mathematics for the second and fifth grades of primary school and are progressively extended to lower secondary school (first and third grades) as well as secondary school (second grade that coincides with the end of compulsory school). These tests are obligatory and involve all schools. When tests are submitted, controversies arise revealing the limits and risks among schools, teachers and intellectuals through articles, debates, contestations, sometimes reprised by the main media, supporting a very intense debate on blogs and dedicated Internet space, and sometimes leading to strikes and a campaign of teachers and parents on the days the standardised tests are submitted.

In terms of how the tests operate, the standardisation of the process is at the moment highly elevated. The attempts to challenge the legitimacy of the tests and contrast them through protests and boycotts were unable to stop the stabilisation and the fine-tuning of the survey that mobilised a circuit of teachers, schools, head teachers, researchers, practitioners and INVALSI staff about the planning, pre-testing and delivery of the exams, and the diffusion of the data from the annual evaluations. National standardised tests have been becoming a core element of the national system of evaluation and INVALSI is consolidating, by stabilising in the form of a public research organisation according to Law 213 (2009), and emerging as a key actor in the rising system. In fact, INVALSI is responsible for: a) the annual and methodological design, delivery and elaboration of tests on the learning outcomes of the system of instruction and training; b) studies on the factors behind leaving school early; c) research on the schools’ added value; d) the preparation of a third exam for the third year of lower secondary school; e) the Italian participation in the international large-scale assessment surveys; and f) the assessment of head teachers. INVALSI also has the task of training teachers and head teachers with regard to the evaluation protocol and offers consultancy to local autonomies, regions and schools on initiatives concerning the evaluation of instruction and training at the local level.

Recently, at the end of the office of Minister Profumo (Monti Government), a new regulation was approved to define the national evaluation system by clarifying roles, actors and responsibilities (Decision of the Council of the Ministries, 8 March 2013). The regulation confirms the key role of INVALSI which is to coordinate the national evaluation system and provides a knowledge base for it (protocols,
guidelines, performance indicators and the selection, recruitment and training of experts for all units of evaluation). In particular, the national evaluation system is composed of three pillars: a) INVALSI; b) INDIRE (National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research), a national institute that helps schools define a plan for improvement where needed; and c) the group of school inspectors that will guide the external evaluation units. The activities of evaluation envisage: a) school self-evaluation by following the information provided by the Ministry of Education and INVALSI; b) the external evaluation concerning low performing schools according to INVALSI’s indicators; c) a plan for improvement with the help of INDIRE, universities, public research institutions and professional associations; and d) the social accountability of schools. Finally, school evaluations are linked with the head teacher’s evaluation under Article 3 of the Regulation so that the efficiency and efficacy of schools are related to the responsibility and capacity of the head teacher to contribute to fulfilling the learning outcomes or objectives of improvement.

INVALSI is then becoming, not only in the policy texts but also in the context of practice, a more and more relevant actor-network in the governance of Italian schools. The work of standardising the national tests is starting to affect educational practices by orienting the dynamics of teaching and learning, the teachers’ and head teachers’ training (more than 1,300 teachers and head teachers have been involved in creating the national evaluation system), and a dedicated educational literature (texts on learning how to prepare for INVALSI tests). It is important to note, however, that the national system of evaluation is at the starting point. The pillars of the system – INVALSI, INDIRE and the group of inspectors – are considerably weak in organisational terms. Suffice it to say that INVALSI may count on a very limited staff of just 40 (Serpieri, 2013: p. 148) and on a group of researchers under contract always at risk of losing their jobs. Moreover, controversies concerning the knowledge base have not been completely settled. The INVALSI tests repeat year after year; however, their know-how is still under attack as the recurrent protests and debate still demonstrate. The drive towards standardisation and perhaps the poor attention to the outpouring of contestation are not assisting in producing the confidence needed to anchor the dynamics of evaluation. The suspicion and the ‘terror of performativity’ seems to be widespread and, accordingly, either ritual compliance or a strategy of a workaround may undermine the opportunity to improve educational practice that may be offered by a national survey of learning outcomes. The situation is even more complex when it comes to evaluating the head teachers (Serpieri, 2013) since there is an open controversy between two methodologies – that is, the reputational method and added value – and the related experiments called “VALORIZZA” and “VALeS”. Here, the production of knowledge is developing in an unresolved way in complex public and private partnerships among INVALSI, the Ministry of Education, and the bank foundations.
Conclusions
The description of the main policies in the last decade reveals that the Italian education system has been interested in a policy of austerity that started before the recent economic and financial crisis and has resulted in spending containment in the field of instruction. The austerity policy has been accompanied by, and partly realised through, the construction of a new regime of performativity. The “eclipse of educational bureaucracy” in Italy ten years after the implementation of school autonomy (Benadusi & Landri, 2002) is bringing about an ever stronger alignment with the rhetoric of new public management and, in particular, the design and implementation of a form of governance through standards, data and performance. In other words, there is a dynamic of institutional isomorphism in the dominant discourses and practices related to the globalisation of education and of the construction of the European space of education. In that respect, this dynamic is repeating some of the commonalities and differences in the transformations of many European countries (Ozga, 2009; Grek & Ozga, 2010; Normand, 2009), of the European space of education (Lawn & Grek 2012; Novoa & Lawn 2002) and of many non-European countries (Koyama, 2011; Lingard, 2010). However, the correspondence within Europe illustrates the increasing pressure of European institutions to carry out reforms in the public administration of those countries and, in a particular way, to accelerate the introduction of performance indicators and standardisation processes in fields of practice – like education where there is a perceived and documented need to increase control over public spending and institutional performances. In that respect, the Europeanisation of education is occurring through the regulation of standards, data and comparisons as well as through the dramatic events associated with the crisis.

The Attention to Standards
Standards are the new technology of control. They do not substitute government by rule but provide a lever to control the uncertainties related to educational performance and a gauge by which to contain public spending on instruction. Standards are voluntary regulatory arrangements that may produce institutional isomorphism where, like in Europe and Italy, there is a plurality of agencies that have a variable self-regulative capacity which is difficult or almost impossible to coordinate in an authoritative way. In this case, they are accompanied by circuits of knowledge and expertise drawing on representationalist conceptions of the scientific knowledge enterprise that have tended to minimise the political side of the standardisation processes and to consider the conflicts emerging with regard to the standards as merely ‘technical’ issues to be fixed.11 This attention to standards in the last decade should reassure the financial markets that, at least in the field of instruction, Italy has been able ‘to do its homework’ and has managed to fulfil the
pre-defined efficiency aims (see OECD 2013). The new standards have concerned
the ratio of students to teachers, class sizes, and the distribution of schools. The
effort for standardising has since 2008 witnessed the increased importance of
national tests for the emerging national evaluation system where INVALSI is
destined to remain a key player. The effort to standardise also overlaps other
practices like school registration and the circulation of information among schools,
families and the many stakeholders in public education. Here, new standards and
standardisation efforts are policies which respond to the legitimation of the crisis
and the decline of schools as an institutional programme (Dubet, 2002). However,
the policy of “investment in forms” (Boltanski & Thevenot, 1999), while supporting
a spending containment, seems to not harm learning outcomes. In the case of Italy,
the PISA results instead highlight an increase in mathematics and science (OECD,
2013). In that respect, more research is needed; however, it may depend on: a) a
possible ‘Hawthorne effect’ or an increase in performance despite the progressive
reduction of the resources; b) a less rich combination of ‘productive factors’, to use
economic language, that is needed to accomplish pre-defined learning outcomes;
or c) the learning effect in solving standardised tests determined by students’
and teachers’ intensive attention to solving the exam. In any case, the attention
to standards, data and performance indicators has been increased without lead-
ing to strong forms of competition and a quasi-market like in the cases of the
United Kingdom or Australia (Lingard, 2010). The attention to standards does not
coincide with the dramatisation of the events of the financial crisis represented here
by official correspondence; rather it has emerged gradually by following a bipartisan
political trajectory. A turning point in this recent history was the elaboration of
Quaderno Bianco del 2007; here, a circuit of expertise is emerging among the
Bank of Italy, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Instruction and Training, and
some academics working in the fields of sociology, psychometric evaluation and
economics. The document contains the knowledge base for the governance of
standards, data and performance, and defines some policies for the consolidation of
INVALSI and the establishment of the national system of evaluation. The knowledge
mobilised is inscribed in the theory of human capital, the school improvement
movement, evidence-based policy-making, and through large-scale international
survey assessments like PISA. The interweaving of these cognitive frameworks
agrees and reaffirms that the ‘disease’ of the Italian education system is efficiency,
or poor learning outcomes with respect to the invested economic resources. This
issue may be confronted by bringing under control the process of spending (in some
cases, by reducing it, or in other cases, redistributing it) through standardising
educational practice with respect to the learning outcomes. This interpretation was
developed before the dramatisation of the crisis, yet it is the dominant discourse of
educational policy-making in Italy.
**A Downward Standardisation?**

The attention to standards is not neutral. It introduces a principle of *regulatory objectivity* into educational policy-making (Cambrosio et al. 2009) where the production of knowledge and the information of the producers of standardised tests is intended to have effects on the governance of educational practices. As a consequence, debates about education are being replaced by discussions of numbers, standards and performances. These discussions give preference to the measurement of education and ascribe more value to measurable means like standardised tests. Accordingly, there is a diversion of attention towards what is measurable and education is being reduced to the learning outcomes and ingredients of the educational processes that can be considered an accountable means for producing educational performances. In that sense, the question “what is educationally desirable?” is becoming “what is educationally measurable?” and the debate on what a “good education” should be in a contemporary democratic society is being pushed into the background (Biesta, 2008). Worse, “what is educationally measurable” is becoming the dominant principle of value to make a judgement on what is the end of education with a resulting means-ends inversion (the measurement of education as an end, and not as a means). Highlighting this side-effect does not lead to the conclusion that it is not preferable to have matters of fact on education systems nor to the conclusion that it is not relevant to have data on learning outcomes. It instead raises an implication in terms of the possible risks of impoverishment in educational practice that may be related to the current standardisation. In the Italian case, the long phase of austerity is orienting the field of education towards attention to efficiency. While efficiency is valued from the economic point of view, it is not directly related to educational desirability. As it has been analysed more, studies highlight how schools and educational organisations draw on weak technologies. Tacit aspects of teaching and learning as well as some elements related to educational processes may make the difference, but they are difficult to measure. The dominant attention to standards, data and performances risks relegating those aspects to the background and, accordingly, marginalising circuits of knowledge not oriented to measuring educational performance and to the school improvement movement. It should also be stressed that these circuits of knowledge have in the recent past accompanied some of the most relevant reforms of the Italian education system. In some cases, these circuits of expertise helped orient educational reforms toward the construction of more inclusive and equitable educational arenas (Landri 2000; Canevaro & Ianes 2013; Mayo 2013).

Moreover, the introduction of regulatory objectivity implies the adoption of external control over educational practice with risk of the depprofessionalisation of teachers. The reduction of teachers and the strong attention to a new performativity regime seems to be orienting the teaching profession towards the dynamics of
teaching-to-the-test which is also accompanied by the development of a dedicated literature of ‘how-to’ publications for the INVALSI tests. A climate of hostility towards teachers and, more generally, toward public servants (who are sometimes described as ‘lazybones’) may be counterproductive with respect to the need to reinforce the professionalisation of teaching. Reorienting educational policy-making, in that respect, should imply the mobilisation of circuits of expertise to develop practice-based studies of standards and professionalisation as well as renewed public investment in educational research. This direction is difficult to envisage in a country where there is no tradition of high investment levels in education. On the other hand, the agreement on new public management and on the circuits of knowledge that supported it seems to be weakening. It appears as though we are possibly moving toward a richer account of educational practice and policy-making, at the least at the international level (Hartley, 2013).

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Notes

1 Website of the Ministry of Instruction, University and Research: www.miur.it; Educazione&Scuola: www.edscuola.it; Sussidiario.net: www.sussidiario.net

2 INVALSI stands for National Institute for the Evaluation of the Educational System of Instruction and Training.

3 In an explicit way, Minister Gelmini of the Ministry of Instruction, University and Research under the Berlusconi government declared that she would dismantle 40 years of educational policies.

4 An interesting analysis of the policy of merit awards for teachers may be found in a recent work by Barzanò and Grimaldi (Barzanò & Grimaldi 2013).

5 A conflict on the standard size or number of students in a school to be considered as a school with autonomy has developed among regional and state officials. In this context, regions that have responsibilities for defining school sizes lodged an appeal against the state. The Constitutional Court decided in favour of the regions since the attempts to introduce national standards in that field were made without including regional officials in educational policy-making. The controversy on naming an optimal standard remains unsettled.

6 'Istituti comprensivi' followed the model of the 'comprehensive school'. To some extent, they are a by-product of the spending containment that found an unexpected educational legitimation (Cerini, 2011).

7 The policies for preventing early school leaving were elaborated during the Monti government by undersecretary Rossi-Doria. The novelty here is the mobilisation of local knowledge (from the schools and the Associations of the Third Sector). It can be noted, also in that case, that the language of standardisation dominates insofar as the policy is aimed at the construction of 'prototypes' for contrasting early school leaving.

8 Wößmann’s research analyses TIMMS data of 77 countries.

9 There has not been a comprehensive mapping of these blogs. For some examples, see http://noisiamolascuolapubblica.wordpress.com and others like ‘Donne e Scienza’, which is concerned with the possible discriminatory form of some tests during a recent survey carried out in 2013: http://www.donnascienza.it/?s=INVALSI&submit=Search

10 Respectively, 200 teachers overseeing the language test and 200 teachers supervising the mathematics test were involved in the design, pre-testing and refining of the standardised national tests.

11 In some respects, standards play a relevant role in contemporary post-political forms of regulation, meaning they may be associated with forms of regulation that downplay the conflicts, and by design reduce political spaces where alternative voices may be heard (Garsten & Jacobsson 2013).

12 On the history of objectivity in science and indeed whether objectivity is compulsory for science, see (Daston & Galison 1992; Daston & Galison 2007).
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