

THE INFLUENCE OF INTERNATIONAL ACTORS
ON THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN ITALY AND
ITS IMPACT ON ACCOUNTABILITY

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INTRODUCTION

This research aims to address two key questions: how international actors and factors such as the European Union and the OECD-PISA¹ tests have influenced the Italian education system and, as a sub-question, what - if any - the implications for accountability are.

This dissertation adopts an institutionalist approach by focusing on institutional changes, specifically examining the evolution and changes within the Italian education system from the end of the 1990s to 2017. The analysis of the development of the Italian education system is complemented by an examination of the growing influence of the OECD-PISA programme and the evolution of the European Union's strategy on education.

The method employed to understand whether the changes observed in the Italian educational system are solely domestic issues or, conversely, linked to the international context and pressures involves a comparative approach. Specifically, I have analyzed the cases of Finland and Germany, exploring the relationship between educational reforms (or lack thereof) and supranational actors and factors, such as OECD tests. Then, the purpose of this work is to investigate, through a comparative method, whether the emergence and the diffusion of educational skills' assessment tools, such as the tests developed by the OECD through the PISA programme, can be considered a change factor for the Italian educational system, within a specific time frame of reference. In addition to this, the influence of the European Union on the same educational system's reforms is considered as another possible change factor, given the fact that the 1990s - particularly from the Maastricht Treaty onward - constitute a fundamental turning point for the integration policies that touched, as will be seen, also education and, more generally, the idea of lifelong learning.

The documents consulted for this work vary in nature and include legislative sources (from Italy, Germany, Finland and the European Union), transcriptions of parliamentary hearings and debates, ministerial acts, and official documentation from the European Parliament and European Commission. This qualitative analysis will then be enriched by data produced particularly by the

¹ "PISA is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment. PISA measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their Reading, Mathematics and Science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges" see OECD-PISA website.

OECD in the field of education.

Assuming an actual correlation between some changes in the Italian educational system and the influence of supranational actors and factors, such as the European Union and the OECD (with distinctions between the two, that will be highlighted and analyzed), a further issue related to accountability then emerges, one that constitutes the second research question or sub-question: viewing a country's educational policies as a consequence of a mandate received from the democratically elected institutions, within a given constitutional framework - which in Italy means particular reference to Article 33 and 34 of the Constitution - if education reforms are the product of pressures generated by external factors rather than the result of efforts to fulfill the electoral mandate, a problem of legitimacy arises, which can, in effect, also be viewed as a problem of accountability. In fact, when climbing international rankings or needing to conform with what the European Union has established becomes the point of reference that reforms are based on, there has been a significant shift in the axis of democratic legitimacy that, in my opinion, calls for the utmost consideration and raises the question of defining to whom/what the decision-makers responsible for educational policies in Italy should be held accountable. This issue will be fully addressed in the conclusions of this research while taking due account of the distinctions resulting from the different natures of the European Union and the OECD: the former to be viewed as a democratic arena where all of the decisions taken involve the member states, who are expected to cooperate to achieve the agreed-upon goals, whilst the latter is an international organization that collaborates with national governments in order to support their actions, but without having a democratic mandate for the definition of any standards or goals in education.

It should be clarified from the outset that when talking about the 'education system' here, this means the paths running through the primary and secondary stages of education, thus excluding both pre-school and tertiary education. It is also worth pointing out that, in order to answer the above questions, this research will focus on a specific period of time when analysing the Italian context, extending from the end of the 1990s - the time of Luigi Berlinguer's ministry - to 2017, the year in which the implementation decrees of the so-called *Buona Scuola* were issued. As the research unfolds, the reasons for this choice will become apparent, but for now it is enough to bear in mind that this period

coincides with the development and diffusion of the first OECD-PISA tests and, post-Maastricht Treaty, with the definition and formalization of a consistent European strategy for education.

Education constitutes one of the essential elements of a country's national identity and this assumption is valid for both the long period of history when it was essentially reserved for those who were called on to be part of the ruling class, and for when it opened up to mass schooling. For a long time in the West it was thought that educating everyone was equivalent to not educating anyone, having to essentially lower the training bar in order to do so²; however, particularly after the WWII period, promoting mass education became a necessity for governments, above all because “it seemed to be the path to prosperity and power”³. The new industrial expansion, the pressing demands of the labour market, the rapid increase in scientific research closely linked to the leadership of individual countries at the global level regarding innovation, all acted as a driving force of this process, helping to produce a progressive increase in literacy rates following reforms designed to ensure that ever more individuals would have access to education and training.

Thus, if in the period of expanding totalitarianism in Europe, education was conceived as just a means of dominating and conditioning the masses and was therefore structured as a tool for the propagation of nationalist ideologies⁴, after the Second World War things in many countries, including Italy, began to change. Following the tragedy provoked by extreme nationalism even in the education context, Western Europe saw the start of a new period of openness, in which its politicians and policy makers exchanged points of view and experiences, to the point of organizing systematic meetings and conferences dedicated to facilitating precisely this type of comparison, starting, as it will be seen, as early as 1959⁵. However, it would take several decades to formalize the idea that, through decisions taken at a supranational level, European institutions could have a concrete influence on national educational policies, and even when the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 introduced some of the Commission's duties in this context, it would do so, as will be seen, whilst always sticking firmly to the principle of subsidiarity and limiting itself to speaking of encouraging cooperation, without

² See R. Hutchins, *The Learning Society*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970. p. 20.

³ Ibid., p. 14.

⁴ See for example Isaac L. Kandel, *Education in Nazi Germany*, ‘The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science’, vol. 182, 1935, pp. 153–63.

⁵ The First Conference of European Ministers of Education was held at The Hague in 1959, just two years after the Treaty of Rome.

questioning the prerogatives and responsibilities of the member states⁶. Notwithstanding the limited nature of the provisions of the Treaty, since 1992 the road towards more efficient cooperation and greater coordination seems to have been laid out, and the path towards the European Council of Lisbon in 2000⁷ - which established the fundamental elements of a European strategy on education - demonstrates how urgent the issue of quality education had become for European policy makers. In fact, it was widely believed that the European Union could only play a central role in the new globalized context if it managed to establish itself as a knowledge-based economy and that it both could and should aspire to being the most competitive one in the world⁸. The innovation introduced by Lisbon did not consist of a new or further formalization or expansion of European responsibilities in the educational field, but rather in the fact that, as Dale states, it “specifies ‘Europe’ and not member states, as the level at which competitiveness is to be achieved”⁹. Since then, EU reports have gradually become more precise at identifying the shortcomings of the individual member states (also thanks to the Eurydice network, founded in 1976¹⁰ and ever increasingly active), reaching the point of defining a full-on Strategic Framework¹¹ and of tying the allocation of resources to the achievement of certain objectives (indeed, in the case of the Italian National Recovery Plan, to the implementation of fully-fledged reforms, including even the way teachers are recruited)¹².

When examining the influence that policies promoted at the European level have had on the reforms of the Italian education system, I will also refer to the concept of Europeanization. This term has been enjoying great popularity in academic literature for some decades, but the greater the interest that grows around it, the greater the number of the uses it has¹³; it is not easy to draw the boundaries of what should be understood when this word is used, that is to say, whether one should limit oneself to

⁶ See H. Walkenhorst, *The Changing Role of EU Education Policy - a Critical Assessment*, European Union Studies Association (EUSA) > Biennial Conference > 2005 (9th), March 31-April 2, 2005.

⁷ Particularly with Delors' and Cresson's white papers.

⁸ See Lisbon European Council 23 and 24 March 2000, Presidency Conclusions.

⁹ R. Dale, *Globalization and Europeanization in Education, Context constraints and resources in the development of European Education Space and European Education Policy* in R. Dale & S. Robertson, *Globalisation and Europeanisation in Education*, Oxford: Symposium Books, 2009, pp. 23-43, p. 26.

¹⁰ See Resolution of the Council and of the Ministers of Education, meeting within the Council, of 9 February 1976 comprising an action programme in the field of education.

¹¹ See European Strategic Framework on EEA website.

¹² See PNNR (National Recovery Plan for Italy), Education and Research on *Italiadomani* website.

¹³ According to Olsen, who breaks it down into five different dimensions, it is a fashionable but contested concept (see J.P. Olsen, *The Many Faces of Europeanization*. 'JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies', 40: 921-952, 2002, p. 921); for Radaelli, there is a serious risk of 'conceptual stretching', see K. Featherstone & C.M. Radaelli (edited by), *The Politics of Europeanization*, Oxford, 2003; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 Nov. 2003, p. 27.

aspects concerning the European Union ('EU-ization') in its formal expressions or should go beyond this, whether one should refer to the sphere of values or instead dwell only on the institutional and governance related aspects. Not aspiring here to relate the whole debate that has developed around Europeanization¹⁴ and its modalities and mechanisms - a debate that has followed two main strands, on the one hand, analysis of the ability of the member states to adapt to EU requirements (depending, in part, on the "goodness of fit")¹⁵ and, on the other, analysis of the types and mechanisms of Europeanization¹⁶ - I will turn to the definition of the concept provided by Radaelli: "Europeanization consists of processes of a) construction, b) diffusion, and c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things' and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU policy and politics and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies"¹⁷. This definition is both broad and detailed enough to be able to hold together both the vertical (top-down and bottom-up)¹⁸ and horizontal dynamics (the attention that each state pays to what happens in the others and their reciprocal influence is an example) that constitute Europeanization, and to combine the three dimensions of governance, institutionalization and discourse that this concept is often translated into¹⁹.

It is important, moreover, as Fabbrini points out, to keep in mind that although integration and Europeanization are closely related concepts, they are not synonymous, the latter being a term to indicate "the qualitative leap that has occurred in the process of integration, specifically in the period

¹⁴ For an overview of the debate concerning Europeanization, particularly in the late 1990s and early 2000s, see the introduction to S. Fabbrini in S. Fabbrini (edited by), *L'europeizzazione dell'Italia*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2003, pp. 3-33.

¹⁵ See M. Green Cowles in M. Green Cowles et al. (edited by), *Transforming Europe. Europeanization and Domestic Change*, New York, Cornell University Press, 2001, pp. 6-9.

¹⁶ See M. Thatcher, *Winners and Losers in Europeanisation: Reforming the National Regulation of Telecommunications*, *West European Politics*, 27:2, 284-309, p. 286.

¹⁷ C.M. Radaelli, *The Europeanization of Public Policy* in K. Featherstone & C.M. Radaelli, p. 30. On page 33 of the same text Radaelli also clarifies the difference between Europeanization and convergence, harmonization and political integration.

¹⁸ The influence of the European Union on its member states through formal action is conceived as a top-down dynamic of Europeanization, whilst the ability of the states to influence the decisions of the Union and guide its policies is an example of a bottom-up dynamic.

¹⁹ See C.M. Radaelli, *Europeanization: Solution or Problem?*, in: Cini M. & Bourne, A.K. (edited by) *Palgrave Advances in European Union Studies*. Palgrave Advances. Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 6-8.

since the Maastricht Treaty of 1992”²⁰. The practical effects of this qualitative leap in the educational sphere will be examined in the second chapter of this research.

Education is one of the areas where the concept of Europeanization can be broken down²¹. If it is true that the Europeanization of education is, as Alexiadou argues, “neither a linear nor a straightforward process”²², one can nevertheless say that it consists of at least four elements, which, over the years, have combined to form a whole: 1) promotion of European values - this concern, already present in the reports of the first meetings between the Western European Ministers of Education, became explicit in Janne's report²³ and was fully explained in Adonnino's report *On a People's Europe*²⁴; 2) mobility and exchanges - it was initially a natural consequence of the first element, so much so that the matter is already mentioned in Janne's report, but it then became a fundamental aspect of Europeanization through a series of dedicated programmes, considering that, as it will be seen, the field of education, at least up to Maastricht, would be completely excluded from the competence of European institutions, and even subsequently the scope for action would be very limited in any case²⁵; 3) policy coordination - as it will be seen, the Open Method of Coordination found extraordinary scope for application in educational policies, in part given the aforementioned limitation; 4) key competencies and common goals - from Lisbon onwards this aspect became one of the most important for the Europeanization of education because, without changing the letter of the Treaties, it nevertheless established that the goals set were European and shared, that is to say, they could only be achieved “at the level of the Community, not at national level”²⁶.

²⁰ S. Fabbrini, p. 3.

²¹ “This aim is linked to the idea that a Europeanized education will provide a ‘common ground’ for all members of the European population, be it in terms of language skills, shared values, mutual understanding, or a shared sense of the past”, S. Carlson et al., *Education, Europeanization and Europe's social integration. An introduction*, ‘Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research’, 31:4, 395-405, 2018, p. 396.

²² N. Alexiadou, *The Europeanisation of Education Policy: Researching Changing Governance and ‘New’ Modes of Coordination*, ‘Research in Comparative and International Education’, 2(2), 102–116, 2007, p. 112.

²³ See H. Janne (report by), *For a Community policy on education*, Bulletin of the European Communities Supplement 1 0/73.

²⁴ See Report to the European Council by the ad hoc committee, *The Adonnino Report - ‘On a People's Europe’*, A 10.04 COM 85, SN/2536/3/85.

²⁵ “Education policy in the EU is [...] governed by the principles of subsidiarity, limited powers and proportionality, which restrict the competency of the EU to intervene in the content or organization of member states’ individual education systems [...] The EU institutions can only ‘encourage cooperation’ and they have no formal law-making power in relation to education policies of the member states” N. Alexiadou, *The Europeanisation of Education Policy*, p. 103.

²⁶ R. Dale, p. 34.

Beyond the provisions of the Treaties, the European Union is now, in actual fact, a key player capable of influencing the education policies of its member states; more than the ‘shame and blame’ model, based on public rankings that provoke - as will be seen in the case of the PISA tests - different reactions from governments, a system of soft power (not always very soft) has been chosen, consisting of both the encouragement of cooperation – in accordance with what is explicitly provided for by the Treaties - and, to a much greater extent, of financial support for some reform programmes.

Although Europeanization, despite all of the similarities between the two processes, should not be confused with globalization, having actually, in part, constituted an alternative to it (especially in the eyes of countries that were the most sceptical about what was viewed as simply Americanization)²⁷, it partially owes its acceleration to the globalization processes that developed in the 1990s²⁸. This is true in the educational sphere as well. In fact, since the 1990s, two processes with a direct influence on the discussion about education in Europe and Italy have developed in the global arena: firstly, the diffusion of theories related to New Public Management has encouraged a profound reflection on the efficiency of public administration, which, alongside reform aimed at decentralization and simplification, has led to the emergence of new measurement tools and the implementation of various accountability mechanisms²⁹ also in the education field; and secondly, in part due to the first process, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) began to reflect on how to measure the outputs of the various national education systems by comparing them not in terms of the amount of information that each of them is able to transfer (in other words, the inputs), but in terms of the quality of the training they deliver, based on concepts such as ‘key competencies’, which would also become central to the European debate. This thing – the fact that an international organization that deals with economic development began to focus its analyses and actions on education - happened mainly because of the idea that education and growth are intrinsically linked concepts, through the medium of work, and because the labour market was seen as ever more competitive and challenging due to globalization and the emergence of new technologies. This process culminated in the preparation of the *Education at a Glance* report and, above all, the PISA tests, whose

²⁷ See S. Fabbrini, p. 8.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁹ See G.A. Larbi, *The New Public Management Approach and Crisis States*, UNRISD, Discussion paper, n. 112, Geneva, 1999 and H. Shah, *Accountability: has it been hollowed out in modern state?*, Journal of Political Studies, Vol 18, Issue 1, 77-91, University of Hertfordshire, 2010.

pervasiveness reached, in just a few years, levels never before seen within the context of International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSAs) ³⁰.

Robert M. Hutchins, the American educationist to whom it is owed the first definition of the ‘learning society’, believed that an education entirely directed at generating prosperity and power was not only ineffective, but also “inhuman, in that it regards people as instrument of production”³¹; what happened during the 1990s and 2000s is that his reflection on the need to pass from an overly ‘practical’ form of education - aimed at preparing students for a given occupation - to a more theoretical approach, aimed at generating understanding and intelligence, would be endorsed by the OECD – in other words, by an organization which, by statute, aims to enhance the link between education and the economy - as the definition for non-disciplinary competencies. The expression ‘learning society’ is also used extensively in OECD documents on education, as it will be seen.

The development of the PISA tests was irresistible: the ranking of the participating countries, and above all the ‘name, shame and blame’ these rankings generated when made public, worked extraordinarily well and gave impetus to a debate in various contexts, from the media, to the political sphere, to academia. Whilst there is no lack of criticism of the tests in themselves, of how they function practically, of the rankings, of the very idea of the standardization that performance measurement is based on, it is a fact that in a relatively short time the PISA results have become a point of reference that is essential for anyone who wants to talk about education.

As stated above, at the heart of this research lie two fundamental questions. The first asks how the Italian education system has been influenced by the development of the PISA tests and by the European Union’s evolving relationship with and approach to education, particularly since the second half of the 1990s. The attempt to answer this question will involve analysing the Italian education system and what happened to it between 1997 and 2017, retracing the emergence and development of the PISA tests, examining the European Union’s journey in the field of education, and that journey’s roots, and lastly, comparing the experiences of Italy with those of two other European countries, namely Finland and Germany.

³⁰ It has gone, in the course of seven rounds of surveys, from the 32 countries/economies being involved in 2000, to 79 in 2018.

³¹ R. Hutchins, p. 47.

The last comprehensive reform of the Italian education system took place one hundred years ago. In 1923 the philosopher Giovanni Gentile (Minister of Education from October 1922 to July 1923) promoted – in a series of six acts - what Benito Mussolini himself called “the most fascist of reforms”³². This simple fact – that is, Mussolini's pride in an attainment that was in itself the most valued of his regime – could lead one to expect that this fascist framework was erased at the dawn of the Italian Republic, but there are many reasons why this did not occur. The first reason lies in the very nature of the reform - whose “elastic resistance”³³ enabled it to not only withstand the various adjustments made by the regime (the so-called ‘touch-ups’), but to also act as the basis for the next educational restructuring. After all, the Gentile Reform did not appear out of nowhere, but was, on the contrary, proposed to salvage the original structure of the Casati³⁴ Law (actually conceived in the pre-unification era, in 1859) and adapt it to the new needs of centralization³⁵. Consequently, although broad debate about the role of education was ignited in the Constituent Assembly³⁶, and notwithstanding the fact that *il Sessantotto* had its roots in the academic contestation against the authoritarianism of textbooks and the curriculum³⁷, the structure of the Gentile Reform still endures as the basis of Italy’s school system today, a century later. The only substantial structural change, made in 1962, concerned undifferentiated compulsory middle school, which made it possible to overcome part of the classism that was, at heart, another of the main reasons behind the durability of the Gentile Reform³⁸.

This research does not, however, intend to investigate what has remained unchanged in the Italian school system in the past one hundred years, but rather what has changed within a specific time frame, including aspects that lie outside the letter of the laws that have succeeded each another during this period. As such, as already said, the point of reference for the historical analysis here is not the passing

³² G. Gentile, *Scritti pedagogici*, Milano: Treves-Treccani-Tuminelli, ed. 1932, p. 249.

³³ See G. Ricuperati, *Storia della scuola in Italia. Dall'Unità a oggi*, Brescia: Editrice La Scuola, 2015, p. 107.

³⁴ Gabrio Casati, Minister of Education of Reign of Sardinia 1859-1860.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 121.

³⁶ See L. Ambrosoli, *La scuola alla Costituente*, Brescia: Paideia, 1987. Recently, on 19th September 2023, in a speech delivered in the Chamber of Deputies on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Constitution, Giuliano Amato stated that some members of the Constituent Assembly did not see the issue of education as very important, and that it only became a topic of debate because of the Christian Democrats’ desire to defend private schools. In any case, in the end education became a fundamental issue, especially as Aldo Moro and Concetto Marchesi, the two rapporteurs in the First sub-committee, were figures of great standing.

³⁷ See G. Ricuperati, p. 105.

³⁸ Ibid, p.104.

of the Gentile Reform, nor indeed 1962, but rather a period of about 20 years, from the end of the 1990s to 2017. The reform desired by Luigi Berlinguer (Minister of Education from 1996 to 2000) was, in fact, the beginning of a *reforms-cycle*, even though the most revolutionary part of Berlinguer's plans have remained totally unimplemented (one thinks, for example, of the unfinished reform of 'school cycles', which would have lowered the age for secondary school graduation by a year and combined primary and lower secondary schooling into a single seven-year stage, thereby eliminating middle schools). This initial attempt at reform - which largely remained just that, with the exception of the autonomy of schools (introduced with the Bassanini³⁹ Law) and the issue of *parità scolastica*⁴⁰ – marked the beginning of a path that increasingly placed so-called 'competency-based education' at its centre, completely replacing the *programmi* (centralized school-programmes) with personalized educational plans (first mentioned in the Moratti⁴¹ Law) and curricula. This gave form to the real overturning of the mindset that in 1930 had led to the *Testo Unico di Stato* (a nationalised compulsory textbook for each year of primary school), a very powerful mass media tool conducive to centralization and subject to the regime's control (not by chance shared with the church for the relevant sections, as provided for in the concordat with the Holy See)⁴².

From the late 1990s on, despite the existence of ministerial guidelines that served as terms of reference for school managers and teachers when drawing up their academic plan (in Italian *Piano dell'Offerta Formativa*, POF, then PTOF, three-year academic plan), the centralized programmes were gradually replaced by a practical approach aimed at enabling the individual student to acquire certain competencies (which, as it will be seen, include even the concept of citizenship). Furthermore, in line with the principles of New Public Management and with the more general reform of the public administration launched by Bassanini, new accountability tools were introduced into education, starting from the first Prodi government, which, within a few years, would lead to the formation of the National Evaluation System and the production of the INVALSI tests, which are a structural element of it.

³⁹ Franco Bassanini, Minister of Public Administration 1996-1998 and 1999-2001.

⁴⁰ See Camera dei Deputati, Quaderni, *Commissione Cultura. Politiche e attività istituzionale nella XIII legislatura*, Servizio Studi, 2001.

⁴¹ Letizia Moratti, Minister of Education 2001-2006.

⁴² See G. Ricuperati, pp. 128-129.

This change was widely justified by the need to meet the standards set at the European and international level, which have been ever more challenging and ever-increasingly part of debates in the sector. Extensive reference will be made to the debate that publication of the results of international tests has provoked, and to the resonance that Italy's poor position in the resulting rankings has had over the years⁴³.

It should be said that the comparison of the national education system with those of the outside world actually has deep roots in Italy, and even the Royal Commission set up in 1905 already set itself the task of analysing the most advanced foreign models in terms of literacy and the relationship with the industrial system, which was very weak in Italy until the 1960s⁴⁴. However, if during the years of fascism it was first Gentile's idealism and then De Vecchi's pragmatism that directed the education system, if in the years after the Second World War it was the text of the Constitution that spurred, above all, the need to increase literacy rates that were still very low, and if during the years of the economic boom the need to keep up with the new requirements of an economy that had become more predominantly industrial than agricultural, in recent times the point of reference that directs reforms of the school system (not comprehensive reforms, as stated above, and indeed often decidedly partial ones) seems to be the need to climb the international rankings. The aim of bringing the systems for measuring Italy's schooling into conformity with full-on international standards can therefore be viewed as a fairly recent one. However, whether they are European or OECD standards, makes all the difference in the world, and this is one of the elements that this research intends to evaluate.

The second question, or rather sub-question, that this work aims to answer is linked to precisely this last aspect and has a more political-philosophical connotation as it concerns the complexities that the influence of supranational players and factors on national education systems can generate in democratic contexts. If one views education as a fundamental part of democracy, in so far as it is aimed at the training of citizens, then the goals of education and the indicators used as the basis for measuring the quality and efficiency of educational systems could be anything but the result of a proper democratic process. Whoever determines the indicators and standards used to make measurements and draw up rankings, actually establishes what purpose education should have; that

⁴³ For examples, see these articles: *la Repubblica*, *Ocse: gli studenti italiani indietro nella UE*, 6th December 2016; and *Corriere della Sera*, *Ocse: è un analfabeta matematico un ragazzo italiano su quattro*, 10th February 2016.

⁴⁴ See G. Ricuperati, p. 80.

this process might not pass through some form of democratic deliberation—would indicate a highly problematic weakness.

As already stated, starting in the 1990s, in part due to New Public Management theories, a tendency to apply the concept of accountability in educational contexts spread widely across Europe, justifying the need to measure students' scholastic performances in order to ensure the quality and efficiency of systems. If there was an urgency to set standards and indicators, it flowed from accountability, which needs them in order to function. Very often the concept of accountability has been used in this context in a 'bureaucratic' way⁴⁵, whilst the rise or fall of a system's efficiency depends on the framework defined for measurement and, therefore, on a strongly political element. Furthermore, the defining of such a framework is a process that calls for special attention in a democratic context - a point that will be analysed shortly.

At this juncture, it is necessary to better clarify the meaning conveyed by the term accountability⁴⁶ within the context of this research and, above all, to ask what the implications of applying the concept of accountability to education are here. This term, of Anglo-Saxon origin, is not easy to define and actually covers various areas (it is "chameleon-like", as Richard Mulgan says⁴⁷, and "slippery", as Melvin J. Dubnick and Jonathan B. Justice argue⁴⁸), managing to assume a horizontal or vertical form depending on whether the parts are placed on the same level or in a hierarchical relationship with

⁴⁵ An interesting contribution, that facilitates defining bureaucratic accountability, can be found in the debate between Herman Finer and Carl Friedrich on the relationship between officials and political authorities; Finer argued for the neutrality of the bureaucrat as a mere executor, while Friedrich advocated the idea that obedience should be accompanied by the responsibility of technical experts, especially regarding policy formation, given the knowledge that they possess. For more on this issue see M. Jackson, *Responsibility versus accountability in the Friedrich-Finer debate*, Journal of Management History, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 66-77, 2009.

⁴⁶ For further information on the definition and history of the concept, see also a previous publication of mine, *Accountability: la virtù della politica democratica*, Roma: Città Nuova, 2014.

⁴⁷ See R. Mulgan, 'Accountability': *An Ever-Expanding Concept?*, 'Public Administration', 78: 555-573, 2000, p. 555

⁴⁸ See M.J. Dubnick & J.B. Justice, *Accounting for accountability*, Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, 2004, p.1. Accountability has also been defined by Dubnick himself, taking an historical-philosophical approach, as the "meta-problem" of modern governance, i.e. "one of a small group of issues that have defined and shaped social theory and practice for centuries – a class of general problems often lurking in the background that continuously challenge the basic assumptions and institutional arrangements of social and political life at any particular time and place. By way of example, consider two such meta-problems – the 'problem of evil' and the 'problem of free-will' – that have for centuries defined (and continue to define) issues and debates in fields as diverse as theology, philosophy and the sciences". See M.J. Dubnick, *Accountability as a Meta-Problem*, prepared for presentation at Minnowbrook III –Phase II The Future of Public Administration, Public Management, and Public Service Around the World Crowne Plaza Hotel, Lake Placid, September 5-7, 2008, pp. 16-18.

each other⁴⁹. Here, the definition given by Andreas Schedler is used as a reference, according to which, “A is accountable to B when A is obliged to inform B about A's (past or future) actions and decisions, to justify them, and to suffer punishment in the case of eventual misconduct”⁵⁰. Accountability should not, therefore, be seen as a broad and ethical concept like responsibility⁵¹, but rather as a set of full-on mechanisms that regulate a triad that can be summed up as information, justification and sanction. Although accountability should be viewed as a set of mechanisms and not as an ‘moral’ concept, it should also be borne in mind that, when it is applied in a democratic context, it requires points of reference (the Bs of the above definition) that enjoy a democratic legitimacy which the players examined (the As) must be seen to be accountable to. Consequently – and this assumption underlies my thesis - the accountability of an education system in a democratic context cannot depend on its ability to conform to standards that have not been democratically discussed and approved. In other words, one cannot measure the increase or decrease in the accountability of an education system solely by reading the rankings provided by supranational actors. Indeed, there is a risk of finding oneself in front of a fully functional, and in some ways beguiling, machine that, consisting mainly of measurements and statistics, gives the appearance of something objective and unquestionable, but which, if not based on democratically legitimized points of reference, ends up being essentially unstable, lacking a firm foundation, and, therefore, being exposed to criticism from anyone who questions its basic concepts, from the definition of competencies and skills, and the setting of standards, through to the very choice of statistical models. I will discuss this point at length in the conclusions.

With regard to the structure of this research, the first chapter will analyse the Italian school system as it is today and will trace its development in the period taken as a point of reference, that is to say, from the laws produced by Minister of Education Berlinguer in Prodi's first government through to those of Minister Fedeli in Gentiloni's government, passing en route through the ministries of De Mauro, Moratti, Fioroni, Gelmini, Profumo, Carrozza and Giannini. Some of these laws have produced significant changes not so much through their provisions, as through the significant cuts in the overall education budget that they have made, which have led to an immediate and difficult to

⁴⁹ See A. Schedler, *Conceptualizing Accountability* in A. Schedler et al., *The Self-Restraining State: Power and Accountability in New Democracies*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵¹ See R. Mulgan, p. 557.

reverse reorganization (exponential growth of the so-called *istituti comprensivi* – bringing multiple school levels within a single institution - larger class sizes, a slowdown in school building programmes, and an explosion in the number of teachers on short-term contracts). The research method in this chapter will be primarily based on regulatory analysis, tracking legislative developments and the political and media debates that preceded and followed them. There will be a particular focus on the definition of school ‘cycles’, on the compulsory education and training period, and on school autonomy, given that these three areas are fundamental elements of the Italian school system and have been the target of the most significant legislative interventions, including those that have remained unimplemented. It will be seen that the suddenness of the changes to the system required by the reform projects from the end of the 1990s through to 2017, has resulted in a significant immobilism and the bureaucratisation of schools’ responses to ministerial directives, and therefore without changes to the regulations being followed by a substantial change in how schools are practically organised (this is perhaps one of the reasons why, for example, one continues to talk about *programmi*, which were superseded twenty years ago in the first level of education and in 2009 in the second)⁵². The chapter will then look at how, even though the instability of the Italian political system has resulted in a succession of numerous ministers and governments, characterized by very different political and ideological views, the whole of this period can actually be interpreted as a single long phase of reform. A phase that, as will be seen, has essentially produced a single concrete structural change: the implementation of a new national evaluation system. The fact that the only profound change occurring during this period was linked to the spread of the Large-Scale Assessments, is of great importance for this work.

The second chapter will look at the supranational players and factors mentioned in the research questions. The first section will provide an analysis of the genesis and development of International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSAs) and, in particular, of the OECD-PISA tests, focusing on the peculiarities of the DeSeCo Project (Definition and Selection of Competencies), and then showing that the OECD’s approach is no longer based on a desire to measure the disciplinary knowledge acquired by students, but rather the outputs a fifteen-year-old is expected to achieve in terms of basic skills, interpreted through their literacy in Reading, Mathematics and Science. The ability to involve

⁵² See M. Dei, *La scuola in Italia*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2012, p. 56 e p. 81.

different countries and governments, including non-members of the OECD, in the project and its various measurement rounds⁵³, the theoretical endeavour behind the project as a whole, and the choice, from the beginning, to use public rankings as tools to exert pressure, have determined the success of the PISA tests in the mainstream of educational discourse. There will then be mention of the main criticisms made of this kind of standardized measurements, divided into criticisms aimed at contesting how well they function on a practical level, and criticisms addressing the theoretical basis underlying them. In fact, this latter category of criticisms will show that the PISA tests are not neutral survey tools, but are actually based on a well-defined ideological system⁵⁴. Moreover, in order to measure, it is necessary to standardize, and the process used to set the standards of quality and related reference indicators for education, cannot in any way be considered neutral, indeed it has a profoundly political connotation as the OECD itself seems to concede⁵⁵. Mention will also be made of the arguments used by some scholars, and by the developers themselves, to defend these tools, whilst leaving open the question of the actual legitimacy of a process that explicitly aims to influence (and in some way standardize)⁵⁶ the educational policies of the various countries involved, without making provision for a democratically-based discussion of its objectives.

In the second section of Chapter 2, the attention will shift to the European journey, as outlined above, focusing, on the one hand, on the regulatory evolution, and on the other, on the broader and more complex process of the Europeanization of education. Tracing the history of European cooperation in the field of education, it will be seen the emergence of interest in promoting shared values, the desire to encourage exchange and mobility – in order to enable the dissemination of good practices and improve mutual understanding - the formalization of methods of cooperation that facilitate the taking of more incisive action, such as the Open Method of Coordination, and, lastly, the definition of key competencies and strategic objectives with precise deadlines, which will justify the encouragement of the reform efforts of individual member states, including through dedicated funding programmes. Then the section will show how the European Union, going well beyond the provisions of the Treaties of the European Union (hereafter ‘the Treaties’), has established itself as a

⁵³ Now, including OECD members and non-members, a total of more than 80 countries are involved.

⁵⁴ See A. Caputo, *Ripensare le competenze filosofiche a scuola. Problemi e prospettive*, Roma: Carocci, 2019 pp. 32-37.

⁵⁵ See OECD, *Measuring Student Knowledge and Skills. A New Framework for Assessment*, Paris, 1999, p. 7.

⁵⁶ B. Vertecchi in *Sull'incerto confine tra comparazione e conformità* in Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema dell'Istruzione (CEDE), *Ricerche valutative internazionali 2000*, Milano: Franco Angeli, 2001, pp. 15-16.

key player in the educational field. From the Lisbon Strategy through to the Strategic Framework, the EU has, in fact, not only moved beyond its non-involvement in this issue, but defined, as it has been already said, standards which are now criteria for the granting of European funds to member states (from the Structural and Investment Funds through to the Next Generation EU). This is a very significant step forward in terms of integration policies, but education remains an area for support, in other words, an area where the European Union can only formally support, coordinate or complement the actions of its member states. Here too, therefore, a problem of democratic legitimacy arises, which becomes even more significant when one notes the enormous influence the documents, and above all the tests, produced by the OECD have on the debate in Europe, so much so that even the objectives set for 2030 explicitly refer to the need to reduce the number of low-achievers in the PISA surveys⁵⁷. The research method here will be based, in particular, on analysis of the documents produced at the European level, on the debate that preceded and followed them, and on evaluation of the effectiveness of the policies concretely implemented in order to achieve the objectives agreed-upon, particularly after Lisbon.

The third and final chapter will present a comparison between the Finnish, German and Italian education systems, paying particular attention to the main period under investigation in this research. Two different sections will conduct an examination of the current situation of the education systems in Finland and Germany, revealing their specific characteristics, including in the light of the historical developments that have shaped them. The selection of these two very different countries, starting, for example, from the huge difference in the size of their populations, derives, above all, from the divergent paths that have characterized their choices in the educational field in response to the publication of the results of the OECD-PISA surveys from 2001 onwards. Whilst in Finland the unexpected position at the top of the international rankings⁵⁸ would call a halt to attempts to bring the national education system into line with the pressures affecting other countries (in accordance with the practices of New Public Management), in Germany, in contrast, the shock provoked by the below-

⁵⁷ According to the European Council resolution defining the Strategic Framework for the European Education Area by 2030 “less than 15% of 15-year-olds should be low-achievers in reading, mathematics and science”. It also refers, in a footnote, to the PISA test results. See Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) 2021/C 66/01, Annex II.

⁵⁸ Some scholars would dispute the actual ability of the tests to measure, for example, the mathematical competencies of the students, see for example K. Astala et al. *The PISA survey tells only a partial truth of Finnish children's mathematical skills*, Matematiikkalehti Solmu, 2005 and K. Tarvainen, & S.K. Kivelä, *Severe shortcomings in Finnish mathematics skills*, Matematiikkalehti Solmu, 2005.

average performance of students would lead to an acceleration in reform processes⁵⁹ and the formulation of new surveying and measurement mechanisms based, for the first time, on national standards and not delegated to the individual Länder. The Italian case will then be compared to the experiences of these two countries, focusing here on what can be seen as the impact of the results of the PISA tests on educational reforms in Italy, starting from the introduction of the INVALSI tests and the National Evaluation System. In this chapter, the three countries in question will be examined separately in terms of the results they obtained in the PISA tests, the debate these results generated, and any legislative developments or reforms (or lack thereof) that they provoked.

In conclusions, addressing the problem of democratic legitimacy linked to the issue of the accountability of education systems, I will seize the opportunity presented by this research to outline a policy advice and a proposal for political action at the European level that makes provision for the implementation of new accountability mechanisms for the education systems of member states. The European Education Area, as outlined by the Strategic Framework⁶⁰, needs to be developed by finding room for the democratisation of the determination of standards and, in particular, of the competencies that need to be promoted, including through the use of the European budget. If one is able to pursue a process of consciously structuring matrices of shared objectives, without compromising member states' areas of responsibility, this will enable a qualitative leap at both the individual country level and the Union level and will help, in my opinion, to solve the problem of the democratic deficit. Whilst if one fails to do so, the fragility of a structure based on the granting of loans and on the soft power (that is not always so soft) of statistics, predominantly borrowed from the OECD, runs the risk of being a weak element on a path to European integration that is already undermined by many other difficulties.

⁵⁹ The German case is highlighted on the OECD-PISA website, together with the Brazilian case, as an example of how PISA tests can help to shape educational reforms.

⁶⁰ See European Strategic Framework on EEA website.

CHAPTER 1: The Italian Education System: how it works, how it has changed

Section 1: Autonomy, Cycles and Compulsory Education. How the Italian Education System Works

For outlining the characteristics and key elements of the Italian school system, three components are considered here as fundamental points of reference: autonomy, cycles and compulsory education and training. This will enable one to avoid examination of technical aspects, typical of this area, whose analysis would not further the aims of this paper⁶¹.

“The organisation of the Italian education and training system is based on the principles of subsidiarity and the autonomy of schools”⁶². One finds these words on the website of the Ministry of Education (official known, since November 2022, as the “Ministry of Education and Merit”), in the page devoted to a description of how the Italian school system works. One can therefore immediately deduce that jurisdiction over education and training in Italy is not limited to a single level of government, but rather shared between different institutions which, as it will be seen, have complementary prerogatives. The state reserves its exclusive jurisdiction over the so-called general rules and over setting the minimum levels of service that need to be ensured throughout the country, whilst the regions have legislative power in relation to education and vocational training, and are responsible - without prejudice to the principles laid down at the national level - specifically for planning the school network, for the integrated provision of education and vocational training, and for the school calendar, in accordance with the provisions of D.Lgs 112/1998 artt. 135-139⁶³. However, what particularly characterizes the Italian educational system, compared to other areas providing essential services, is the autonomy the law grants individual schools. This includes didactic, organizational and research experimentation and development related autonomy; consequently, a decidedly extensive scope. An analysis will be conducted on its characteristics in order to identify the key elements when it comes to determining the specific nature of the Italian education system, as well

⁶¹ To explore the matter of the technical and non-historical approach to school issues, see G. Ricuperati, *Storia della scuola in Italia. Dall'Unità a oggi*.

⁶² See the Ministry of Education and Merit website.

⁶³ See DECRETO LEGISLATIVO 31 marzo 1998, n. 112 “Conferimento di funzioni e compiti amministrativi dello Stato alle regioni ed agli enti locali, in attuazione del capo I della legge 15 marzo 1997, n. 59” (GU Serie Generale n.116 del 21-05-1998 - Suppl. Ordinario n. 96).

as how they have, with time, changed since L. 59/1997⁶⁴, the so-called Bassanini Law 1, moving from the ‘state school’ to the national education and training system, “a network-based model within which the state, regions, local authorities, private non-state schools, vocational training institutes and bodies and supporting bodies operate in an integrated manner”⁶⁵.

It is useful clarifying again that this research will focus on a specific part of the Italian education system, that is to say, primary and secondary schools. As such, the first phase of the educational path envisaged in Italy, the so-called integrated system for zero to six-year-olds - which is also part of the national education and training system as a six-year, non-compulsory path, subdivided into educational services for early childhood and kindergarten schools - will not be examined in this study.

Instead, the focus will be on the path laid out for those aged 6-19, which is currently divided into two cycles. It is precisely these cycles that will form the second guiding concept of this research, which will look at the current division, but also at the public debate about the need for reorganization, that, having reached a significant point in the attempted reforms of Minister Berlinguer, was totally undone by the repeal of L. 30/2000⁶⁶ resulting from the so-called Moratti Reform. The first education cycle, which is compulsory, lasts a total of eight years and is, in turn, divided into primary school - for students aged 6 to 11 - and lower secondary school - for students aged 11 to 14. The second education cycle consists of two possible paths: higher secondary school lasting five years for students aged 14 to 19 (organised into high schools, technical institutes and vocational institutes), and three-year or four-year vocational training under regional jurisdiction.

The third and last concept that will serve as a point of reference in this section is compulsory education. Education in Italy is compulsory until 16 years of age, with the additional right/duty to education and training up to the age of 18, or in any case until the attainment of a three-year professional qualification. Various legislative interventions have followed one another in this area as well, and these have prompted considerable public debate about the possibility of extending

⁶⁴ See LEGGE 15 marzo 1997, n. 59 “Delega al Governo per il conferimento di funzioni e compiti alle regioni ed enti locali, per la riforma della pubblica amministrazione e per la semplificazione amministrativa”, (GU Serie Generale n.63 del 17-03-1997 - Suppl. Ordinario n. 56).

⁶⁵ A. Sandulli, *Sussidiarietà ed autonomia scolastica nella lettura della Corte Costituzionale*, Relazione all’incontro seminario organizzato dall’Associazione nazionale docenti *Uno Statuto per le scuole: la nuova prospettiva dell’autonomia statutaria*, Cosenza, 22 aprile 2004 in ‘Le istituzioni del federalismo’ 4.2004, p. 546.

⁶⁶ See LEGGE 10 febbraio 2000, n. 30 “Legge-quadro in materia di riordino dei cicli dell’istruzione” (GU Serie Generale n.44 del 23-02-2000).

compulsory education up to 18 years of age⁶⁷, and/or of extending it to kindergarten (i.e., starting from 3 years of age)⁶⁸.

1.1. Autonomy: A Complex Structure

The national education and training system defined by Bassanini, Berlinguer and De Mauro⁶⁹ is “dispersed and acephalous”, and thus not constructed in a hierarchical manner but in a “polyarchic”⁷⁰ or “polycentric”⁷¹ one. The reform of the Constitution in 2001 (Title V, Part II)⁷² also influenced the definition of this new system, which, in addition to recognizing schools’ autonomy, “reaffirmed the importance of managing public education at the local level, whilst still leaving the state in charge of determining criteria and the levels of standards aimed at ensuring a certain uniformity and a level playing field throughout the nation”⁷³.

In order to have an effective understanding of the nature and workings of this autonomy, it is needed to undertake a brief regulatory excursus. The Bassanini Law 1, L. 59/1997 (which aimed at administrative decentralization in order to fully lay down the principle of subsidiarity for the first time) and its consequent implementation measures constitute the source of the legal status and the didactic, research related, organizational and financial autonomy conferred upon individual schools. The main implementation regulation regarding schools is D.P.R. 8th March 1999 no. 275⁷⁴, according to which the mainstay of schools’ autonomy is their “*Piano dell’Offerta Formativa*” (Academic Programme, in Italian, acronym POF), later called “*Piano Triennale dell’Offerta Formativa*” (Three-Years Academic Programme, in Italian, acronym PTOF) according to L. 107/2015 (the so-called

⁶⁷ See for example MicroMega, *Obbligo scolastico fino a diciotto anni: un’ipotesi feconda e praticabile?*, 29th August 2022.

⁶⁸ See for example la Repubblica, *In classe a tre anni, l’idea dem divide. Ma in mezza Europa è già realtà*, 25th August 2022.

⁶⁹ Tullio De Mauro, Minister of Education 2000-2001.

⁷⁰ A. Sandulli p. 546.

⁷¹ R. Morzenti Pellegrini, *L’ autonomia scolastica. Tra sussidiarietà, differenziazioni e pluralismi*, 2. ed., Torino: Giappichelli, 2011, p. 12.

⁷² See LEGGE COSTITUZIONALE 18 ottobre 2001, n. 3 “Modifiche al titolo V della parte seconda della Costituzione” (GU Serie Generale n.248 del 24-10-2001).

⁷³ R. Morzenti Pellegrini, p. 2.

⁷⁴ See DECRETO DEL PRESIDENTE DELLA REPUBBLICA 8 marzo 1999, n. 275 “Regolamento recante norme in materia di autonomia delle istituzioni scolastiche, ai sensi dell’art. 21 della legge 15 marzo 1997, n. 59” (GU Serie Generale n.186 del 10-08-1999 - Suppl. Ordinario n. 152).

Buona Scuola Law, ‘good school’ in English)⁷⁵, which has to be defined in October of the year before the three-year period referred to. Other key points of reference regarding autonomy are: 1) D.Lgs. 6th March 1998, no. 59⁷⁶, which established the managerial qualification for school heads, indispensable for the running of the schools themselves (from this point one will no longer talk - at least in bureaucratic parlance - of ‘principals’, but rather, indeed, of school managers); 2) D.P.R. 18th June 1998, no. 233⁷⁷, which introduced criteria and procedures for the optimal sizing of educational institutions and for determining their staffing requirements; 3) D.Lgs. 30th June 1999, no. 233⁷⁸, which reorganized schools’ governing bodies at the national and local level; 4) D.M. 26th June 2000⁷⁹, which set the curricula for schools, with part determined nationally and part reserved for the schools, and specific learning objectives and competencies (a word that will, from this moment, frequently reappear in scholastic legislation); and 5) D.M. 1st February 2001, no. 44⁸⁰, which set the criteria for the financial statements of autonomous schools and the rules for their accounts. In addition to these very important provisions, there are regulations about the national evaluation system, which, starting from this period, made INVALSI (formerly CEDE, the European Centre for Education, and thereafter the National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education System) - being subject to but separate from the Ministry of Education and endowed with autonomy (administrative, accounting, financial standing, regulatory and financial) - the body in charge of evaluating the quality of the education system (a role reserved for the state), of studying the phenomena of early school leaving and educational failure, of evaluating the impact of legislative innovations, and of helping schools with the self-evaluation initiatives necessitated by the system of autonomy. Indeed, “schools’ autonomy

⁷⁵ See LEGGE 13 luglio 2015, n. 107 “Riforma del sistema nazionale di istruzione e formazione e delega per il riordino delle disposizioni legislative vigenti” (15G00122) (GU Serie Generale n.162 del 15-07-2015).

⁷⁶ See DECRETO LEGISLATIVO 6 marzo 1998, n. 59 “Disciplina della qualifica dirigenziale dei capi di istituto delle istituzioni scolastiche autonome, a norma dell'articolo 21, comma 16, della legge 15 marzo 1997, n. 59” (GU Serie Generale n.71 del 26-03-1998).

⁷⁷ See DECRETO DEL PRESIDENTE DELLA REPUBBLICA 18 giugno 1998, n. 233 “Regolamento recante norme per il dimensionamento ottimale delle istituzioni scolastiche e per la determinazione degli organici funzionali dei singoli istituti, a norma dell'articolo 21 della legge 15 marzo 1997, n. 59” (GU Serie Generale n.164 del 16-07-1998).

⁷⁸ See DECRETO LEGISLATIVO 30 giugno 1999, n. 233 “Riforma degli organi collegiali territoriali della scuola, a norma dell'articolo 21 della legge 15 marzo 1997, n. 59” (GU Serie Generale n.170 del 22-07-1999).

⁷⁹ See MINISTERO DELLA PUBBLICA ISTRUZIONE, DECRETO 26 giugno 2000, n. 234 “Regolamento, recante norme in materia di curricula nell'autonomia delle istituzioni scolastiche, ai sensi dell'articolo 8 del decreto del Presidente della Repubblica 8 marzo 1999, n. 275” (GU Serie Generale n.198 del 25-08-2000).

⁸⁰ See MINISTERO DELLA PUBBLICA ISTRUZIONE, DECRETO 1 febbraio 2001, n. 44 “Regolamento concernente le Istruzioni generali sulla gestione amministrativo-contabile delle istituzioni scolastiche”. (GU Serie Generale n.57 del 09-03-2001 - Suppl. Ordinario n. 49).

has been seen by the legislature as a means of enhancing the structures and potential within schools, with the aim of empowering the entire scholastic community”⁸¹.

The factors leading to this decision have deep roots in the history of the Italian educational system, to the extent that an overview of the complex path it has followed can enable one to see the Bassanini-Berlinguer reform as almost the closing of a circle.

In fact, in order to briefly retrace the steps leading to the current balance between state direction and the autonomy of schools, with non-marginal roles allotted to the regions and local bodies (such as school buildings for primary and lower secondary school being the responsibility of municipalities, and mapping out and planning the school network being assigned to the regions) one needs to go back to the Casati Law of 1859, which addressed the Reorganization of Public Education. It is, in fact, clear that those who enacted it, and even more so those who extended it to a united Italy, intended to foster administrative centralization in a sector that had largely escaped state control, as primary schools were run by the municipalities, and which had become crucial in the light of the changed institutional setup. However, the municipalities retained both the authority to open schools (the provisions regarding compulsory education were actually applied with great flexibility, depending above all on a municipality’s financial resources) and control over running them (municipal councils were able to exercise control by appointing superintendents or inspection commissions or by associating to contain costs)⁸². Coppino⁸³ (in 1877) deserves the credit for extending compulsory education for children up to nine years of age, including penalties for noncomplying parents, and Orlando⁸⁴ (in 1904) for making municipalities responsible - at least formally, because the funds destined to support poorer city councils soon proved insufficient - for establishing schools everywhere up to at least the fourth grade, and for assisting the poorest students; however, it was only with the Daneo-Credaro Law⁸⁵ (presented by the former⁸⁶ in 1910 and pushed through by the latter⁸⁷ the following year) that a real turning point was reached, linked to the division between schools in the

⁸¹ R. Morzenti Pellegrini, p. 3.

⁸² See M. C. Morandini *Il cerchio e l'ellisse. Centralismo e autonomia nella storia della scuola dal XIX al XXI secolo*, Pruneri Fabio (a cura di), Roma: Carocci, 2005, pp. 52-53.

⁸³ Michele Coppino, many times Minister of Education between 1867 and 1888.

⁸⁴ Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, Minister of Education 1903-1905.

⁸⁵ See LEGGE 4 giugno 1911, n. 487 “Provvedimenti per la istruzione elementare e popolare” (GU n.142 del 17-06-1911).

⁸⁶ Edoardo Daneo, Minister of Education 1909-1910.

⁸⁷ Luigi Credaro, Minister of Education 1910-1914.

provincial capitals, still run by the city council, and schools in all of the other municipalities, placed, instead, under superintendence offices⁸⁸. It is, in fact, only from this time on that the state becomes directly involved in managing schools in the poorer areas of the country, and this was the most concrete precondition for compliance with the obligation to provide compulsory education, until that point remained only words, in part due to the financial straits most of the municipalities found themselves in⁸⁹; such a change naturally also led to the state having a much more visible presence in the national education system. All of the measures that followed on from these aimed at centralization, reaching their apex with the regulations sought by Minister Gentile and his successors in the Fascist era. Gentile himself, moreover, saw his work at the ‘Minerva’ (the nickname given to the Ministry of Education at the time, due to its location) not as a creation of his brain, but as a “result of serious, diligent study”⁹⁰, or rather, of projects repeatedly wrecked in parliament, aimed at reorganizing school bureaucracy along centralist lines, from teacher training through to school programmes and control of what was happening in individual schools. Naturally, given the context he operated in, Gentile particularly emphasised this last aspect, arguing that “superintendents and school heads” had to be “the vigilant sentries who respected the task entrusted to them as a sacred thing, with military devotion, and with ready, absolute and unconditional obedience”⁹¹. As is natural for schools under a regime, it was at the height of Fascism, with the De Vecchi⁹² ministry and his idea of the ‘purification of schools’ and with the Bottai⁹³ ministry and his ‘School Charter’⁹⁴, that the point furthest from the idea of the autonomy of educational institutions as it is known today was reached.

The end of the Fascist era gave rise to great debate about schools, which had become a very powerful tool in the regime's propaganda; a debate inspired, among other things, by a document issued by the Allied Forces Subcommittee for Education headed by Carleton Washburne⁹⁵, a disciple of Dewey, and composed of American, British and Italians, entitled *School Policy and Legislation in Italy 1922-1943: With Introductory Notes on Preceding Periods and a Concluding Section on the Post-Fascist Period* published in 1947. Meanwhile, the discussion that arose within the Constituent Assembly

⁸⁸ See L. Ambrosoli, *La scuola alla Costituente*, p. 23.

⁸⁹ See F. Pruneri, *Il cerchio e l'ellisse*, p. 127.

⁹⁰ G. Gentile, *Scritti pedagogici III: la Riforma della Scuola in Italia*, Milano: Treves-Treccani Tuminelli, 1932, p. 315.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁹² Cesare Maria De Vecchi, Minister of Education 1935-1936.

⁹³ Giuseppe Bottai, Minister of Education 1936-1943.

⁹⁴ See G. Ricuperati, p. 221.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

itself is described in detail in the volume by Luigi Ambrosoli published in 1987, *La Scuola alla Costituente*, from which it clearly emerges that none of the leading parties involved in building the Republic had a clear plan for school reform or for what direction should be given to a new democratic school system⁹⁶. With regard to the question is addressed here, that is to say, autonomy and the process of the decentralization of responsibilities, it is very interesting to look at the debate that took place over the opportunity to entrust the regions (which were not in actual fact established until more than twenty years later, with the 1970 elections) with responsibility for primary education. Many - including a number of Christian Democrats, but also Einaudi⁹⁷ - expressed negative views about how the state had presided over education up to that point, arguing that the regions would, instead, be closer to the people and their interests. In contrast, the Communists, Socialists and Republicans argued that assigning this responsibility to the regions meant ignoring the specific characteristics of some areas of the country, and in particular the fact that illiteracy in the South was a very important national issue that only the state could resolve. The vote of the committee charged with giving its opinion on the issue ended with 11 votes in favour of, and 12 against, the inclusion of primary education among the responsibilities delegated to the regions⁹⁸ (which did include vocational education despite the negative views of some, among them Concetto Marchesi, who was hostile to all autonomist leanings in this sector)⁹⁹. It is therefore evident that, ever since the Constituent Assembly, there has been an open debate on school governance and that the solution identified has had to be re-discussed in some way.

For many years, however, schools remained on the margins of Italian political debate and immersed in a state of total conservation (with the exception of the only substantial change - the introduction of unified middle school in 1962 - which arose as a result of a very long debate) so much so that, even when student protests at the end of the 1960s lit the touchpaper of a much broader movement, no substantial changes were actually made to the system¹⁰⁰. “In a centralistic school, dominated by the Ministry of Public Education, which had its own prefect in the person of the education superintendent, who had to supervise the principals, who in turn rigorously directed the teachers, ensuring a formal

⁹⁶ On this point see also G. Ricuperati, p. 243.

⁹⁷ Luigi Einaudi, member of the Constituent Assembly and then President of the Republic (1948-1955).

⁹⁸ See L. Ambrosoli, pp. 39-40.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁰⁰ See G. Ricuperati, p. 292.

uniformity punctuated by programmes and circulars, the students were seen as the final step of a top-down education process”¹⁰¹. One has to wait until the so-called *Decreti Delegati*¹⁰² (a series of executive decrees on schools) issued between 1973 and 1974 to see a significant step forward. Even if they did not change the general organization of schools, the *decreti delegati* anyway mark the beginning of an acknowledgment that the existing organization of schools no longer served the needs of Italian society and that it was instead necessary to give room to the various voices within schools through the governing bodies established by D.P.R. 416/1974¹⁰³. Alongside this, room was made for experimentation¹⁰⁴, but this ended up multiplying in such a disorderly manner that Ricuperati speaks of “wild experimentation”¹⁰⁵. As already mentioned, the *Decreti Delegati* cannot be viewed as a systemic reform, but they are certainly a very important step in the reversal away from a centralization that had still been fully operational until that point, to which one can add the transfer of some responsibilities and administrative functions from the state to the regions in 1972 and 1975¹⁰⁶. However, it would still take another twenty years for autonomy as it is known today to arrive. In between, the only really new development for schools in this field was the work of the Brocca Commission, overseen and coordinated from 1988 to 1992 by the Christian Democrat member of parliament and then Undersecretary for Education Beniamino Brocca, which, in fact, produced nothing but new experiments and the reorganization of existing experiments¹⁰⁷, and the drafting of the *Testo Unico*¹⁰⁸ – approved with Minister Rosa Russo Jervolino, that in 1994 had the merit of bringing order to the jungle of existing rules and regulations. Thus one reaches what has been defined as the ‘closing of the circle’, that is to say, of a path that from total decentralization (with the

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 294.

¹⁰² See LEGGE 30 luglio 1973, n. 477 “Delega al Governo per l’emanazione di norme sullo stato giuridico. del personale direttivo, ispettivo, docente e non docente della scuola materna, elementare, secondaria e artistica dello Stato” (GU Serie Generale n.211 del 16-08-1973) and DPR 416/1974, DPR 417/1974, DPR 418/1974, DPR 419/1974 and DPR 420/1974.

¹⁰³ See DECRETO DEL PRESIDENTE DELLA REPUBBLICA 31 maggio 1974, n. 416 “Istituzione e riordinamento di organi collegiali della scuola materna, elementare, secondaria ed artistica” (GU Serie Generale n.239 del 13-09-1974 - Suppl. Ordinario).

¹⁰⁴ See DECRETO DEL PRESIDENTE DELLA REPUBBLICA 31 maggio 1974, n. 419 “Sperimentazione e ricerca educativa, aggiornamento culturale e professionale ed istituzione dei relativi istituti” (GU n.239 del 13-09-1974 - Suppl. Ordinario).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 296.

¹⁰⁶ See M. Dei, *La scuola in Italia*, Quarta edizione, Bologna: il Mulino, 2012, p. 26.

¹⁰⁷ See G. Ricuperati, pp. 317-318.

¹⁰⁸ See DECRETO LEGISLATIVO 16 aprile 1994, n. 297 “Approvazione del testo unico delle disposizioni legislative vigenti in materia di istruzione, relative alle scuole di ogni ordine e grado” (GU Serie Generale n.115 del 19-05-1994 - Suppl. Ordinario n. 79).

municipalities in charge) led to absolute centralization, and then to the definition of a complete horizontal and vertical subsidiarity. As it has been already said, the legislative basis of this very important last turning point are the Bassanini-Berlinguer reform and the one of Title V of the Constitution, particularly Article 117¹⁰⁹. Indeed, the combined provisions of these innovations have defined the foundational elements of schools' autonomy. Specifically, Article 21 of L. 15th March 1997 No.59 (the already mentioned Bassanini 1) grants legal status to schools together with organizational and didactic autonomy, specifically stating that: "In order to achieve the autonomy of schools, the functions of the central and peripheral administration of public education regarding the management of educational services, without prejudice to the unitary and national levels of exercising the right to study as well as the elements common to the whole public school system concerning management and planning defined by the state, are progressively conferred on the schools"¹¹⁰. In this context, the decision was made to grant autonomy to the schools and to not delegate the management of them to the regions because, as Berlinguer himself has written, it was feared that transferring power to the regions would simply produce as many administrative centralisms as there are regions¹¹¹.

Autonomy defined in this way is divided into organizational and didactic and, specifically:

1. "organizational autonomy is aimed at achieving the flexibility, diversification, efficiency and effectiveness of the school's service, at the integration and best use of resources and facilities, at the introduction of innovative technologies, and at coordination with the local context. It expresses itself freely, including by overcoming constraints related to unitarity of the hours of lessons and of the classes' groups, and the ways teachers are organized and utilized, in accordance with the aim of optimizing the use of human, financial, technological, material and temporal resources, without prejudice to the annual number of days of educational activities set at the national level, the distribution of educational activities over no less than five days a week, compliance with the overall annual service obligations of teachers set by collective agreements which can also be fulfilled on the basis of a special multi-week schedule instead of on a five-day week schedule"¹¹². It thus becomes possible to overcome some

¹⁰⁹ See La Costituzione, Parte II, Ordinamento della Repubblica, Titolo V, Le Regioni, le Provincie, i Comuni, Art.117.

¹¹⁰ LEGGE 15 marzo 1997, n. 59, Art.21.

¹¹¹ See L. Berlinguer, *La scuola nuova*, Bari-Roma: Laterza, 2001, p. 38.

¹¹² LEGGE 15 marzo 1997, n. 59, Art.21 comma 8.

planning rigidity, although the need to comply with standards set at the national level, which cannot be disregarded, is reaffirmed (for example, teachers' service obligations, annual number of teaching days);

2. “didactic autonomy is aimed at the pursuit of general objectives of the national education system regarding freedom of teaching, freedom of educational choice for families, and the right to learn. It takes the form of a free and planned choice of teaching methods, tools, structure and schedules, to be employed in compliance with the possible plurality of methodological options, and in every initiative that is an expression of planning freedom, including the possible provision of optional, elective or additional classes, in line with students’ educational needs”¹¹³.

In addition to organizational and didactic autonomy there is autonomy regarding “research, experimentation and development”, as defined in Article 6 of D.P.R. 275/1999¹¹⁴, dealing with, among other things, staff training, methodological and disciplinary innovation, didactical research, and integration between different schools. As already mentioned, it was actually through a series of implementation measures that the details of this new type of school were defined, alongside the reorganization of its governing bodies, aimed at enhancing the contribution that the various components of the school and local context could make to the new system (D.Lgs. 233/1999)¹¹⁵. The constitutional reform of 2001 added to these definitions with the provision that the state has exclusive legislative power over the general regulations on education, whilst areas subject to concurrent state-regional legislation include “education, without prejudice to the autonomy of schools and with the exception of education and vocational training”¹¹⁶, which, like all areas not explicitly mentioned as exclusively the state’s responsibility or as a concurrent responsibility, lie within the purview of the regions. This revision of Article 117, in the part reserved for concurrent responsibility, seems to at least partially conflict with that of Article 33¹¹⁷ and has therefore been the source of many controversies brought before the Constitutional Court¹¹⁸; however, this problem does not undermine

¹¹³ LEGGE 15 marzo 1997, n. 59, Art.21 comma 9.

¹¹⁴ DECRETO DEL PRESIDENTE DELLA REPUBBLICA 8 marzo 1999, n. 275, Art.6.

¹¹⁵ DECRETO LEGISLATIVO 30 giugno 1999, n. 233.

¹¹⁶ See La Costituzione, Parte II, Ordinamento della Repubblica, Titolo V, Le Regioni, le Provincie, i Comuni, Art.117

¹¹⁷ “The Republic lays down the general rules on education and establishes state schools for all levels and grades” La Costituzione, Parte I, Diritti e doveri dei cittadini, Titolo II, Rapporti etico-sociali, Art.33.

¹¹⁸ See R. Morzenti Pellegrini, pp. 23-24.

the autonomy of schools, which, on the contrary, gained further recognition with the reform, being explicitly mentioned in Article 117.

The concrete realization of this autonomy in schools stems from the POF (later PTOF as already mentioned), described as “the identity card with which the school defines itself in relation to families, students and the local context”¹¹⁹ or, to quote the letter of the law that establishes it, “the fundamental, cornerstone document of schools’ cultural and planning identity”¹²⁰. Since 2015 it is drawn up by the teaching staff “based on the guidelines for the school’s activities and the operational and administrative decisions made by the school’s manager”¹²¹ (this was one of the most debated points among those interested in the so-called *Buona Scuola* reform - with supporters of the importance of the leadership role of school managers and supporters of democratic schools lined up on opposing sides) and approved by the school’s *Consiglio di Istituto* (Board of Governors) by the end of the October preceding the three-year period referred to and reviewed annually¹²². It contains, amongst other things, an analysis of the context, the strategic decisions made based on the priorities gleaned from the Self-Assessment Report (so-called RAV), the academic programme, the organisational structure, the professional training plan for teaching and auxiliary staff, and the school’s needs in terms of material, infrastructural and staffing resources. Given the complexity of preparing the PTOF (in the Italian school system, as it will be seen in the course of this research, the acronym is king), the Ministry of Education has a portal to help schools to draft it, complete with FAQs, templates and video tutorials and makes the data it contains public through its single online archive, also established by L. 107/2015. To these elements, which were, as it will be seen in the next part, partially revised in the reforms of the 2000s, one must add the establishment, again with L. 107/2015, of the so-called ‘autonomy staff’ (*organico dell’autonomia* in Italian), that is to say, the ensemble of regular posts, special needs teachers posts, and posts aimed at enhancing what the school’s educational offer, which are assigned to the schools in accordance with the needs defined in the PTOF¹²³.

According to Berlinguer, one of the promoters and fervent supporters of this model, autonomy should pursue “the goal of creating an open school, able to model itself on the students, centred around the

¹¹⁹ M. Dei, p. 28.

¹²⁰ DECRETO DEL PRESIDENTE DELLA REPUBBLICA 8 marzo 1999, n. 275 art. 3 comma 1

¹²¹ LEGGE 13 luglio 2015, n. 107, art. 1 comma 4.

¹²² Ibid., art. 1 comma 12.

¹²³ See LEGGE 13 luglio 2015, n. 107, art. 1 comma 5.

teaching-learning relationship, and capable of customizing curricula based on a solid general education and on openness to the local area”¹²⁴. However, Berlinguer was aware of the risks associated with the possibility of the gap between schools widening, in part due to the different local contexts they operate in¹²⁵, and so it is not surprising that the debate about autonomy – autonomy which gained support with time because it was seen as particularly effective at moving towards personalized learning and at supporting the educational success of all students and, therefore, at achieving EU objectives, as it will be seen better in the second chapter – is anything but over. To give an example using two authors already cited several times in these pages, Marcello Dei argues that although school autonomy is viewed favourably by public opinion as a valid alternative to state bureaucracy, the emphasis placed on it is nothing other than one of the forms of the concrete realization of liberalism and of the process that aims to change the nature of public services “provided uniformly throughout the nation”¹²⁶; in contrast, according to Aldo Sandulli, the circulars and explanatory notes issued by the Ministry of Education continue to strongly constrict school autonomy, and the regional school boards overly influence school managers because they have too much power over them¹²⁷. In general, very different opinions persist about the purpose of school autonomy and the opportunities to limit or strengthen it; what is certain is that before its introduction the differences between regions and areas were by no means more limited than they are now and, at the same time, the achievement of that capacity for dialogue between schools and the social context they operate in, which was among the expectations and goals of the legislature, still lies far ahead¹²⁸.

¹²⁴ L. Berlinguer, *La scuola nuova*, p. 35.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹²⁶ M. Dei, p. 29.

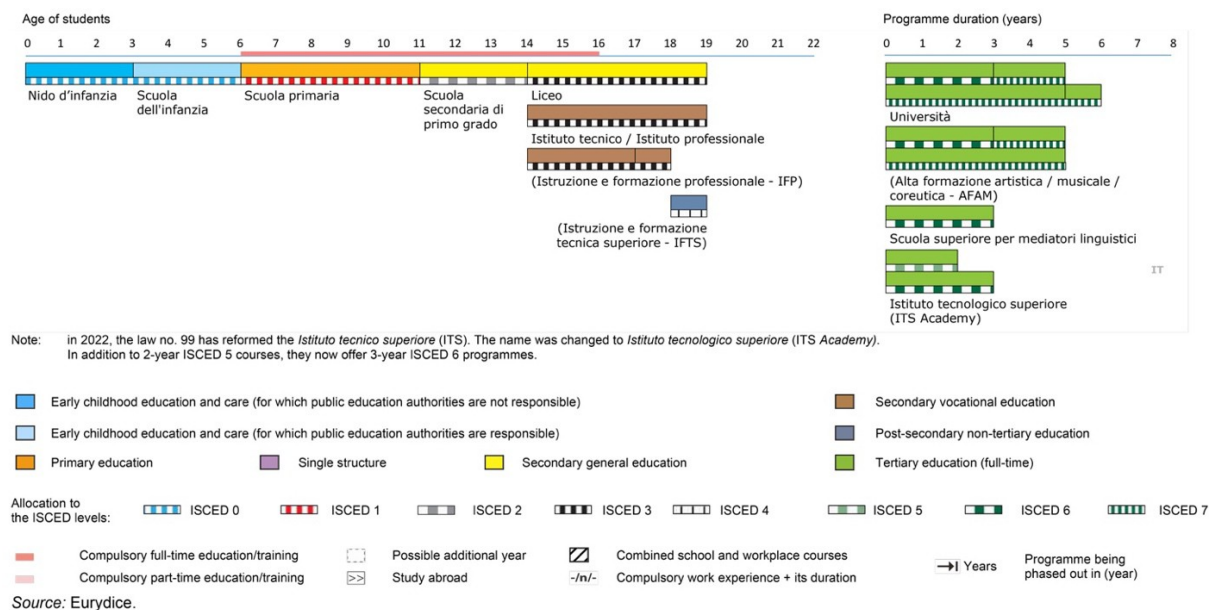
¹²⁷ See A. Sandulli, p. 555.

¹²⁸ See R. Morzenti Pellegrini, p. 3.

1.2: School Cycles: The foundation stone of Italian Schools

Fig.1¹²⁹

Italy – 2022/2023



The reform of school cycles is the minefield of the Italian educational system, something that is talked about at conferences, in specialist magazines and on websites on the sector, in electoral manifestos¹³⁰, and sometimes even in Parliament, but something which people are greatly afraid of putting into practice. In fact, reforming the cycles means, first and foremost, having and then practically implementing a vision of education that differs from the existing one, considering that Gentile's structure has been only altered by the advent of the unified middle school introduced in 1962 and partially by Moratti's reform in 2003. An exception to this conservatism, which according to some was due to a desire to maintain the class structure of the education system¹³¹ even within the republican context of 'democratic schools' envisaged by the Constitution as 'open to all', was the attempt made by Luigi Berlinguer from 1997 to 2000; a reform that never came into force, being promptly repealed before it could come into effect. Before examining the details of this attempt, the reasons behind its drawing up, and those that led to its immediate abandonment, one must, however,

¹²⁹ European Commission, Eurydice website, Italy, Overview.

¹³⁰ See, for example, this article on the League's proposal in its electoral programme for the 2022 general election: La tecnica della scuola, *Riforma dei cicli, obbligo a 5 anni, scuola primaria di 4: è la proposta della Lega*, 9th August 2022.

¹³¹ See G. Ricuperati, pp. 97-109.

take a step back and clarify the stages passed through to reach this type of school structure at the threshold of the 21st century.

Here, as in the previous pages, the Casati Law of 1859 is taken as a starting point, since it was, as it has been seen, the first law on education extended to the newly united Italy. As already mentioned, the organization of schools provided for the direct management of elementary education by the municipalities, free of charge, divided into a compulsory lower cycle and an upper one of two years each, for a total of four years; from 10 years of age and up, education was divided into classical and technical, both borne partly by the municipalities and partly borne by the state. Only the classical education, aimed at training the ruling class, gave access, after the three years of high school, to university. Aside from the effort aimed at reducing illiteracy and raising the general level of education of Italians, the strongly classist structure of this model is highly evident¹³². It is no coincidence, therefore, that Gentile did not have to detach himself far from this model when envisaging the new fascist school. Prior to this, Coppino's reforms (1877) had raised the duration of elementary school to five years (bringing the compulsory part from two years to three), and Orlando's (1904) had brought it back to four, but added a two-year 'popular course' to the elementary cycle to bring the age of obligatory education to 12; in fact, at the end of the fourth year of elementary school, it was possible - as a result of the Orlando Law - to enter secondary school after taking a final exam or to attend popular school for two years. Once again one can see how the intention of raising the level of education runs in tandem with a desire to maintain a structure with a strong separation between the classes.

In 1923 Gentile reorganized the school cycles without radically changing the Casati framework and whilst taking account of the debate that emerged in the 1905 Royal Commission, which some great intellectuals and experts of the time had participated in (including, for example, Gaetano Salvemini)¹³³. "Even an incipiently dictatorial government and a minister who could blast away with royal decrees [...] could do nothing but gather and organize what they believed was best, what had already been affirmed by the teachers and educators of the previous decades, if they wanted to build something enduring"¹³⁴. The Gentile Reform, certainly enduring, therefore consisted of a series of

¹³² Ibid., p. 70.

¹³³ See G. Gentile, p. 312.

¹³⁴ T. De Mauro in L. Berlinguer, *La scuola nuova*, p. IX.

legislative interventions, taking the form, overall, of an organic intervention, the first since the Casati Law and, I would say, the last through to the present day. It is no coincidence that neither of these reforms had to follow the normal parliamentary route. With regard to the second, the measures that it gave substance to were all provided for by law 1601/1922, *Delegation of full powers to the Government of the King for the reorganization of the tax system and public administration*¹³⁵.

In the new system devised by Gentile, at the end of the five-year compulsory elementary school¹³⁶ - preceded by a non-compulsory preparatory stage - one had access to a three-year supplementary course or a 'complementary school' (a three-year post-elementary school), with no further options for continuing school afterwards; alternatively, one could enter a technical institute, first lower and then upper, for a total of seven years. Teacher teaching institutes lasted the same period and were designed to replace the 'normal schools' (the previous schools for teachers); in addition, there were girls' schools, specifically designed to free the 'normal schools' from girls who wanted access to education but did not want to become teachers. Another option after elementary school, was enrolling in a gymnasium (lower and upper) and then in a classical high school, the only possible route to all university faculties, or in the scientific high school, which gave access to the technical-scientific university faculties. For the first time, a state exam was introduced for the end of high school studies (which Benedetto Croce¹³⁷ had already unsuccessfully tried to include)¹³⁸. As Gentile himself clarified, this framework served to ensure that quality schools were closed to the "weak and incapable", who instead had a totally separate track reserved for them on the educational journey¹³⁹. The objective was, once again, not so much to raise the level of education (although the age of compulsory schooling was raised to 14¹⁴⁰ in compliance with the Washington Agreement)¹⁴¹, but to separate the classes and ensure that each type of school produced the numbers needed, on the one hand, for the new world of work, and on the other, for the intellectual class.

¹³⁵ See LEGGE 3 DICEMBRE 1922, n. 1601, "Delegazione di pieni poteri al Governo del Re per il riordinamento dell'ordinamento tributario e della pubblica amministrazione" G.U., Roma - Venerdì 15 dicembre 1922, n.203

¹³⁶ See REGIO DECRETO 1 OTTOBRE 1923, n. 2185, "Ordinamento dei gradi scolastici e dei programmi didattici dell'istruzione elementare", G.U., Roma - Mercoledì, 24 ottobre 1923, n.250.

¹³⁷ Benedetto Croce, Minister of Education 1920-1921.

¹³⁸ See G. Gentile, p. 316.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 246.

¹⁴⁰ See REGIO DECRETO 31 DICEMBRE 1923, n. 3120, "Disposizioni sull'obbligo dell'istruzione", G.U., Roma - Sabato 2 febbraio 1924, n. 28.

¹⁴¹ See G. Riciperati, p. 123 and ILO, International Labour Conference, First Annual Meeting, Washington 1919.

Although a policy of “retouching”¹⁴² characterized the whole of the Fascist era, to the great annoyance of Gentile himself¹⁴³, the general structure of his reform was not substantially affected by his successors, apart from the total failure of the girls' high schools and of the complementary schools that did not reduce, as their promoter had hoped, the ever greater influx of students into technical education¹⁴⁴.

Reading the debate that took place on this issue in the Constituent Assembly, one can see how the need for a “democratic school system”¹⁴⁵ meant the Republic’s founding parties were very clear on the freedom to teach, on opening education up to everyone, and on the principle that universal compulsory education comes with the obligation of universal free education¹⁴⁶. The idea was to ensure that “each class, each category” had “the opportunity to allow its best elements to move up, so that each of them can temporarily, transitorily, for that brief moment of life that destiny grants each of us, contribute their work, their best personal qualities, to the progress of society”¹⁴⁷.

However, there was no room to discuss an overall reorganization of the cycles, whose structure remained substantially unchanged – as it has already been said - until 1962 when, with Law no. 1859¹⁴⁸, the revolution of the unified middle school was introduced, thereby finally implementing the constitutional text which provided for compulsory and free school for all¹⁴⁹. The idea of a single type of middle school had been opposed by very different figures, from Salvemini¹⁵⁰ to Gentile, whilst the supporters of the project included the fascist minister Bottai, who had already tried to introduce it in 1940 during his ministry. Supported by Socialists (with the fundamental contribution of Tristano Codignola, member of the Constituent Assembly and point of reference for his party on school

¹⁴² G. Ricuperati, p. 90.

¹⁴³ See G. Gentile, pp. 373-375.

¹⁴⁴ See G. Ricuperati, p. 90.

¹⁴⁵ See P. Calamandrei, *Discorso a Difesa della scuola pubblica* pronunciato in occasione del III Congresso ADSN (Associazione a difesa della scuola pubblica), in *Scuola democratica*, periodico di battaglia per una nuova scuola, Roma, iv, suppl. to no. 2, 20th March 1950, pp. 1-5.

¹⁴⁶ See Ambrosoli pp. 165-215.

¹⁴⁷ P. Calamandrei, p. 2.

¹⁴⁸ See LEGGE 31 dicembre 1962, n. 1859 “Istituzione e ordinamento della scuola media statale” (GU Serie Generale n.27 del 30-01-1963).

¹⁴⁹ In fact the rapporteur to the Chamber of Deputies, Scaglia – a Christian Democrat– highlighted how “all Italian legislation related to schools for eleven- to fourteen-year-olds, prior to the promulgation of the Republic’s Constitution, was based on a rigid and clear distinction between schools for those who were destined to continue their studies in secondary schools and universities, and schools for those who had to be directly and immediately entered into active life”, see the VIII Standing Committee’s report No. 4160-A.

¹⁵⁰ See G. Ricuperati, p. 82.

legislation)¹⁵¹, Social Democrats, Republicans and Christian Democrats, the reform found firm opposition from the conservative right¹⁵² and the Liberals¹⁵³, and it did not receive the assent of the PCI¹⁵⁴, which – in the words of Deputy Adriano Seroni – saw the law as a downward compromise aimed not at breaking the old system, but at perpetuating an unacceptable classist element¹⁵⁵. Although today middle schools lie at the centre of many of the reflections on the inadequacy of the structure of school cycles, then the reform marked a very important qualitative leap in the country's overall level of education¹⁵⁶ and a significant step in the reduction of the inequalities in society which, until then, schools had mirrored and at times even accentuated.

The structure of the Italian school system thus defined, divided into five years of primary school, three years of lower secondary (middle) school and five years of upper secondary (high) school would survive, with some adjustments regarding the programmes and policies that have been already mentioned and the dropping of the single teacher model in primary schools in favour of the 'didactic module', which took place in 1990¹⁵⁷, until the end of the 1990s, when Education Minister Luigi Berlinguer presented Parliament with the *Framework Law on the Reorganization of Educational Cycles*, approved in February 2000. In the eyes of its sponsor, this reorganization was part of a 'mosaic'¹⁵⁸ aimed at effecting a real structural reform of the school system, toppling Gentile's edifice, and finally fully implementing the constitutional provisions given that "too much old stuff has interposed between the light of the Constitution and the virtuous practices of teachers and educators for schools to truly, fully, calmly and in accordance with the law, take the new paths that even the farsighted Constitution has exhorted us to look at"¹⁵⁹. Berlinguer's plan started from the need to overcome the bottleneck and ambiguity of middle school, which had proven to be one of the determining factors behind early school leaving¹⁶⁰. Schooling would be divided into two cycles,

¹⁵¹ See G. Ricuperati p. 245.

¹⁵² See the report by opposition rapporteurs Deputies Angelo Nicosia and Antonio Grilli.

¹⁵³ See the report by opposition rapporteur Deputy Vittorio Badini Confalonieri.

¹⁵⁴ Italian Communist Party.

¹⁵⁵ See the stenographic transcript of the session of 13th December 1962, Chamber of Deputies, pp. 36268–36273.

¹⁵⁶ See ISTAT - Time Series Table 7.1.1 Resident Population Aged 6 and over by Educational Attainment, Region and Geographical Division at Census - Years 1951-2011 Censuses.

¹⁵⁷ See LEGGE 5 giugno 1990, n. 148 "Riforma dell'ordinamento della scuola elementare" (GU Serie Generale n.138 del 15-06-1990).

¹⁵⁸ L. Berlinguer, *La scuola nuova*, Introduction.

¹⁵⁹ T. De Mauro in Berlinguer, *La scuola nuova*, p. XII.

¹⁶⁰ See L. Berlinguer, *La scuola nuova*, pp. 72-73.

preceded by pre-school and followed by university and a new non-university channel of post-high school diploma professional training. The first cycle, also called ‘basic school’ would last for seven years instead of the eight that the sum of elementary and middle school produced; this reduction was driven by the desire to shorten the length of study by one year, thereby enabling students to graduate from high school at 18, as in other European countries, rather than at 19¹⁶¹. It was conceived not as the ‘sum of two chunks’ but as a ‘united path’ that would inherit the merits of the successful primary school approach, also recognized by international statistics, putting the school curriculum at the centre as a tool for linking direct and indirect experience and the knowledge of subjects. The second cycle, of five years, would maintain the same duration as the previous framework, but differ in its insistence on a common basis for the first two years in terms of the various courses of study (which would be reduced in number, given the proliferation of the previous years). This aims to put every student in a position where they can master certain basic knowledge and certain key skills, which are fully-fledged ‘mental structures’ capable of generating the acquisition of other knowledge and skills¹⁶². As it has been said, this reform will never see the light of day, because of the opposition from not only the centre-right, who came into office shortly after and made the repeal of this law one of the cornerstones of its electoral programme¹⁶³, but also from a significant segment of the trade unions (not only Cobas and SNALS, but the CISL as well) and of the “conservative and ideological left” as defined by Berlinguer himself¹⁶⁴. As such, despite the centre-left reform being the product of long parliamentary debate and a detailed study by almost 300 experts, and despite the efforts of Berlinguer’s successor, Tullio De Mauro, to pursue its implementation, it was almost inevitably going to undergo reconsideration with Letizia Moratti’s accession to the post of Minister of Education. The centre-left complained en masse about this drive to turn back time, offspring of a classist mindset¹⁶⁵; in fact, the freshly approved reform of the cycles was completely cancelled, and there was a return to the previous model, the one still in force today. This was done using an enabling act¹⁶⁶, which was also strongly

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁶³ See the interview with Francesco D’Onofrio, former Minister in *La Repubblica*, 30th October 2000

¹⁶⁴ L. Berlinguer, *La scuola nuova*, p. 18.

¹⁶⁵ See this article with some statements by members of the centre-left opposition: *la Repubblica*, *Scuola*, *Berlinguer attacca "Molto rumore per nulla"*, 1st February 2002.

¹⁶⁶ See LEGGE 28 marzo 2003, n. 53 “Delega al Governo per la definizione delle norme generali sull’istruzione e dei livelli essenziali delle prestazioni in materia di istruzione e formazione professionale” (GU Serie Generale n.77 del 02-04-2003).

contested as an inadequate instrument for doing so. With legislative decrees 59/2004¹⁶⁷ and 226/2005¹⁶⁸, a new reform of the cycles was implemented, and as envisaged by the enabling act of 2003, the cycles were reorganized into first and second, both concluding with a state exam. The first consisted of five years of primary school (with a first year aimed at attaining basic learning skills followed by two two-year periods) and three years of lower secondary school (with one two-year period followed by a third year of consolidation); the second cycle unfolded in upper secondary schools, and was divided into a system of high schools on the one side, and vocational education and training on the other, distinct but of equal rank. The high schools (eight types, organized by the course of studies), last five years, consisting of two two-year periods and a final year. As far as vocational education and training is concerned, it is up to the regions to manage them in compliance with the levels of performance set at the national level; the qualifications obtained at the end of these paths, lasting at least four years, give access to a state exam and therefore to university provided that a specific additional one-year course is taken. This distinction was defined by the parliamentary opposition as “odious discrimination between types of institutions that inevitably correspond to differentiated social destinies”¹⁶⁹.

Indeed, it is difficult not to see how this reform effected a return to the separation of paths mentality, which seemed to have been supplanted, as it has been seen, since the advent of the single type of middle school in the 1960s - despite the difficulty of proceeding with a real reform of secondary education - but which was actually being re-proposed here. In the second section of this chapter the elements of this reform will be examined in depth, placing it within its political context and highlighting also some elements of continuity in terms of the decisions made by Berlinguer and the centre-left. Suffice it to say here that, as a result of the repeal of the Berlinguer reform, the structure of the school cycles - which acts as the foundation stone that the Italian education system rests on - has remained substantially unchanged since 1962, in other words, for over 60 years.

¹⁶⁷ See DECRETO LEGISLATIVO 19 febbraio 2004, n. 59 “Definizione delle norme generali relative alla scuola dell’infanzia e al primo ciclo dell’istruzione, a norma dell’articolo 1 della legge 28 marzo 2003, n. 53” (GU Serie Generale n.51 del 02-03-2004 - Suppl. Ordinario n. 31).

¹⁶⁸ See DECRETO LEGISLATIVO 17 ottobre 2005, n. 226 “Norme generali e livelli essenziali delle prestazioni relativi al secondo ciclo del sistema educativo di istruzione e formazione, a norma dell’articolo 2 della legge 28 marzo 2003, n. 53” (GU Serie Generale n.257 del 04-11-2005 - Suppl. Ordinario n. 175).

¹⁶⁹ See stenographic transcript of the session No.263 Tuesday 11th February 2003 Chamber of Deputies, speech by the opposition rapporteur Titti De Simone.

1.3 Compulsory Schooling: The Long Run to Mass Literacy

“Education is compulsory for at least 10 years and concerns the 6-16 age band. Fulfilling this obligation is directed towards attaining an upper secondary school diploma or a professional qualification, following a course of at three years, by the age of 18. Compulsory education is free”¹⁷⁰. This is what one finds in the section on compulsory schooling on the Ministry of Education’s (now the Ministry of Education and Merit’s, as said) website, which just under this also explains the distinction between compulsory schooling and compulsory training, introduced only since the late 1990s. Notwithstanding these regulations, it should be pointed out that in Italy the problem of early school leaving continues to affect 11,5% of people between the ages of 15 and 24, who appear not to have fulfilled the obligation established by law¹⁷¹. It is the children that schools lose who were dear to Don Lorenzo Milani and his *Scuola di Barbiana*¹⁷².

Before going into the details of how the current system functions in terms of fulfilling the obligation, also laid down in Article 34 of the Constitution¹⁷³, it is useful, in this case as well, to briefly retrace the steps that have led to the laws in force today. To gain a better understanding of the change that has taken place, starting from the establishment of the Republic after the Second World War, some data on the literacy rate will be used here¹⁷⁴, bearing in mind that at the start of the unified nation, in 1861, the first national census recorded that 74.7% of people were illiterate, while ten years later it was 68.8%¹⁷⁵.

As it has already been said, it was the Casati Law that introduced compulsory education into the unified Italy. In fact, Article 376 says that fathers or those who act in their stead “have the obligation to procure, in the way they deem most convenient, for their children of both sexes who are of age to

¹⁷⁰ Ministry of Education and Merit website.

¹⁷¹ See Save The Children’s report 2022.

¹⁷² Don Milani, *Lettera a una professoressa*, 1a ed. 1967, Firenze: Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, 1990. Regarding the innovation introduced by the single type of middle school, see this passage, “the new middle school exists, there is only one kind, it is compulsory, it is disliked by those on the right. It is a good thing. It makes me sad just to know that it is in your hands. Will you make it classist again like the other one?”, p. 30.

¹⁷³ “Lower education, provided for at least eight years, is compulsory and free of charge” La Costituzione, Parte I, Diritti e doveri dei cittadini, Titolo II, Rapporti etico-sociali, Art. 34.

¹⁷⁴ Data are mostly taken from ISTAT - Time Series Table 7.1.1 Resident Population Aged 6 and over by Educational Attainment, Region and Geographical Division at Census - Years 1951-2011 Censuses, and Marcello Dei’s *La scuola in Italia*.

¹⁷⁵ See L. Ambrosoli, p. 17.

attend the public lower elementary schools, the education that is given in them”¹⁷⁶. However, indeed, the schools, as it has been seen, remained under the management of the municipalities, and in many contexts financial constraints prevented them from being established. Therefore, in a context marked by a total lack of uniformity in an elementary sector that was “rarely public or, if such, entrusted to the municipalities”, it was easy for this provision to remain completely unimplemented¹⁷⁷. The question of this obligation - also bearing in mind that there was a clear reference to this issue in the Civil Code, in the section on rights and duties in relation to offspring - was seen as one of great importance and was at the centre of several debates in Parliament in the first decades of the unified nation. Among these, one that stands out is the attempt by Cesare Correnti, identified by Education Minister Scialoja as the rapporteur for his reform project, to bring compulsory education up to five years and make it effectively enforceable by insisting on the state’s right to impose this obligation and on the importance of education to rebuilding a sense of freedom after so many years of subjection¹⁷⁸. Among the main problems was the question of schooling being free, which in Correnti's report was inextricably linked to the obligation to attend, a point that was contested by a part of the Right because of the costs it would have entailed. The divisions on this aspect ended up determining - together with De Sanctis's attempt to overly broaden the scope of the reform by assigning, for example, to the state, the task of organizing schools, and to the municipalities, only that of supervising them¹⁷⁹ - the failure of the reform project. The secret ballot on it in 1874 finished with 107 in favour and 140 against¹⁸⁰. It was Michele Coppino – already a deputy at the time of Correnti's attempt and therefore aware of the importance of the debate on this issue – who brought compulsory schooling up to three years in 1877¹⁸¹. Little or nothing changed regarding the issue of municipal schools, even though the need for free schools had been reaffirmed¹⁸² and sanctions had been introduced for

¹⁷⁶ LEGGE in data 13 novembre 1859 sul Riordinamento dell'Istruzione pubblica, Art. 376.

¹⁷⁷ G. Ricuperati, p. 16.

¹⁷⁸ See stenographic transcript of the session of 22nd January 1874, Chamber of Deputies, speech by Cesare Correnti, p. 821.

¹⁷⁹ See stenographic transcript of the session of 23rd January 1874, Chamber of Deputies, speech by Francesco De Sanctis pp. 846-853 in which he declares, for example, “Now, gentlemen, do you believe that compulsory education is only this: to fully retain all of the ancient mechanism and then add a penalty? Anyone holding this opinion would show that they had embarked on this path blithely and did not have a clear conscience about what they must do”

¹⁸⁰ See stenographic transcript of the session of 4th February 1874, Chamber of Deputies p. 1175.

¹⁸¹ Results: 208 in favour 20 against, see stenographic transcript of the session of 10th March 1877, Chamber of Deputies, p. 1981.

¹⁸² See Coppino’s speech on this point: “As for the tax, according to the law we are discussing, I was pleased to see that the reasons for free schooling were accepted, because they are right” stenographic transcript of the session of 9th March 1877, Chamber of Deputies p. 1926.

noncomplying parents (the fines, moreover, were initially intended to reward the most diligent pupils, something which ended up punishing the poor in favour of the rich). Notwithstanding this, because of the stricter controls introduced by the law, which required the municipalities to compile lists of those who came under the obligation and to set the fines, and the role of the provincial administrations in automatically allocating funds destined to establish municipal schools where there were none, in 1901 the illiteracy rate stood at 20 percentage points lower than that recorded before the Coppino Law, that is, at 48.7%¹⁸³.

The Orlando law of 1904, as it has been already seen, brought compulsory education up to four years (so to 12 years of age), allocating funds to the municipalities with the most precarious finances and promoting support for less affluent families (textbooks, school meals and school clothing) to encourage both the establishment of schools and children's attendance¹⁸⁴; however, this was not enough to overcome the problem of the lack of schools, structurally linked to the governance model. This is also why a very intense debate soon opened on the subject of the so-called assumption of responsibility for schools by the state, that is to say, on the shift from regulations which limited the state to obliging municipalities with a certain population to establish schools, to the establishment and management of schools by the state itself. In a speech by the Republican deputy Mirabelli during the discussion on the address in response to the Crown's speech of 1909, one can clearly see the view that would soon be shared by the entire Parliament: "if one really wants to uproot the bad plant of illiteracy, one must clearly say that responsibility for schools must be assumed by the state: all the more so as this converges with the supreme need of the South, where the assumption of responsibility by the state is an indefectible necessity"¹⁸⁵. In fact, the point was that the Casati Law had been designed for the most literate areas of the kingdom, Lombardy and Piedmont¹⁸⁶, and automatically extended to areas where compulsory education could never have become effective without the intervention and control of the state given their financial precariousness, the striking lack of teachers and schools, and the wary disposition of many families. With the Daneo-Credaro Law of 1911¹⁸⁷, this need for uniformity was finally acknowledged and the state was entrusted with the management the

¹⁸³ See L. Ambrosoli, pp. 19-20.

¹⁸⁴ See LEGGE 8 LUGLIO 1904, n. 407 "Provvedimenti per la scuola e pei maestri elementari", GU Roma, Giovedì 4 agosto, n. 182.

¹⁸⁵ Stenographic transcript of the session of 30th March 1909, Chamber of Deputies pp. 94-95.

¹⁸⁶ See G. Ricuperati, p. 43.

¹⁸⁷ LEGGE 4 giugno 1911, n. 487.

elementary schools, and with them the teachers' salaries, although opponents of this approach included prominent figures such as Gaetano Salvemini¹⁸⁸. In the year the Daneo-Credaro Law was approved and finally made schooling a state public service, the census of the kingdom's population still recorded more than 11 million illiterates¹⁸⁹, a clear sign that the introduction of compulsory schooling over fifty years before had delivered totally insufficient results in terms of mass education. Ten years later, in 1921, the illiteracy rate had dropped by more than 12 percentage points, from 37.9% to 27.3%¹⁹⁰.

It was Giovanni Gentile – based, as it has already been said, on what had been established in Washington following an international conference on work that set a minimum parameter that had to be respected - who raised the age for compulsory schooling to 14¹⁹¹ by, as it has been seen, putting together a complex programme of reform to reorganize primary and secondary education. It can be said that, beyond the numerous references to be found in the stenographers' accounts of parliamentary debates on what was happening in the rest of Europe and the world - it is startling, for example, how in his report on the Orlando Law, the rapporteur Credaro devotes about half of his discourse on the law to comparisons with other countries (Germany, Austria, Belgium, France, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Portugal, Russia and Scotland)¹⁹² - this was the first that a national provision was clearly influenced by international agreements. In order to comply with this rule, having abolished Orlando's 'popular course', Gentile promoted the establishment of the complementary school, "a middle ground between middle school and post-elementary courses" which gave students access, once they had attained the elementary school certificate, to the lowest grade of state work¹⁹³ (but did not consolidate this decision by providing adequate resources to allocate to the municipalities, which therefore continued to decide whether or not to establish such

¹⁸⁸ Gaetano Salvemini argued, as recalled by Gaetano Mosca in this debate, that in the South private schools produced better results than public ones because they were more capable of responding to the needs of rural families, and therefore the state taking responsibility for elementary schools would mean further distancing schools from these families, see stenographic transcript of the session of 16th February 1910, p. 5030.

¹⁸⁹ See ISTAT, *Population Census of the Kingdom of Italy as of 10th June 10, 1911*, Vol 3: *The Literacy of the Present Population*.

¹⁹⁰ See L. Ambrosoli, p. 25.

¹⁹¹ See REGIO DECRETO 31 DICEMBRE 1923, n. 3120.

¹⁹² Report of the committee on the draft of the Orlando Law's provisions for elementary schools and teachers, sitting 21st May 1904, pp. 5-11.

¹⁹³ G. Ricuperati, p. 125.

courses, that remained mostly at their expense)¹⁹⁴. It was replaced in 1929 by the vocational schools – so called ‘*avviamento*’¹⁹⁵- given the evident failure caused by the simultaneous desertion of the petite bourgeoisie and the upper proletariat¹⁹⁶. None of the adjustments (*ritocchi* in Italian) made in the Fascist era to the structure of the educational system devised by Gentile changed the fundamental structure of compulsory schooling; the first ISTAT survey after the founding of the Republic, conducted in 1951, revealed an illiteracy rate that was decidedly lower than the one measured thirty years before, but still very high: 12.9% of Italians were illiterate (over 24% in the South and on the Islands, but under 3% in the North-West) and 17.9% of literate people still had no educational qualifications¹⁹⁷. In short, Italy continued to have an enormous problem when it came to compliance with compulsory schooling as regulated by law, and it is no coincidence that this was one of the elements discussed in the Constituent Assembly, which wanted to insert in Article 34 (Article 28 of the draft of the Constitution approved by the commission of seventy-five) an explicit statement about compulsory and free education for all. The rapporteurs of this part were Aldo Moro and Concetto Marchesi, who had reached a preliminary agreement on the statement “Primary and post-elementary teaching, given for at least eight years, is compulsory and free, up to the age of at least fourteen”¹⁹⁸. This provision was unanimously approved on 29th October 1946 by the first subcommittee, despite some remarks by Ottavio Mastrojanni. In the final text of the Draft Constitution drawn up by the commission of seventy-five, a simplified version emerged, without specifying the age or type of school the compulsory education referred to: “Primary teaching, given for at least eight years, is compulsory and free”. The wording was then modified again – at the suggestion of Codignola, who pointed out that education, not teaching, was compulsory – as follows: “Primary education, given for at least eight years, is compulsory and free” and, although the word ‘primary’ had been strongly contested by Paolo Emilio Taviani, it was approved in this form in the sitting of 30th April 1947. Whilst Calamandrei had already pointed out in the sitting of the Constituent Assembly on 4th March

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 123.

¹⁹⁵ “The supplementary vocational training courses, the vocational training schools and the complementary schools are organized into a single type with cultural and professional programs respectively aligned with those of the complementary schools and the vocational training schools. The courses and schools, organized in this way, assume the name of vocational secondary schools” LEGGE 7 gennaio 1929, n. 8. Coordinamento di istituti e scuole, già alla dipendenza del Ministero dell'economia nazionale, con istituti e scuole dipendenti dal Ministero della pubblica istruzione, G.U. Roma – Sabato 12 Gennaio 1929, p. 166.

¹⁹⁶ G. Ricuperati, p. 143.

¹⁹⁷ See ISTAT - Time Series Table 7.1.1.

¹⁹⁸ Constituent Assembly, Sitting 18th October 1946 first sub-committee.

1947 that it was necessary to clarify in a preamble that the actual fulfilment of the right to education for all should be a programme and not a dead letter, because there was a risk if it falling down among the unkept promises, as had often happened in the past¹⁹⁹, it was the socialist Umberto Pistoia, presenting an amendment on the state's obligation to support families, who explicitly posed a question about the effectiveness of the provisions regarding compulsory education in these terms: "It is, honourable colleagues, almost 100 years since the consecration of the principle according to which schools are open to the people, and 60 years since the day public education was made compulsory. However, illiteracy bares its ugly face in certain regions and in certain social tiers of Italy. Why? Because the state has not created the conditions needed to ensure that the people can attend school [...] If the State does not provide all of the assistance needed for the maintenance of these children, we, by voting on Article 28 [Article 34 of the final text], will be completely unable to put the noble principle that schools are open to the people into practice: this principle will remain a pleonasm, hence the reason for my amendment"²⁰⁰. Pistoia's amendment was rejected, in part because of Moro, who highlighted how these elements were already incorporated into the second part of the article, where the state made provision for ensuring that "capable and deserving pupils, including those lacking financial resources", have the opportunity "to attain the highest levels of education"²⁰¹. Despite the concerns of Calamandrei, Pistoia and others, in the 1950s Italy began an all-out "race towards education"²⁰² which brought the illiteracy rate down to 8.3% by 1961²⁰³.

However, this leap in quality, had not erased the inequalities that Don Milani denounces when he describes the system of being 'flunked' that forces thousands of children to leave school early, arguing that in this way "school is no longer school. It is a hospital that treats the healthy and rejects the sick. It becomes an ever increasingly irremediable tool of differentiation"²⁰⁴. The tables and charts

¹⁹⁹ 4th March 1947. One can add to this the speech by the socialist Codignola in the sitting of 21st April 1947, in which he stated "let us be careful not to promise what cannot be delivered; the commitment that we make today in the Constitution to guarantee free education up to the age of fourteen - there are constitutions that guarantee much more - is already, however, a very onerous commitment for our budget. [...] honourable colleagues, it is not enough to vote today to establish the principle of free education, the principle of subsidies for the poor who have the right and the duty vis-à-vis society to be educated; it is not enough; the policy of the left must be one that enables these principles to be concretely implemented".

²⁰⁰ Constituent Assembly, Sitting 29th April 1947, p. 3387.

²⁰¹ La Costituzione, Parte I, Diritti e doveri dei cittadini, Titolo II, Rapporti etico-sociali, Art. 34.

²⁰² T. De Mauro in Berlinguer *La scuola nuova*, p. X.

²⁰³ See ISTAT - Literacy Table 7.1.

²⁰⁴ Don Milani, p. 20.

of the Barbiana school reveal that compulsory schooling continued to lose more than 460,000 children a year²⁰⁵, almost all of them children of rural workers from isolated areas; this openly contradicts the provisions of the Constitution, according to which the state must assume responsibility for removing the obstacles which, in contrast, are fully and actively limiting the chances of many young people attaining the highest levels of education²⁰⁶.

The single type of middle school of 1962, which has already been mentioned several times, did not introduce any major innovations regarding the age band and duration of compulsory education, but, as it has been seen, it produced a better organized school system and, above all, a new push in the fight against inequalities.

The duration of compulsory education, which is at the heart of this part of this paper, thus remained fixed at eight years until Berlinguer – “strongly convinced that extending compulsory education would call for a step forward and [...] tackling the thirty-year stalemate that had blocked any reform and left tens of thousands of children at home every year” – accepted the compromise of extending compulsory education by one year instead of the two initially envisaged by his plan, thereby managing to get the reform approved and breaking “the taboo of the untouchability of compulsory education”²⁰⁷. To do this, Berlinguer sponsored a real integration between education and vocational training, which remained one of the most innovative elements of his ministry; the goal was to encourage better enforcement of school attendance, increase opportunities, and differentiate the training offered, so that everyone could attain “educational success”²⁰⁸. Another very important innovation was the introduction of compulsory training alongside compulsory schooling, up to 18 years of age, in order to not leave anyone behind, enabling everyone to continue their studies, and establishing a significant parity between educational courses, vocational training, and apprenticeships²⁰⁹. Under Letizia Moratti, there was a further change shortly after; the length of compulsory education was formally raised to ten years, but the wording was changed to a right/duty, an element strongly contested by the parliamentary opposition²¹⁰ and forcefully claimed by the

²⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 35.

²⁰⁶ Ibid. p. 61.

²⁰⁷ L. Berlinguer, pp. 143-144.

²⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 18.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. p. 24.

²¹⁰ A legislative measure cannot modify a constitutional provision (which, as it has been seen, speaks of compulsory education) and yet the opposition rapporteur Titti De Simone, when illustrating her group's opposition to Moratti's

Minister²¹¹. The most disputed aspect was the view that, in actual fact, instead of an extension of compulsory education provided for by Article 34 of the Constitution – “redefined and expanded”, as provided for by paragraph 1 c) of article 2 of L. 28th March 2003, no.53 – the law was in reality a step backwards, given that with D.Lgs. 15th April 2005 no.76²¹² the plans for compulsory schooling and training introduced by the Berlinguer reform overlapped, effectively providing for a right/duty that makes it possible to discharge the last year of compulsory education by alternating between school and work, starting from 15 years of age²¹³. These measures were then modified and superseded by the subsequent centre-left government which, with the Finance Law for 2007, brought the age for compulsory education to 16, restoring the need to fulfil this obligation only through education and vocational training courses²¹⁴. This law, laid out in Ministerial Circular 101 of 30th December 2010²¹⁵, is the law of reference in force today as regards compulsory schooling, although the provision in Article 34 of the Constitution that makes education compulsory and free for at least eight years (and not ten, as the law says) has never been modified.

Although the opportunity to further extended compulsory education up to the age of 18 is often discussed today, the early school leaving rate - which measures how many students do not, in fact fulfil the obligation the law provides for - still stands at 11.5%²¹⁶, revealing the topicality of many of the speeches made in the parliamentary debates mentioned above about the effectiveness of the regulations and the many inequalities still in effect in Italy.

proposal, maintained that “compulsory education as a legal principle is abolished and transformed into a right-duty which one can avail oneself of” – see stenographic transcript of the session 263 11th February 2003 Chamber of Deputies

²¹¹ See L. Moratti con P. Ostellino, *La nostra scuola*, Milano: Rizzoli, 2006, p. 37.

²¹² See DECRETO LEGISLATIVO 15 aprile 2005, n. 76 “Definizione delle norme generali sul diritto-dovere all'istruzione e alla formazione, a norma dell'articolo 2, comma 1, lettera c), della legge 28 marzo 2003, n. 53” (GU Serie Generale n.103 del 05-05-2005).

²¹³ See L. 53/2003, Art. 4.

²¹⁴ “Education is compulsory for at least ten years and is aimed at enabling the attainment of an upper secondary school diploma or a professional qualification, following a course of at three years, by the age of 18. The age for access to employment is consequently raised from 15 to 16” LEGGE 27 dicembre 2006, n. 296 Ripubblicazione del testo della legge 27 dicembre 2006, n. 296, “Disposizioni per la formazione del bilancio annuale e pluriennale dello Stato”, (GU Serie Generale n.8 del 11-01-2007 - Suppl. Ordinario n. 7), Art. 1 comma 622.

²¹⁵ “Under current legislation, compulsory education concerns the 6-16 age band. After the first cycle, this obligation is fulfilled with attendance of the first two years of the second cycle” section 4.

²¹⁶ See ISTAT, Annual Report 2023.

Section 2: The Recent Debate and the Most Relevant Institutional Changes in the Italian Education System from Berlinguer to the Buona Scuola²¹⁷

As it has been seen in the previous section, carrying out educational reform calls for time and patience and, above all, it has not been possible to pass any comprehensive reform of the Italian education system under ‘normal’ conditions, given that both the Casati Law and the Gentile Reform were the result of schemes produced by a regime with full or special powers. It is these two laws, as has already been said, that have established the framework of the educational system that still survives today due to the ‘elastic conservatism’ that characterized them, enabling them to act as a push towards mass schooling, but without questioning the underlying classism²¹⁸. As it has been already said, in 1962, with the single type of middle school, this equilibrium was at least partially fractured, but accepting to introduce that change into a system that remained substantially unchanged, whereas in 1973/74, with the *Decreti Delegati*, the school doors were swung open as the importance of everyone's participation via a school's governing bodies was recognized. These are the only two changes worthy of note. From Scalfaro²¹⁹ to Malfatti²²⁰, from Galloni²²¹, with the Brocca Commission, to Rosa Russo Jervolino, author of the consolidation law of 1994, efforts have been aimed more at reorganizing the *status quo* than at effecting a fully-fledged reform. However, Italy has seen attempts to reform the school system, and one can even say that they have actually increased over the past 30 years compared to earlier.

Here, an analysis of the most important ones will be proposed, starting from the experience of Luigi Berlinguer, who, as Minister of Public Education in the *Ulivo* coalition government, introduced the significant changes into schools that it has been already mentioned, but failed in the implementation of the most important one, concerning the cycles. The laws approved by Letizia Moratti are an essential point of reference because they constitute the cornerstone of the current system, with some amendments made in the second Prodi government by Giuseppe Fioroni²²² and in the fourth Berlusconi government by Mariastella Gelmini, who had the thankless task of making unprecedented

²¹⁷ For the details of the individual laws and their parliamentary journey, see the dossiers of the research service of the Chamber of Deputies concerning the VII Committee in Legislatures XV to XVII.

²¹⁸ See G. Ricuperati, p. 70.

²¹⁹ Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, Minister of Education 1972-1973.

²²⁰ Franco Maria Malfatti, Minister of Education 1973-1978, was the author of the *Decreti Delegati*.

²²¹ Giovanni Galloni, Minister of Education 1987-1989.

²²² Giuseppe Fioroni, Minister of Education 2006-2008.

school cuts due to the financial constraints of the time and the consequent political decisions made (it is no coincidence that one talks about the Gelmini-Tremonti Reform, named after the then Minister of Economy and Finance, Giulio Tremonti)²²³. The last part of this section will be devoted to the latest attempt, chronologically, at overall reform, the so-called *Buona Scuola* reform, put forward by Stefania Giannini²²⁴, Minister of Education, Universities and Research in the Renzi government. In this case too, as it will be seen, notwithstanding a sincere intention to rethink the overall system, the law limited itself to significant but not structural changes, leaving the structure of the cycles, compulsory schooling and, in fact, even the governance of schools - in other words, the elements identified as fundamental in the previous section - unchanged.

2.1 Berlinguer: The New School

“One of the few reformers comparable to the men of the previous generation”²²⁵, this is how Giuseppe Ricuperati refers to Luigi Berlinguer, Minister of Public Education from 1996 to 2000. As it has been seen in the previous section, the vision of educational reform that the *Ulivo* government pursued was linked to an overall plan aimed at reforming the administration of the state, making it more efficient and, as a result, reducing centralization. When applied to schools, this became a very complex task because it gave rise to a need to balance autonomy and planning, considering the constitutional framework that gave the regions responsibility for vocational training and which would then identify them - as a result of the 2001 constitutional reform - as also responsible, ‘*in concorrenza*’ (together with the central state) for education, apart from the ‘general rules’.

“The characteristics of our politics and our Parliament induced us to realistically choose the only viable path and to sacrifice the clarity of the project to its realization”²²⁶ writes Luigi Berlinguer in *La Scuola Nuova*, published in 2001, an all-out clarifying manifesto of his reform work. As the circumstances did not allow for a single long bill to be presented to Parliament to be converted into

²²³ See, for example, the article *Istruzione, in tre anni tagli per 8 miliardi* in *Il Sole 24 Ore* 17th April 2011, with details of the school cuts, or the interview with Mariastella Gelmini in *la Repubblica* 8th October 2011, in which she stated that “governing with cuts is the most difficult thing”.

²²⁴ Stefania Giannini, Minister of Education 2014-2016.

²²⁵ G. Ricuperati, p. 336.

²²⁶ L. Berlinguer, *La scuola nuova*, Introduction.

law, the so-called ‘Berlinguer Reform’ was made up of various measures, which the Minister himself defined as a ‘mosaic’, as it has already been said.

The first of these measures was issued at the pen stroke of another minister, Franco Bassanini, head of the Public Administration Ministry: this was Law 59/1997 that is to say the enabling act regarding the assignment of functions and tasks to the regions and local bodies for the reform of the public administration, and administrative simplification. In Article 21 one finds what has been examined in the previous section regarding the granting of didactic, organizational and financial autonomy to educational institutions, which marked a momentous change in the Italian education system. In this way, each individual school assumed a legal status which would make it a direct interlocutor with other institutions at the local and national level²²⁷. Autonomy “is the basis of the whole innovative project” and means, above all, “self-planning”²²⁸, being able to enhance the traditional heritage of classroom lessons by innovating and enriching them in order to make them more effective²²⁹; naturally, autonomy should also mean renouncing the centralist model in which ministerial circulars direct the school system even more than laws do²³⁰. Berlinguer's idea was not to set up different school systems for each territory (the choice to grant autonomy to individual schools rather than transfer responsibilities to the regions derived from the desire to avoid producing as many centralisms as there are regions, as it has been already said)²³¹, but rather to ensure that schools engage in a dialogue with the context around them, that they open themselves up and thereby add precious elements of local identity to the national identity²³². “Autonomy pursues the goal of creating an open school, able to model itself on its students, centred around the teaching-learning relationship, and capable of customizing curricula based on a solid general education and on openness to the local

²²⁷ From the parliamentary debate one can clearly see that the will of both the government and the opposition converged on the principle of introducing autonomy, although the latter reproached the former for using the parliamentary delegation tool and for the lack of a comprehensive plan (see, for example, the speech by Valentina Aprea in the stenographic transcription of the session of 28th January 1997, Chamber of Deputies).

²²⁸ L. Berlinguer, *La scuola nuova*, p. 31.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 33-35. It should be borne in mind that during the years of the *Ulivo* government, there was very strong pressure from the supporters of a new federalism, led by Umberto Bossi's Northern League, but also from numerous others outside that political group. This was one of the factors that prompted the centre-left government to take action, first with a progressive and broad decentralization of responsibilities via Bassanini's interventions, and then to reform the Constitution and identify a much broader role for the regions in the new Title V. On page 34 of his book Berlinguer points out that the autonomous schools were certainly not ‘Padanian schools’ and yet this explicit reference suggests how culturally pressing the need to acknowledge these local demands was.

area”²³³. It is clear that this model also involves some risks, the main one of which is increasing the gap between schools; however, according to Berlinguer, autonomy, if used correctly, can actually be the means of reducing the gaps associated, above all, with different levels of quality of the teaching staff and managers of individual schools, by increasing the opportunities to leverage the skills present in a given context and to build networks between the schools themselves with a view to supporting each other²³⁴. Lastly, according to Berlinguer, autonomy generates responsibility and freedom, and therefore growth for the entire school system and for students²³⁵. This part of the ‘mosaic’ also includes the already mentioned D.P.R. 8th March 1999 no. 275, an implementation measure intended to regulate autonomy by introducing its mainstay, that is to say, the Academic Programme (POF) adopted by each school as a full-on ‘identity card’. In addition to this regulation, other implementation measures included D.P.R. 18th June 1998 no. 233, which deals with the optimal sizing of schools and determining the staffing requirements of individual autonomous institutions, and D.M. 1st February 2001, no. 44, concerning the criteria for preparing the financial statements of autonomous schools.

Finally, this reorganization of schooling also included other legislative provisions such as D.Lgs. 6th March 1998 no. 59, which gave school heads managerial status (essential in order to have a point of reference responsible for what happens within each school), D.Lgs. 30th June 1999 no. 233, concerning schools’ governing bodies at the national level, and D.Lgs. 20th July 1999, no. 258²³⁶, the tool used to create the national body for evaluating the school system by transforming CEDE (the European Education Centre) into INVALSI (the National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education System). This element is highly relevant with regard to the purposes of this research as INVALSI would be identified by the Ministry as the body responsible for administering the OECD-PISA tests in Italian schools, which will be discussed in the next chapter and will be the core of the national evaluation system implemented in the next years. The institute came into being as a result of the decision made with D.Lgs. 112/1998 to leave assessment of the quality of the education system to the State (Article 137), entrusting it, in this case, to a body that is autonomous and separate from the

²³³ L. Berlinguer, *La scuola nuova*, p. 35.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²³⁶ See DECRETO LEGISLATIVO 20 luglio 1999, n. 258 “Riordino del Centro europeo dell'educazione, della biblioteca di documentazione pedagogica e trasformazione in Fondazione del museo nazionale della scienza e della tecnica “Leonardo da Vinci”, a norma dell'articolo 11 della legge 15 marzo 1999, n. 59” (GU Serie Generale n.181 del 04-08-1999).

Ministry. In addition to the abovementioned evaluation, the institute's duties also include ensuring Italian participation in European and international research projects in the assessment field, studying the causes of students failing at school and leaving school early, and providing schools with support and technical assistance with the carrying out of the monitoring initiatives required by the autonomy system, that is to say, the ones provided for by Paragraph 9 of the aforementioned Article 21 of the Bassanini Law, which obliges schools to “adopt procedures and tools for checking and evaluating school performance and the achievement of objectives”. The framework of the new autonomous schools would be completed by the amendment of Title V of the Constitution which, as it has been already seen, would introduce explicit recognition of schools’ autonomy in Article 117.

Another part of the ‘mosaic’ of the Berlinguer reform consisted of measures dealing with increasing the length of compulsory schooling, implemented, in particular, by L. 20th January 1999 no. 9²³⁷, which laid out the increase from eight years (as provided for by Article 34 of the Constitution, as seen in the previous section) to nine years “at the moment of first application”²³⁸. In fact, Berlinguer intended to bring compulsory schooling up to 16 years of age, but the internal conflicts of the ruling coalition, particularly with regard to the role of vocational training, strongly opposed by the Communist Refoundation Party (PRC)²³⁹, led him to relinquish the plan and to maintain a total of nine years of compulsory schooling, even within the context of the subsequent reform of the cycles. The parliamentary opposition would shortly afterwards criticize Berlinguer for having adjusted the length of the basic cycle of his reform to this new formulation of compulsory education, and for therefore not having a real vision of schooling, and, quite the opposite, for subjugating schooling to the compromises needed to hold the government coalition together²⁴⁰. For that matter, Berlinguer himself speaks of a compromise when he admits that accepting the extension of one year instead of two was, at the time, the only way to break a thirty-year stalemate on the issue and the taboo of the

²³⁷ See LEGGE 20 gennaio 1999, n. 9 “Disposizioni urgenti per l'elevamento dell'obbligo di istruzione” (GU Serie Generale n.21 del 27-01-1999).

²³⁸ Art. 1 of L. 20th January 1999 no.9 states “at the moment of first application, until approval of a general reorganization of the school and training system, compulsory education lasts nine years. According to a plan to be drawn up within the framework of the aforementioned reorganization, compulsory education and training will be introduced up to the age of eighteen”. This wording confirms the need for a political compromise, hinting at the hope that within the context of the broader reorganization of the cycles, there could be room for further progress that, as it will be seen, did not come to pass.

²³⁹ For more on this, see the brief article summarizing the debate then underway between Berlinguer and the PRC published in *La Repubblica*, 28th June 1998.

²⁴⁰ See stenographic transcription of session no.575 on 23rd July 1999, Chamber of Deputies, speech by rapporteur for the opposition Angela Napoli, p. 7.

untouchability of compulsory education²⁴¹. Another important innovation in this area was the introduction of so-called ‘compulsory training’ via Article 68 L. 144/1999²⁴², to be completed in school or, alternatively, also through vocational training or an apprenticeship. This provision was implemented through D.P.R. 12th July 2000 no. 257²⁴³, whose fundamental objective was the integration of education and training and the breaking of another taboo, that of the relationship between school and work, linked to the idea that school is a “*turris eburnea*, uncontaminated and incontaminable”²⁴⁴. This rigid separation, which according to Berlinguer is also reflected in the separation envisaged by Article 34 of the Constitution between state and regional responsibilities for matters related to education and training respectively, is the offspring of the classist framework that he intended to break with his reforms; this concerns, in fact, a very rigid hierarchy with top division, higher-quality, schools, and second division schools more closely linked to know-how than to knowledge, and therefore, according to this profoundly classist perception, also to work. With his reform, Berlinguer wanted, instead, to create an integrated system that keeps knowledge and know-how together, putting individuals’ advancement at its centre in order to support the whole idea of lifelong learning²⁴⁵. “With compulsory education until fifteen, compulsory training until eighteen and with a system structured like this” he wanted to give “vocational training, on-the-job training (apprenticeships) and school equal dignity, so that vocational training should cease to be a residual activity, a backup channel for the incapable and the disadvantaged”²⁴⁶. The matter of lifelong learning was also at the heart of provisions relating to adult education (another issue particularly dear to Berlinguer), such as Ministerial Order of 29th July 1997 no. 455, which established the Permanent Territorial Centres (CTPs) for adult education and training (now CPIA - Provincial Centres for Adult Education)²⁴⁷. It is worth remembering that 1996 was proclaimed ‘European Year of Lifelong

²⁴¹ See L. Berlinguer, *La scuola nuova*, pp. 143-144.

²⁴² See LEGGE 17 maggio 1999, n. 144, “Misure in materia di investimenti, delega al Governo per il riordino degli incentivi all'occupazione e della normativa che disciplina l'INAIL, nonché disposizioni per il riordino degli enti previdenziali” (GU Serie Generale n.136 del 12-06-1999 - Suppl. Ordinario n. 111).

²⁴³ See DECRETO DEL PRESIDENTE DELLA REPUBBLICA 12 luglio 2000, n. 257 “Regolamento di attuazione dell'articolo 68 della legge 17 maggio 1999, n. 144, concernente l'obbligo di frequenza di attività formative fino al diciottesimo anno di età” (GU n.216 del 15-09-2000).

²⁴⁴ L. Berlinguer, *La scuola nuova*, pp. 115-116.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 118.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 121.

²⁴⁷ Berlinguer sees adult education as a fundamental tool for ensuring social cohesion and participation, and as a building block of a new social wellbeing. Ibid, pp. 128-131.

Learning’ by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union²⁴⁸, and that this topic was therefore widely discussed by political decision-makers at the time, well before the Lisbon Strategy, which confirmed its importance and inaugurated a set of European interventions on education, as shall be seen in the next chapter.

The third important element of Berlinguer's reform plan, which in this case remained just a plan, as it has been seen, given the immediate repeal set in motion by Letizia Moratti, was the reform of the cycles, which constituted the real framework of the New School. It set “the first cycle the mission of imparting knowledge, the second one that of deepening knowledge and starting the acquisition of competencies, overcoming the unresolved ambiguity of middle school”²⁴⁹. The *Framework Law on the Reorganization of Educational Cycles*, L. 10th February 2000 no. 30 therefore envisaged two cycles (plus kindergarten), as already said: compulsory basic schooling, lasting seven years, aimed at the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills, at the strengthening of relational skills, at civic education, and at the development of individual choice; and five-year secondary schooling, compulsory for the first two years, aimed at consolidating and augmenting skills and competencies, in part with a view to admission to university or entering the world of work. The first cycle was conceived not as a sum of elementary school and middle school, but as a single path aimed at reducing the skills gap, already recorded in 1993 by the IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement), between the linguistic and mathematical skills of fourth grade Italian children and those of middle school children, which were much poorer²⁵⁰. The point, according to Berlinguer, is that the scholastic segments are devised as neither communicating nor homogeneous, and are therefore unable to positively contaminate each other and function as a system; in his opinion, reforming the cycles would make it possible to overcome this malfunctioning²⁵¹. The second cycle would have the same length as before (although with the basic schooling at seven years, students would be expected to finish secondary school a year earlier), but with a drastic reduction in the number of courses, which had reached over a hundred, and the possibility of ‘bridges’ that would

²⁴⁸ European Parliament and Council Decision n° 95/2493/EC of 23 October 1995 establishing 1996 as the European Year of Lifelong Learning.

²⁴⁹ L. Berlinguer, *La scuola nuova*, p. 4.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 9. The fact that in his book Berlinguer mentions the results of an international study aimed at measuring students' skills is very relevant to the aims of this research. In fact, reading this part of the text, it seems that among the reasons for eliminating middle school, according to him, was precisely this difference between the results obtained by children in elementary school and those obtained in middle school, demonstrating the inefficiency of the latter.

²⁵¹ Ibid., p. 10.

enable a simple passage from one course to the other and also to and from vocational training. When describing the structure of this cycle, Berlinguer refers to key skills – ‘mental structures’ capable of generating other knowledge and skills – and, in general, to what happens in other European Union countries, where they are also striving to reconcile the need for specialization with the need to strengthen general basic skills²⁵². For Berlinguer, the basic objective of the reform of the cycles was to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to achieve educational success, “not a right to be successful no matter what [...] the right to have the opportunity for self-realisation, each according to their abilities”²⁵³.

Berlinguer is also responsible for - with L. 425/1997²⁵⁴ and the associated implementation legislation (D.P.R 23rd July 1998 No. 323)²⁵⁵ - the complete revision of the regulation of the state exams to be taken at the end of upper secondary education courses, including the naming, which until then remained the ‘maturity exam’. Among the most important innovations, there was: the reformulation of the exams, to be divided into three written papers and an oral interview; the composition of the panel of examiners, with four internal and four external members plus the chairperson; the evaluation system expressed in hundredths and no longer in sixtieths, and linked not only to the results of the exams, but also to the student's academic progress over the preceding three years, which could be evaluated using school credits. According to Berlinguer, this new state exam is “the litmus test and driving force of the reform processes”²⁵⁶ as it eradicated the contradictions of the existing framework, which had led pupils to lose interest in subjects that were not tested in the final exams (L. 5th April 1969 no.119²⁵⁷) and at the same time had forced them to concentrate all of their efforts on precisely that moment of testing, which was totally detached from their academic path as a whole. “The examiners must know the candidates, not improvise a judgment in a few hours” writes Berlinguer,

²⁵² Ibid., p. 14. This element is also relevant to the aims of this study, and will be analysed below, in relation to the European Union's impact on education reforms in Italy.

²⁵³ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁵⁴ See LEGGE 10 dicembre 1997, n. 425 “Disposizioni per la riforma degli esami di Stato conclusivi dei corsi di studio di istruzione secondaria superiore” (GU Serie Generale n.289 del 12-12-1997).

²⁵⁵ See DECRETO DEL PRESIDENTE DELLA REPUBBLICA 23 luglio 1998, n. 323 “Regolamento recante disciplina degli esami di Stato conclusivi dei corsi di studio di istruzione secondaria superiore, a norma dell'articolo 1 della legge 10 dicembre 1997, n. 425” (GU Serie Generale n.210 del 09-09-1998).

²⁵⁶ L. Berlinguer, *La scuola nuova*, p. 21.

²⁵⁷ See LEGGE 5 aprile 1969, n. 119 “Conversione in legge, con modificazioni, del decreto-legge 15 febbraio 1969, n. 9, riguardante il riordinamento degli esami di Stato di maturità, di abilitazione e di licenza della scuola media” (GU Serie Generale n.97 del 16-04-1969).

underlining the importance of evaluating not only the individual tests but the whole three-year period²⁵⁸. As it has been said, this element takes concrete form with the use of credits, “the best examination innovation, with which we were telling students: don't only study at the last minute, always study, because you can use the good results of the last three years to secure up to 20% of the final score”²⁵⁹. According to Berlinguer, this reform was also a powerful weapon against private ‘diploma mills’ because obtaining a diploma required that one demonstrates not only that one could do the tests, but that one had also attended a complete course²⁶⁰.

The Berlinguer reform also indirectly touched another of the historically more sensitive elements of school organization, dating back to the origins of the first associations in the Giolittian era: the initial training of teachers. Several years earlier, L. 341/1990²⁶¹ had already established that a degree was needed to teach in elementary school, thus providing for the establishment of a specific degree course and, for the initial training of secondary schools’ teachers, the establishment of specific post-graduate specialization schools. The initial implementation of these provisions actually came during Berlinguer’s tenure, when D.M. 26th May 1998 (issued by the Minister of Universities and Research in concert with the Minister of Public Education) defined the criteria for both degrees in Primary Education Sciences and the SSISs, that is to say, graduate schools for secondary school teacher training²⁶². Berlinguer would soon face the issue of the different requirements of elementary and middle school teachers, unified into the new basic school by his vision for reorganizing the cycles; in fact, this thorny issue would never be resolved and would be postponed to a ministerial regulation that was never issued. Instead, the SSISs would remain the main channel for training in teaching in secondary schools, even after the repeal of the reform of the cycles. Through 2010, there would be nine biennial courses, with a scheduled number of trainee teachers, which were open to public competition. It will be seen, when analysing the innovations introduced by Gelmini and the knots that

²⁵⁸ L. Berlinguer, *La scuola nuova*, p. 22.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24. According to Berlinguer, this is one of the reasons for the opposition to the new state exam, generated by precisely the owners of the ‘diploma mills’ and by those defined as their parliamentary lobbyists.

²⁶¹ See LEGGE 19 novembre 1990, n. 341 “Riforma degli ordinamenti didattici universitari” (GU Serie Generale n.274 del 23-11-1990).

²⁶² See MINISTERO DELL' UNIVERSITA' E DELLA RICERCA SCIENTIFICA E TECNOLOGICA, DECRETO 26 maggio 1998 “Criteri generali per la disciplina da parte delle università degli ordinamenti dei corsi di laurea in scienze della formazione primaria e delle scuole di specializzazione per l'insegnamento nella scuola secondaria” (GU Serie Generale n.153 del 03-07-1998).

the Renzi government found itself unravelling, just how much the failure to resolve the issues of initial training and entry to the role of secondary school teacher would weigh upon (and still weighs upon) the Italian school system.

The last very important topic addressed by Berlinguer was that of school parity (*parità scolastica* in Italian). In the previous section there was no opportunity to discuss it, but the question of teaching freedom and freedom of choice had been at the centre of Italian political debate since the Constituent Assembly²⁶³, which devoted a lot of time to unravelling the knotty relationship between the state schools and other schools, particularly the Catholic ones. The result was the third and fourth paragraph of Article 33 of the Constitution, according to which entities and private individuals have the right to establish schools, at no cost to the state and “the law, when setting out the rights and obligations for the non-state schools which request parity, shall ensure that these schools enjoy full liberty and offer their pupils an education and qualifications of the same standards as those afforded to pupils in state schools”²⁶⁴. It was a fairly precarious balance (given that, for fifty years, these ‘rules’ were not, in fact, fixed) that with the reforms of Luigi Berlinguer found a solution, albeit a much debated one. L. 62/2000²⁶⁵ regulates school parity by defining a national education system consisting of state schools and officially recognized private and local entity schools, to be called ‘paritarie’, which are required to comply with certain elements of state regulations and standards of quality in order to attain parity. Specifically, the parity of private and local administration schools will be recognized, on request, if they: adopt an academic programme consonant with the principles of the Constitution and the regulations in force; have public accounts, democratically conceived internal bodies, and teachers in possession of the necessary qualifications and employed in compliance with national collective agreements; accept anyone, including pupils with handicaps; and submit to the evaluations laid down by the national evaluation system. In the text Luigi Berlinguer wrote in 2001 - used here as a guide to clarify the intentions that led to the introduction of individual regulations - the question of parity mentioned only in few pages²⁶⁶, even though the same minister has subsequently

²⁶³ See L. Ambrosoli, pp. 51-87.

²⁶⁴ La Costituzione, Parte I, Diritti e doveri dei cittadini, Titolo II, Rapporti etico-sociali, Art. 33, par. 4.

²⁶⁵ See LEGGE 10 marzo 2000, n. 62 “Norme per la parità scolastica e disposizioni sul diritto allo studio e all'istruzione” (GU Serie Generale n.67 del 21-03-2000).

²⁶⁶ See L. Berlinguer, *La scuola Nuova*, pp. 149-158.

defended his initiative several times²⁶⁷. The law was the result of a long parliamentary debate, which took place in the relevant Senate commission, unifying 11 bills including one government initiative (A.S. no. 2741) which speaks of “officially recognized public schools” as part of the public education and training system. This text never reached the Senate floor and instead the Assembly discussed a proposal the opposition (chiefly the CCD party, Federation of Christian Democrats) had asked to be scheduled. However, the text was fully replaced by a government ‘maxi-amendment’ and thus became law in 2000. Things came to such a pass because there was a widespread conviction among the centre-left parties that the principle established in Article 33 of the Constitution had remained unapplied in part due to the lack of precision about the rules that should underlie the recognition of parity. The Communist Refoundation Party, by now part of the opposition, would reproach Berlinguer and the government for having submitted to the cultural and political hegemony of the right and for having actually expanded the sphere of action of non-state schools, not just the clerical ones but also and above all the ‘confindustrial’²⁶⁸ ones. However, this supposed hegemony of the right would appear to have been belied by the opposing vote that the united centre-right (National Alliance, Northern League and Forza Italia) expressed during the approval of the provision²⁶⁹.

2.2 Moratti: The Last Reform

“I based my action on analysis of the results of the levels of students’ learning which, in the opinion of the OECD, are not good [...] If the levels of learning had been good, I would not have started this reform”²⁷⁰. Thus, Letizia Moratti told Piero Ostellino, who interviewed her in *La Nostra Scuola*, a book published in 2006 (at the end of her time as Minister of Education, Universities and Research), what fundamental driving force spurred her to pursue L. 28th March 2003 no. 53, an enabling act from which all of the provisions that fall under the name the ‘Moratti Reform’ derive, as it has been said.

²⁶⁷ See, as an example, an interesting interview with the daily newspaper of the Italian Episcopal Conference, twenty years after the approval of Law 62, in *Avvenire*, 8 Marzo 2000

²⁶⁸ With this adjective the PRC were referencing Confindustria, the Italian employees’ federation

²⁶⁹ See the voting on the government’s maxi-amendment to replace Senator Tarolli’s text in stenographic transcription of the session of 21st July 1999, Senate of the Republic

²⁷⁰ L. Moratti, *La nostra scuola*, p. 61

In the next chapter this link with the OECD data will be analysed, together with what has influenced Italian affairs in the evolving European framework post-Lisbon²⁷¹.

Although, as it has been already seen, it was Moratti who repealed the provisions envisaged by the most disruptive reform introduced by her predecessors – i.e., the reform of the cycles – there has often been talk of continuity with regard to the work of Berlinguer and Moratti (with an *intermezzo* with Tullio De Mauro, who had the arduous task of implementing some of the thorniest and most divisive issues envisaged by the rules Berlinguer had wanted in the previous government)²⁷². According to Giuseppe Bertagna - who Moratti called on to lead a *Select Working Group* tasked with “comprehensively reflecting on the whole education system and, at the same time, providing concrete feedback for a new action plan to reform school related regulations, that is to say, any changes that need to be made to L. 10th February 2000 no.30”²⁷³ - the real novelty of this phase is determined by the return of the leading role of politics through “a real cavalcade of reform” which took place from 1997 to 2003, and which was in some way opposed by the “pedagogical-scholastic-trade unionist” establishment that, over the decades, had got used to governing the world of education by itself, making up for the lack of politics²⁷⁴. As it will be seen by examining the details of the work of this second phase, which unfolded from 2001 to 2005, there are elements of continuity, even significant ones²⁷⁵, notwithstanding the differences of opinion that the various protagonists of the time did not fail to underline.

One first difference - probably in part determined by the unity of the centre-right government in the face of the divisions mentioned in the centre-left - lies in the choice to use a single enabling law with

²⁷¹ The Lisbon European Council of 23rd-24th March 2000 marked a real turning point in the relationship between the Union and its member states regarding education and training. The conclusions of the Presidency will be extensively examined in the next chapter, together with the implications of this significant change.

²⁷² To illustrate the difficulties that Tullio De Mauro had to tackle in the course of his brief ministry, the episode of the tears in Naples is often referred to, an occasion where, when speaking in front of an audience of teachers who were mostly displeased with the changes made, the minister collapsed in his chair covering his face and then wiped his tears away and resumed his impassioned speech. See *la Repubblica*, *Le lacrime del Ministro “La mia riforma incompresa”*, 23th February 2001.

²⁷³ D.M. 18th July 2001, issued little more than a month after the inauguration of the second Berlusconi government.

²⁷⁴ G. Bertagna, *Dietro una Riforma. Quadri e problemi pedagogici dalla Riforma Moratti (2001-2006) al ‘cacciavite’ di Fioroni*, Soveria Mannelli (CZ): Rubettino, 2009, pp.7-8.

²⁷⁵ Briguglio comes to speak of “a shared horizon of ends and objectives that Italian schooling intended to achieve with pro-European oriented legislation”. This is a very interesting aspect that will be developed in the third chapter - A.E. Briguglio, *Dal Ministero Berlinguer alla Riforma Gelmini: Note cursorie per riflettere sugli itinerari della formazione e dell’istruzione in Italia*, ‘Quaderni di Intercultura’, Anno III/2011, p. 1.

the relevant implementation provisions rather than a ‘mosaic’ of regulations to construct the reform. Between the working group’s consideration, public consultation and political compromises, first in the cabinet and then in parliament, drafting this law actually took about two years. To understand the key elements of the enabling law of 2003, it is first of all necessary to examine the work carried out by the group led by Bertagna, which the professor himself recounts in several of his writings, particularly in *Pensiero Manuale*, which essentially relates the content of the 81 pages of report the commission presented to the Minister and to public opinion²⁷⁶. In the chapter dedicated to the work that produced the proposal, it is first of all reiterated that the action decided on was the result of a “urgent national need”²⁷⁷, in other words, the need to raise the level of personal education and instruction of each citizen (the same need that had stimulated the great reform of 1962 on the single type of middle school), highlighted - as was explicitly reported - by the OECD’s surveys²⁷⁸. Other key elements were: a) the need to safeguard the unity of the cycles without compromising the overall organization as the Berlinguer-De Mauro proposal had instead done, guilty of having left open both the risk of reducing the number of teachers because of the reduction of one year in the overall duration of the school curriculum, and the enormous work load assigned to the new high schools (including the question of the physical structure of this ‘new school’, linked to school buildings, which was not adequately considered in the provisions linked to the reform)²⁷⁹; b) the desire to ensure equal opportunities for young people who undertake different studies, recognizing, both in form and substance, the equal status of different courses of study at high school, and of academic and vocational training paths; c) the need to integrate not only academic and vocational training paths into the education system, but also initial work experience, and, at the same time, the need to introduce a work-school alternation inspired by the German model; d) the desire to give substance to the autonomy of schools, which remained on paper only, and was, in fact, opposed by the ministerial

²⁷⁶ See G. Bertagna, *Pensiero Manuale. La scommessa di un sistema educativo di istruzione e di formazione di pari dignità*, Soveria Mannelli (CZ): Rubbettino, 2006.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 126.

²⁷⁸ It is very interesting to note that the first data derived from the OECD-PISA surveys dates back to 2000, which explains the significance of these tools in the public debate of that period, as will be seen in the next chapters.

²⁷⁹ In fact, it was the question of the anomalous wave – i.e., the convergence of two years’ worth of pupils in the same academic year (2007-2008) due to the overall reduction in the length of schooling – that generated the most heated debate, together with the difficulty of implementing these provisions since the 2001-2002 academic year. All of this was known to the government’s parliamentarians, who discussed it in a resolution approved in the Chamber on 12th December 2000 which, whilst not asking for the overall postponement in form (which was instead what the opposition requested) provided for it in substance, referring the structuring of a transition phase to the negotiations with the unions. See the Mussi et al. resolution in stenographic transcription of the session of 12th December 2000, Chamber of Deputies.

bureaucracy, in part due to some legislative errors²⁸⁰, by implementing real flexibility; e) the desire to transform compulsory schooling into the right/duty to receive education and to implement the national evaluation system; f) the need to introduce new regulations for the initial training of teachers, especially for the second cycle of education.

Once its proposal had been drawn up, the working group, as related in the Bertagna Commission's report, proceeded to submit it to the critical evaluation of some focus groups made up of experts and a sample of sixty class and school councils throughout the country. A third phase saw the involvement of ISTAT, asked to scientifically survey the opinions of teachers, parents and students in order to submit this element to political decision-makers as well. Finally, opinions and suggestions were sought from research centres and magazines dealing with the sector. The work of the group led by Bertagna ended on 28th November 2001, in line with the deadlines set by the ministerial decree, but the government-initiated enabling law proposal would not be presented until 3rd April 2002²⁸¹ and would require a year of debate between commissions and the Chamber to obtain the final approval of both houses of parliament²⁸².

The law of 28th March 2003 no. 53 consists of some immediately regulatory elements and some which instead make provision for implementation measures. Among the former, particularly worthy of mention - in addition to the repeal of the reform of the cycles and the law on increasing the length of compulsory education, provided for in articles 12 and 13²⁸³ respectively - is the provision according to which from, the 2003-2004 academic year it would have been possible, in the form of an experiment, to anticipate enrolment in both kindergarten and primary school by a year (Article 7, paragraph 4). This aspect of the law was extensively discussed, particularly in the debate held in the Chamber of Deputies, in part because of the constraints linked to spending limits, which were seen

²⁸⁰ In particular, Bertagna disputes article 8 of D.P.R. 275/1999 which, when defining curricula, goes well beyond the general rules under the jurisdiction of the state in matters of education, according to Article 33 of the Constitution, going instead into the details of objectives and standards in the typical manner of the centralist 'apparat school': "an sweeping presumption that instead of helping autonomy ends up stripping it", G. Bertagna *Dietro una riforma* pp. 11-22.

²⁸¹ The government proposed initiative and related dossier are available in Senate of the Republic, XIV legislature, Nota di lettura n. 23, A.S. n. 1306: "Delega al Governo per la definizione delle norme generali sull'istruzione e dei livelli essenziali delle prestazioni in materia di istruzione e formazione professionale".

²⁸² The overall length of the parliamentary debate was actually in line with the time normally envisaged for the conversion of bills involving delegation to the government. One can see the statistics produced by the Senate relating to Legislature XIV.

²⁸³ Letizia Moratti was very clear about the reasons that led to this repeal: "I cancelled the school reform because it was illogical and badly received by the schools themselves" – L. Moratti, *La nostra scuola*, p. 21.

as discriminatory²⁸⁴. The whole provision was based, to tell the truth, on the promise that within 90 days of the law coming into force, a systematic plan of financial interventions would be adopted and then submitted to the Joint Conference (a consultative body with permanent conferences focusing on relations between the state and local authorities and the coordination of public finances). This plan was essentially produced by the Cabinet based on a proposal from Moratti in September 2003, but the lack of agreement with local authorities – arising, in particular, from disagreement on issues relating to school-work alternation - would be the first instance of fracture in the reform framework²⁸⁵.

The most important part of the Moratti bill conferred power to enact secondary legislation, and here its implementation will be described, giving a chronological review of individual provisions.

The first was D. Lgs. 59/2004, which concerns kindergarten schools and first cycle schooling, which includes, as already provided for in Article 2 paragraph 1 (d) of the enabling law, primary schools and lower secondary schools. In fact this - very meagre – provision, reiterates that the first cycle will last a total of eight years (unlike the basic school envisaged by Berlinguer, which would have lasted seven years), to be concluded with a state exam, and that primary schools will be structured with a first year linked to kindergarten school and “aimed at attaining basic abilities”²⁸⁶ and then two- year periods, whilst the lower secondary school will be divided into two years plus a final year, which must, in turn, ensure a link with the second cycle. As is evident, this represents a significant step backwards and a return to the system preceding the Berlinguer reform, apart from recognition of the possibility of having schools that combine the first cycle and pre-school when both exist in the same place, a formula which had actually already been used since 1994 for areas at risk of depopulation, and which was destined to become, with time, “the largely predominant organizational structure in basic schools”, notwithstanding the absence of a clearly laid out pedagogical plan, and of equal working conditions for teachers (paradoxically, those who work more hours are paid less), and the fact that it was actually the result of the regions’ and municipalities’ planning²⁸⁷.

²⁸⁴ See the Chamber of Deputies stenographic transcription of the session n.267, 18th February 2003. During the debate on Article 7 the Deputy Rusconi disputed the lack of adequate financial coverage and therefore the differences that will arise when applying the same law in different geographical areas.

²⁸⁵ For the reasons behind see the negative opinion expressed by ANCI and UPI in their meeting on 14th October 2004

²⁸⁶ D. Lgs. 59/2004, Art. 4.

²⁸⁷ See EdScuola, N. Puttilli, *Lo strano caso degli istituti comprensivi, la crisi infinita della scuola media e l'ignavia della politica*, 16th November 2021.

The second implementation measure of the Moratti reform was D. Lgs. 286/2004²⁸⁸, relating to the national evaluation service. This is the first component of real continuity between Berlinguer's reforms and Moratti's and it concerns what will be dealt with in the next chapters regarding the ever more pressing influence of international evaluations and the need to have institutions in charge of administering the tests and supporting school authorities. This decree therefore established the National Service for the evaluation of the education system "with the aim of evaluating its efficiency and effectiveness, and framing the evaluation within the international context"²⁸⁹. It was immediately specified that it was not talking about the evaluation of pupils, which remained the exclusive responsibility of the teachers, nor about evaluation of the teachers, but exclusively about the evaluation of the system, in accordance with the essential levels of performance. "In fact, the external evaluation of the system and of the skills possessed by Italian students, which is the responsibility of the national service for the quality of the education and training system, with its operatives, is one thing [...] the internal evaluation of schools, concerning the competencies of individual students, which goes into particulars, is another. This latter is exclusive to teachers, and it is their responsibility as professionals and as human beings"²⁹⁰. It is evident from reading the articles of the law and these words by Bertagna, that fear of teachers revolting against the new evaluation tool was widespread. There would be no lack of decidedly adverse views among Italian public opinion on the introduction of this tool, notwithstanding the fact that it was the result of a convergent desire of two governments from different sides of the political spectrum, the one that Berlinguer had expressed as Minister and the one that Moratti was expressing as Minister in the second Berlusconi government. This debate will be resumed in the third chapter. Coming back to the provisions of the legislative decree; in order to fulfil the functions set out in Article 1, provision was made for a reorganization of INVALSI, and it was awarded the status of research body and assigned a series of new functions, from, indeed, research activities, to the preparation of papers for the state exams, to training activities for teachers and managers²⁹¹.

²⁸⁸ See DECRETO LEGISLATIVO 19 novembre 2004, n. 286 "Istituzione del Servizio nazionale di valutazione del sistema educativo di istruzione e di formazione, nonché riordino dell'omonimo istituto, a norma degli articoli 1 e 3 della legge 28 marzo 2003, n. 53" (GU Serie Generale n.282 del 01-12-2004).

²⁸⁹ Ibid., Art. 1 comma 1.

²⁹⁰ G. Bertagna, *Pensiero Manuale* p. 245. Bertagna dwells on the same concept on page 148 of the same text as well

²⁹¹ For a full list of the institute's current functions, see the INVALSI official website.

A third, particularly discussed, implementation measure, D. Lgs. 76/2005, concerned the right-duty to receive education and training. Article 2 paragraph 1(c) of the enabling law had already clarified that the right to education and training would be extended to 12 years or in any case until the attainment of a qualification by 18 years of age. The crux of the dispute here is rather controversial: if on the one hand, taken literally, this seems to be an increase in compulsory education which, as it has been seen, Berlinguer had laboriously brought up to 9 years, in reality, the way this provision was implemented actually led observers to speak of moving backwards. The reason for this is connected to the lexical (and not only) choice of replacing the term *compulsory* with the expression *right-duty*, ending up, according to the opposition, actually contradicting the Constitution's provisions with an ordinary law²⁹². However, Moratti herself repeatedly claimed responsibility for this change, seeing it as an expression of the transition “from an authoritarian to a liberal outlook”²⁹³. Similarly, Bertagna extols this change as a success thanks to which the concept of compulsion born in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries “seems to have reached the end of its luminous parabola”²⁹⁴. In reality, the use of this terminology made it possible to introduce the principle whereby the obligation actually remained linked to education and training paths up to the age of 15, whilst subsequently it was possible to comply with the provisions of the law not only via these routes, but also within an alternation regime. This is why the provisions of the legislative decree state that not only schools and training institutes and families contribute to the carrying out of the right/duty, but also those who hire young people on an apprenticeship contract, and in particular company mentors. In this regard, it is necessary to take a step back in our chronological excursus, as it is not possible to fully understand the meaning of these provisions without referring to Article 48 of D. Lgs. 276/2003²⁹⁵, which implements some secondary legislation related to work and states that “young people and adolescents who have turned fifteen can be hired, in every sector of activity, with an apprenticeship contract to fulfil the right/duty to receive education and training”²⁹⁶ and establishes the principles that govern

²⁹² See in Chamber of Deputies, stenographic transcription of the session of 11th February 2003 the speech of Deputy Alba Sasso, p. 97.

²⁹³ L. Moratti, *La nostra scuola* p. 38.

²⁹⁴ G. Bertagna, *Pensiero manuale* 141. However, it is evident, regardless of this celebration, that no legislation of ordinary rank can modify constitutional provisions, and that the latter remains, in any case, superordinate compared to the provisions of the former, including the reference to the compulsoriness of education.

²⁹⁵ See DECRETO LEGISLATIVO 10 settembre 2003, n. 276 “Attuazione delle deleghe in materia di occupazione e mercato del lavoro, di cui alla legge 14 febbraio 2003, n. 30” (GU Serie Generale n.235 del 09-10-2003 - Suppl. Ordinario n. 159).

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, Art. 48.

this particular form of apprenticeship aimed at issuing a qualification (the same one that must be attained by 18 years of age according to the provisions of the Moratti reform).

According to Bertagna, this provision is particularly innovative and important because it shifts attention from the places of education to the end competencies, moving beyond the traditional choices between school and training and between school and business²⁹⁷, finally giving every pathway equal status, also eliminating the senseless distinction between compulsory schooling and compulsory training²⁹⁸. Although Berlinguer had also insisted on the need for greater integration between the vocational education and training system and the secondary education of high schools, this step was much more audacious, as already highlighted by the opposition during the debate on the enabling law²⁹⁹.

Closely linked to the provisions just examined are those of D. Lgs. 77/2005³⁰⁰ concerning school-work alternation, which is defined as a training option, in other words, as a way of doing second-cycle training in both high schools and vocational education and training (it being understood that the right/duty to receive education can also be fulfilled through an apprenticeship). The alternation paths, accessible from the age of 15 – and included in the training offer plan - must have a flexible structure and be divided into periods of classroom training and others of learning through work experience planned by the school, in accordance with agreements governed by the principles set out in the regulations themselves with accredited centres and organisations. The tutors play a particularly important role, both the teacher appointed by the school and the external tutor identified by the employing organisation. Examining the evolution of the regulations on alternation with L. 107/2015, one can see that the lack of training and financial investment for these key figures has been one of the main reasons for the failure of this measure, which has led to its downsizing and transformation

²⁹⁷ G. Bertagna, *Pensiero Manuale*, p. 142.

²⁹⁸ For Bertagna, this distinction desired by Berlinguer contains a persistent classist element that wants to distinguish high-quality compulsory schooling from residual compulsory training – G. Bertagna, *Pensiero Manuale*, p. 224.

²⁹⁹ See Deputy Pierluigi Bersani's declaration of vote in Chamber of Deputies stenographic transcription of the session of 18th February 2003, pp. 76-78.

³⁰⁰ See DECRETO LEGISLATIVO 15 aprile 2005, n. 77 "Definizione delle norme generali relative all'alternanza scuola-lavoro, a norma dell'articolo 4 della legge 28 marzo 2003, n. 53" (GU Serie Generale n.103 del 05-05-2005).

into Pathways for Transversal Skills and Career Guidance (PCTO), of shorter duration and less impact³⁰¹.

With legislative decree 226 of 2005, Moratti then established the general regulations and essential levels of performance for the second cycle of the education and training system. This cycle consisted of two elements of equal status, the high school system ('licei') and the vocational education and training system, with tools available to students to change their choices, both moving from one type of high school to another and passing from one system to another, in both directions. High schools, divided into eight types, three of which were further divided into different courses of study³⁰², lasted for five years, with two two-year courses and a final year that ends with the state exam. The timetable was divided into activities and lessons that were compulsory for everyone, compulsory for individual courses, compulsory but at the student's choice, and optional, that is to say, attendance was optional and free. As far as the vocational education and training paths were concerned, as they were matters also covered by regional legislation, the decree established the essential levels of performance - such as the requirements for accreditation - for the training provided, the timetable, the assessment of competencies, and the mandatory requirements for teachers. This formal separation of the two systems, which was intended to lead to recognition of the equal status of the paths, actually generated a contrary debate on the crystallization of top division schools, managed by the Ministry, and second division schools, delegated to the regions. Bertagna insists that these provisions were the direct result of the reform of Title V of the Constitution, desired by the centre-left government, and that the prejudice according to which whatever is managed by the central administration is higher-quality than whatever is delegated to the peripheral administrations, is a legacy that needs to be dealt with, linked to the idea that "the school model [...] based on the statist paradigm, must be the only reassuring and reliable one"³⁰³. In his personal harangue on this point, Bertagna went so far as to invoke Cattaneo and Sturzo, contrasting their outlook with that of Gramsci and Gentile³⁰⁴, perhaps precisely because

³⁰¹ With the budget law for 2019, article 1 comma 784, the name of the alternation paths was changed to PCTO, bringing the total duration in the final three years of the paths to a minimum of 210 hours in vocational schools, 150 hours in technical school, and 90 hours in high schools (see LEGGE 30 dicembre 2018, n. 145 "Bilancio di previsione dello Stato per l'anno finanziario 2019 e bilancio pluriennale per il triennio 2019-2021" GU Serie Generale n.302 del 31-12-2018 - Suppl. Ordinario n. 62), while the new guidelines were defined with a subsequent ministerial decree.

³⁰² The multiplication of course up until the end of the 1990s had determined the need, already highlighted by Berlinguer, to bring order to the multiple experiments – see L. Berlinguer, *La scuola nuova*, p. 14.

³⁰³ G. Bertagna, *Pensiero manuale*, p. 327.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

the opposition to this model came, as he himself relates, from both the right and the left, from the CGIL³⁰⁵ and Confindustria, for opposite but converging reasons: for the trade union, the regulations would have produced new inequalities, while for the employees' federation, they would have discredited vocational education and training³⁰⁶. The debate that arose around this dichotomy led, according to Bertagna, to a political compromise with Forza Italia and the National Alliance on the final text of the legislative decree, which ended up becoming an enormous contradiction: one could no longer distinguish between two subsets of an educational system that therefore needed to be coordinated within a single framework, but the plans of state provisions and the responsibilities of local authorities and scholastic institutions were confused, ending up '*licealizing*' vocational education and training, in other words, reproducing what the centre-right opposition had fought against with Berlinguer³⁰⁷.

The last, but not least, implementation provision of L. 53/2003 is the one concerning the initial training of teachers, or rather the access to teaching, D.Lgs. 227/2005³⁰⁸. In the text of the enabling law, article 5 anticipated that access to the teaching profession would take place through university courses and no longer through post-university specialization courses, making the equal status of the initial training of first and second cycle teachers explicit. While the text of the legislative decree specifies the characteristics of these new training courses - with limited numbers and only accessible via competition on the basis of a three-year plan of teaching staff needs, qualifying after positive evaluation of the internship phase and passing a state exam, with automatic enrolment in a special regional register – the identification of master's degree course classes, the profile of teachers, the internship activities and the related credits were passed on, as provided for in article 2 paragraph 7, to subsequent ministerial decrees, which should have made the provisions effective from the 2006-2007 academic year. These decrees would never be issued, whilst shortly afterwards, the finance law

³⁰⁵ In the comment sheet on the legislative decree produced by the union, the heaviest criticism was directed at precisely the clear separation between the two paths, saying that the drafters speak of a single system only out of a kind of 'guilty conscience', and that of the excessive number of ways that one can fulfil the right/duty to receive education, with three - alternation, internships and apprenticeships - relating to only work environments, with the risk that students "may never see a school classroom".

³⁰⁶ See G. Bertagna, *Pensiero manuale*, pp. 342-346.

³⁰⁷ Ibid. pp. 366-374.

³⁰⁸ See DECRETO LEGISLATIVO 17 ottobre 2005, n. 227 "Definizione delle norme generali in materia di formazione degli insegnanti ai fini dell'accesso all'insegnamento, a norma dell'articolo 5 della legge 28 marzo 2003, n. 53" (GU Serie Generale n.257 del 04-11-2005).

for 2008, an intervention by the new centre-left government, would repeal article 5 of L. 53/2003. As it will be seen when dealing with the so-called *Buona Scuola* reform, the issue of initial teacher training, still under discussion and object of one of the reforms envisaged by the PNRR³⁰⁹, was heavily conditioned by the increasing precariousness of teachers' employment and the consequent accumulation of pressure in the candidate ranking lists, such as to make it very difficult to introduce a new system without having solved the existing problems³¹⁰.

The core of the measures related to schooling issued during the Moratti era reiterated Berlusconi's slogan of the 2001 electoral campaign: English, business, information technology (the three “I” in Italian: *inglese, impresa e informatica*)³¹¹. If the reference to business was already obvious from the desire to structurally link the world of school and the world of work, insisting on training that is personalized but strongly oriented towards the skills needed in the job market, it is more interesting to see how the other two elements developed. In law 53 of 2003, particular attention was paid to multimedia and computer technologies, which is reiterated in both D.Lgs. 59/2004, in relation to the first cycle, and in D.Lgs. 226/2005, in relation to the second: students must - by the end of the first cycle - know how to communicate via internet, solving problems by making use of IT tools and search engines, whilst by the end of the second cycle they must know how to use new technologies, knowing their languages and codes (to this end, the total hours of lower secondary school were increased by 33 hours, spent teaching IT). With regard to English, the enabling law envisaged literacy in at least one of the languages of the European Union in primary school (confirming what had already been foreseen more than a decade earlier)³¹², while D.Lgs. 226/2005 allocated 33 hours of lower secondary school to studying English, and made provision for the hours intended for studying a second EU language to also be used, in both lower secondary school and upper secondary school, and at the

³⁰⁹ National Recovery and Resilience Plan. For the contents of the new regulations, see the summary sheet produced by Palazzo Chigi in July 2021. It will be noted that many of the provisions envisaged by the new legislation follow those already indicated in the Moratti legislative decree but which nevertheless remained unimplemented. The hope that the PNRR could act as a spur to implementing regulatory elements that has repeatedly remained on paper and then been repealed, contrasts with the pessimism induced by the number of cases where laws have not been put into practice, particularly due to firm opposition by the unions, driven in turn by an exorbitant number of precarious workers waiting for concrete solutions to stabilize their own circumstances.

³¹⁰ See the eloquent comment made by the CGIL on 14th October 2005 concerning the announcement of D.Lgs. 227/2005, where mention is made of over 500,000 qualified people who would be thrown away “like old clothes” as a result of the new provisions.

³¹¹ The clear wording can be found also in the PDL's electoral programme for 2008, underlining the continuity between future plans and what was done during Berlusconi's second government with Moratti.

³¹² L. 148/1990, Art. 10, par. 1: “a foreign language is taught in elementary school”.

request of the families, for studying English in a way analogous to that used for Italian language. It is also made provision for high school courses that - alongside the mastery of a second European language in addition to English - in the fifth year, had a non-linguistic subject taught in English.

2.3 Fioroni and Gelmini: New Laws Without Reform

As occurred with the transition to Berlusconi's second government in 2001, with the transition from it to the new Prodi government that took office in 2006, elements of innovation and continuity intersected when it came to school education. What is certain, however, is that from this moment on, the cavalcade of reform that Bertagna had spoken of can be seen as interrupted, and a phase of gradual adjustments opens up instead, primarily introduced through articles inserted into legislative provisions on other matters, ministerial decrees, regulations and circulars. In short, nothing that can in any way be traced back to a vision for comprehensive reform. First of all, Giuseppe Fioroni, the new Minister of Education, had to unravel the knot of the widely debated question of compulsory schooling, which was resolved with article 1 paragraph 622 of the 2007 budget law³¹³: it was decided to raise the length of compulsory education to ten years – just as Berlinguer had wanted to do a decade earlier, but had found himself facing, as it has been seen, resistance from part of the government coalition – thereby raising the age for entry into the world of work from 15 to 16. This regulation and the ministerial decree that implements its provisions (no. 139 of 22nd August 2007)³¹⁴ are still in force and are the legislative point of reference for the Italian education system as regards fulfilling the obligation (although the wording of the constitutional provision remains unchanged).

A few months later, as happened with Moratti, a thorough examination of some of the most debated elements of the legislation issued by the previous government was launched when the parliamentary commission responsible (Commission VII of the Chamber of Deputies) decided to start a fact-finding investigation. The work began in January 2007, on the initiative of the Forza Italia group³¹⁵, and ended over a year later with a document which, among other things, gives ample room to the

³¹³ L. 296/2006.

³¹⁴ See MINISTERO DELLA PUBBLICA ISTRUZIONE, DECRETO 22 agosto 2007, n. 139 “Regolamento recante norme in materia di adempimento dell'obbligo di istruzione, ai sensi dell'articolo 1, comma 622, della legge 27 dicembre 2006, n. 296” (GU Serie Generale n.202 del 31-08-2007).

³¹⁵ As claimed during the explanation of final vote by Deputy Valentina Aprea, undersecretary for education in the previous government.

international scene and, in particular, to the landscape in the European Union, whilst emphasizing that education and vocational training do not fall within the areas that, according to the Treaties, the EU has regulatory responsibility for³¹⁶. In the conclusions it is highlighted that increasing the length of compulsory education should not be seen as a problem that needs to be solved, but as an opportunity that needs to be seized in order to change schooling, in part by resolving the ahistorical dichotomy between ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’ that the Moratti Reform, while intending to give equal status to different paths, had in fact accentuated³¹⁷. The vote, in agreement with and in favour of the final resolution by both majority and opposition parties, was a perfect demonstration of how far those contradictions, deriving in part from a need to adequately apply the new Title V, were under the attention of all of the political players. According to some observers, however, the problem could not be said to have been resolved, because its deep roots lay in the constant temptation of the central apparatus to continue operating while ignoring, in practice, on the one hand, the autonomy of schools, and on the other, the concept that the state was responsible for the ‘general rules for education’ and not for the individual detailed aspects³¹⁸. It was Fioroni himself who, with a ministerial decree dated 31st July 2007³¹⁹, issued the national guidelines for the curriculum of the first cycle of schooling, initiating a phase of governing school autonomy from the centre, which, whilst on the one hand responding to the need to ensure that all students have the same levels of quality of service and equal opportunities for educational success, on the other, inevitably ended up limiting and partially

³¹⁶ The fact that in this document more space is devoted to examining EU strategy and the objectives that need to be achieved (also recorded in the conclusions) than is reserved for the opinions of the sector’s unions, reveals that the influence of the EU, from Lisbon on, has had a huge weight on what is debated and decided at the parliamentary level. This point will be extensively discussed in the next chapter.

³¹⁷ See Chamber of Deputies, XV legislature, *Indagine conoscitiva sulle problematiche connesse alla riforma del secondo ciclo del sistema educativo nazionale di istruzione e di quello di istruzione e formazione professionale*, FINAL DOCUMENT APPROVED BY THE VII COMMISSION, Annex 2, pp. 31-52.

³¹⁸ For Bertagna, a clear example of this profound contradiction lies in the fact that the same government that had recognized the autonomy of schools, had inserted it into the Constitution, and with the new Title V, had proposed a new division of responsibilities between central and peripheral administrations, but had then issued D.P.R. 75/1999 which, in article 8, reassigned to the Ministry a whole series of responsibilities concerning the definition of poorly specified objectives and standards. So, beyond the enthusiasm for the transition from the programmes to the curricula, the work of schools and teachers was only complicated without simplifying even that of the central administration, and with the only result being increased bureaucracy. “A lot of movement, a lot of smoke, but the roast risked being burnt” – G. Bertagna *Dietro una riforma* pp. 18-25.

³¹⁹ See MINISTERO DELLA PUBBLICA ISTRUZIONE, DECRETO 31 luglio 2007 “Indicazioni per la scuola d’infanzia e del primo ciclo di istruzione. Indicazioni per il curriculum” (GU Serie Generale n.228 del 01-10-2007 - Suppl. Ordinario n. 198).

bureaucratizing the work of schools' autonomy³²⁰. Another issue that saw Fioroni intervening with a more reorganization focused intent than a reforming one, was the precariousness of teachers' employment. Also in the Finance Law for 2007, paragraph 605, one finds a reference to a special plan for the recruitment of 150,000 teachers for the academic years 2007-2009, and to the transformation of the permanent ranking lists for access to the teaching profession to closed ranking lists³²¹ (*Graduatorie ad Esaurimento*, acronym: GaE). This meant closing access to this channel (from which, by law, schools had to and have to draw in order to identify 50% of new hires, while the remaining 50% must come from ranking lists based on merit, that is to say, linked to competitive exams) with the aim of 'depleting' those registered on the closed lists and, by 2009-2010, eliminating the precariousness of temporary jobs for all those with at least three years' service³²². The Minister's idea was essentially to end the 50-50 system, envisaging competitive exams on a regular basis with three-year ranking lists and no possibility of extending their validity³²³. Examining Law 107/2015, it will be seen what went wrong with this, albeit noble, plan to reorganize the system.

Alongside other measures of lesser importance, Fioroni included, in the second and last financial law produced by the government he was part of, provisions which annulled what Moratti had made establishment for regarding the initial training of teachers on specifically designed degree courses, deferring the definition of a different approach³²⁴ to a new regulation, which, however, he did not have time to issue. Although, as it has been said, there was a complete lack of a reform-oriented approach, Fioroni must be recognized for having attempted to clarify the overall plan that underpinned these precise interventions in a *White Paper* produced in September 2007 thanks to the

³²⁰ The document is 113 pages long and includes points of references for kindergartens schools as well. One also finds, alongside an overall values-based framework centred around the trinity of culture-school-person (the right would come to rebuke Fioroni for the order of the words, arguing that for the left 'culture' would come before the person), very detailed indications on teaching individual subjects.

³²¹ The legislation relating to these ranking lists dates back to the 1994 consolidation law on schooling and were partially modified by Moratti regarding permanently staying, on request, in the ranking lists, the updating of them, and access to them after obtaining the necessary qualification from the graduate schools for secondary school teacher training (SSISs). The first cycle of the SSISs was activated in 1999-2000 for a total of nine two-year cycles through to 2008-2009. Although those enrolled in the ninth and final cycle, in accordance with the 2007 Finance Law, were not entitled to register on the GaE, the Ministry, in part due to some appeals, decided to allow their registration.

³²² See Tuttoscuola, *Fioroni & precari: solo con me una risposta chiara*, 8th December 2006.

³²³ In reality one of the main problems was that, although clear deadlines had been established for carrying out the competitive exams, no exams for teaching positions were held in Italy from 1999, and to see another one, one had to wait until 2012, when Francesco Profumo was Minister of Education. In the meantime, schools continued to have to draw from the existing ranking lists, generating expectations, differences in treatment and, therefore, numerous appeals.

³²⁴ L. 244/2007, Art. 1 comma 416.

work of an inter-ministerial group (within the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Education). It has 287 pages consisting of analysis of the state of the art, comparison with other contexts, examination of what has already been sponsored by the government, and ideas for the future³²⁵. A precious document which, however, is no substitute for a real reform framework like those of Berlinguer or Moratti.

The fall of Prodi's second government was followed by an early general election and the installation of a new centre-right government where responsibility for the ministry of education was entrusted to Mariastella Gelmini. If the preliminary remarks could have made one envisage the resumption of a reform-oriented approach, what happened was anything but. The great financial and economic crisis of 2008 forced the country to devise a savings plan that deeply affected the entire public administration. Naturally, education was no exception. This is essentially the reason that all of Gelmini's work ended up being conditioned by the application of the consistent cuts envisaged for the world of schooling by the Minister of Economy and Finance, Giulio Tremonti. In total, from 2008 to 2012, the budget of the Ministry of Education was reduced from €51,649m to €51,084m and the incidence on the state budget went from 10.6% to 9.1%. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the first provisions regarding education in this new phase are found in Chapter II of D.L. 112/2008 under the title "Containment of Expenditure for the Public Sector"³²⁶.

What catches the eye, therefore, is not so much the intention to redefine the curricula, which takes up the organizational torch of Moratti and Fioroni, but the need to provide new numerical parameters for the pupil-teacher ratio and therefore for the formation of classes and sizing of schools. It is interesting to note that in paragraph 1 of article 64, in order to anchor these choices to an objective

³²⁵ See MINISTERO DELL'ECONOMIA E DELLE FINANZE & MINISTERO DELLA PUBBLICA ISTRUZIONE, *Quaderno bianco sulla scuola*, 2007. In this document too, the attention given to EU strategy and objectives, as well as to the OECD surveys, catches the eye.

³²⁶ This refers, in particular, to article 64. comma 6 reads: "from the implementation of comma 1, 2, 3, and 4 of this article, the state budget must derive gross savings of not less than €456m for the year 2009, €1,650m for the year 2010, €2,538m for the year 2011, and €3,188m starting from the year 2012", TESTO COORDINATO DEL DECRETO-LEGGE 25 giugno 2008, n. 112 "Testo del decreto-legge 25 giugno 2008, n. 112 (pubblicato nel supplemento ordinario n. 152/L alla Gazzetta Ufficiale n. 147 del 25 giugno 2008), coordinato con la legge di conversione 6 agosto 2008, n. 133, (in questo stesso supplemento ordinario, alla pag. 3), recante: «Disposizioni urgenti per lo sviluppo economico, la semplificazione, la competitività, la stabilizzazione della finanza pubblica e la perequazione tributaria»" (GU Serie Generale n.195 del 21-08-2008 - Suppl. Ordinario n. 196).

point of reference, there is a choice made to mention unclearly defined ‘European standards’³²⁷ even though - as it has been already mentioned and will be extensively explained in the second chapter - the Union has no legislative power over educational matters, nor even standard guidelines in the strategy regarding the numerical parameters that need to be respected in this field.

Then D.P.R. 81/2009³²⁸ provided criteria for determining staff numbers on based on the number of pupils per class “based on an increase in the average ratio, at the national level, of 0.40 pupils/class, to be achieved in the three-year period 2009-2011”. Specifically, it was thus established that: primary school classes had to have no less than 15 pupils and no more than 26 (with exceptions for peripheral and isolated areas and for classes made up of different age groups)³²⁹; the first classes of lower secondary school had to have no less than 18 pupils and no more than 27, providing that a single class is formed if the total number of pupils at the school site does not exceed 30, and that classes are recomposed if, in the years following the first, the average number of pupils per class is equal to or less than 20³³⁰; the first classes of upper secondary school had to have no less than 27 pupils³³¹. This process of rationalization was also pursued in the first finance law of the Monti government when - still within a context where drastic reductions in expenditure were necessary - strong interventions were made regarding the posts of head teacher and director of general and administrative services, increasing the number of so-called regencies³³² (sites put under the management of a head teacher already in charge of another school).

³²⁷ L. 112/2008, Art. 64 par. 1: “adoption of interventions and measures aimed at gradually increasing the pupil-teacher ratio by one point, to be achieved, in any case, within the 2011-2012 academic year, in order to bring this ratio closer to the relative European standards”.

³²⁸ See DECRETO DEL PRESIDENTE DELLA REPUBBLICA 20 marzo 2009, n. 81 “Norme per la riorganizzazione della rete scolastica e il razionale ed efficace utilizzo delle risorse umane della scuola, ai sensi dell’articolo 64, comma 4, del decreto-legge 25 giugno 2008, n. 112, convertito, con modificazioni, dalla legge 6 agosto 2008, n. 133” (GU Serie Generale n.151 del 02-07-2009).

³²⁹ Ibid., Art. 10.

³³⁰ Ibid., Art. 11.

³³¹ Ibid., Art. 16.

³³² This trend too had been started by the previous government with article 19 comma 5 of decree 98/2011, which established the sizing criteria by providing that the autonomy of schools with less than 500 pupils was assigned to a regency, apart from the schools in the more peripheral territories, where the number was lowered to less than 300. See DECRETO DEL PRESIDENTE DELLA REPUBBLICA 20 marzo 2009, n. 81 “Norme per la riorganizzazione della rete scolastica e il razionale ed efficace utilizzo delle risorse umane della scuola, ai sensi dell’articolo 64, comma 4, del decreto-legge 25 giugno 2008, n. 112, convertito, con modificazioni, dalla legge 6 agosto 2008, n. 133. (GU Serie Generale n.151 del 02-07-2009). In the Monti government’s budget law for 2012, in article 4 comma 69, the number was increased up to 600 students and 400 for the less populated areas.

Among the changes introduced by Gelmini one finds the assignment, starting from the 2009-2010 academic year, of the first classes of primary school with a single teacher³³³ (except for the teaching of English and religion and the case of families choosing 40 hours full-time); it was a return to the system prior to 1990 when, with law 148, it was decided by Minister Sergio Mattarella, to eliminate the single teacher model, opening up to joint management of classes by multiple teachers and to their co-presence. There was no lack of even very bitter disputes about this decision. The ex-minister, Fioroni, spoke, in the explanation of vote in Parliament on behalf of the opposition of the Democratic Party, of “a combination of cut, sew and arrange that made money immediately” highlighting that “with the single teacher in primary school, the number of teachers cut, when fully operational” would be “about 53,000 [...] More than a reform [...] it is a real foreclosure, and Italian schools are your ‘bad company’. Cuts, therefore, and only cuts”³³⁴. It was evident, moreover, how the issue of expenditure weighed on this decision (as can be read, moreover, in the same article of the law when, in paragraph 1 of article 4, it speaks of ‘rationalization objectives’), although the Minister and the rapporteur for the provision, Valentina Aprea, had claimed the pedagogical value of this approach, rejecting the interpretation of it as a return to the past³³⁵. However, the thorniest issue - also highlighted by the Court of Accounts - was the irreconcilability of this approach, once again centralist, with the system of school autonomy³³⁶.

Another relevant change, this time unrelated to accounting needs, was the reintroduction of the numerical marking system expressed out of ten in primary and lower secondary schools³³⁷. This issue

³³³ See LEGGE 30 ottobre 2008, n. 169 “Conversione in legge, con modificazioni, del decreto-legge 1° settembre 2008, n. 137, recante disposizioni urgenti in materia di istruzione e università”. (GU Serie Generale n.256 del 31-10-2008) Art. 4 and D.Lgs 89/2009 Art. 4 par. 3 for the implementation of the provisions of the decree.

³³⁴ Chamber of Deputies, Stenographic transcription of the session n. 64 of 9th October 2008, p. 68.

³³⁵ Ibid., pp. 4-6. In reality, even within the government majority, there were those who, like the Northern League’s Bossi, accused the Minister of inexperience. Prime Minister Berlusconi intervened in her defence in person: see *Berlusconi difende il maestro unico: Gelmini promossa*, 9th September 2008.

³³⁶ Resolution no. 12 of 2009 of the Court of Accounts, relating to the Presidential Decree, states that: “the single teacher model - referred to in D.L. 137/2008, converted into law no. 169 of 30th October 2008 – it is indeed indicated as a model to be favoured in the context of the possible frameworks of school time, but while still taking account of families’ requests and respecting schools’ autonomy. Essentially, any indication of the model should not be of a prescriptive nature, leaving schools full freedom to structure schedules and teaching-organizational resources in accordance with their own plans and judgement”. It is clear, however, that the assignment of staff to schools according to the criteria established by the Ministry would impede the adoption of any other model, thereby effectively conditioning and limiting the schools’ autonomy.

³³⁷ See TESTO COORDINATO DEL DECRETO-LEGGE 1 settembre 2008, n. 137 “Testo del decreto-legge 1° settembre 2008, n. 137 (in Gazzetta Ufficiale - serie generale - n. 204 del 1 settembre 2008), coordinato con la legge di conversione n. 169 del 30 ottobre 2008 (in questa stessa Gazzetta Ufficiale alla pag. 4), recante: «Disposizioni urgenti in materia di istruzione e università»” (GU Serie Generale n.256 del 31-10-2008) Art. 3 and DECRETO DEL PRESIDENTE DELLA

was intensely contested by some of the political players, since the idea of evaluation out of ten was, in their opinion, linked to a selective attitude that is incongruous with the inclusive nature of primary school in particular, rejected a joint judgment by the teachers, assigning each one responsibility for defining a student with a number, and contradicted the very idea of personalizing the study plan contained in Moratti's texts³³⁸. However, this choice was claimed by numerous representatives of the government, including even the Minister of Finance, Giulio Tremonti, who spoke enthusiastically about replacing the chaotic and anti-meritocratic school model of *il Sessantotto*³³⁹. The debate on this issue recently reopened when, in 2020, then Education Minister Lucia Azzolina, at the urging of Parliament, which had approved an amendment to this effect, signed the decree for the return to descriptive judgments in primary school. On the one side, there was talk of “mass dumbing down” that would destroy merit, on the other, the about-turn was celebrated as necessary and scientifically well-founded³⁴⁰, revealing that the question of numerical or descriptive assessment is far from closed.

Lastly, Gelmini also found herself having to intervene to address the issue of the initial training of the teachers, which was still pending after the repeal of the provisions introduced by Moratti, and the failure by Fioroni to issue new regulations on the matter. The closed ranking lists were reopened, as an exception, for those who had done the ninth cycle of specialization in the SSISs³⁴¹, but this specialization channel was then replaced by the new Active Training Internships (TFAs), scheduled access pathways based on the number of teachers needed, which - at the end of two years of courses and internship, with a thesis and a final exam - qualify secondary school teachers without giving them the right to access the closed ranking lists, or therefore the permanent contract by moving up a list. Notwithstanding the many appeals presented as a result of the TFAs, the only recognized way of accessing the role of teacher for these new specialists was the ordinary competitive exams,³⁴² the first

REPUBBLICA 22 giugno 2009, n. 122 “Regolamento recante coordinamento delle norme vigenti per la valutazione degli alunni e ulteriori modalità applicative in materia, ai sensi degli articoli 2 e 3 del decreto-legge 1° settembre 2008, n. 137, convertito, con modificazioni, dalla legge 30 ottobre 2008, n. 169” (GU Serie Generale n.191 del 19-08-2009) Art. 2

³³⁸ See Chamber of Deputies, stenographical transcription of the session n. 56 of 29th September 2008, p. 9.

³³⁹ See the interview of Giulio Tremonti with La Padania on 12th August 2008: “There is a number to remove and one to introduce. The one that needs to be removed is the number 1968, condensed into '68. It's that year that saw the start of what we have what we have come to call ...” A mess? “That's right”.

³⁴⁰ See La tecnica della scuola, *Voti a scuola, “strumenti di difesa per docenti che non riescono ad appassionare” o “unico modo per segnalare chi merita”?*, 18th November 2022.

³⁴¹ This was a question of more than 11 thousand aspiring teachers.

³⁴² The controversy that opened up about this pathway concerned not only the “double competition” that the planned number of those who accessed the TFA had to then do to access the role, but also, in accordance with the wishes of

of which would take place in parallel with the actual creation of this pathway in 2012, with Minister of Education Profumo and the Monti government, 13 years after the last competitive exam for teaching posts in 1999.

2.4 The *Buona Scuola*: The Problem of Temporary Employment in the Missing Reform

As it has been seen, the issue of long-term temporary employment had become ever more complex and ever more difficult to solve, considering, moreover, that overlapping regulations had resulted in completely different situations for teachers included on the same ranking lists. If Fioroni's efforts had envisaged a depletion of the permanent ranking lists (which, as it has been said, he transformed into GaE) in order to start a phase where there would only be access to the role of teacher through ordinary competitive exams, then things went very differently, because no competitive exams were held and the five-year period of cuts that followed that decision, and this caused a slowdown in recruitment. It is not difficult to imagine how the pressure of those who found themselves put on the ranking lists without a way out drastically increased over the years, notwithstanding the plan of permanent employment after three years promised by Gelmini. On the one side, those who were on the closed ranking lists waiting to move up them in order to access the role, trying to earn points when the lists were updated by taking on temporary posts for year, or also by taking various kinds of, often disputed, training courses; on the other, those who do not have access to the closed ranking lists, not even having a real qualification channel (the SSISs having been abolished) found themselves in a real limbo, consisting of provincial and institute ranking lists structured with multiple bands, from which, however, the state continued to draw for substitute teachers, given the lack of teachers for some subjects (particularly the more scientific ones) and in some areas (particularly in the North). In this way, the number of those who could boast - so to speak - of the status of temporary employment by schools had literally exploded: about 300,000 people³⁴³. Moreover, it was not possible to give a single response to teachers who, while doing the same work, had different qualifications: some qualified

Profumo and the Monti government, the parallel establishment of the 'Special Qualifying Pathway', without access tests but reserved for those with at least three years' service.

³⁴³ See La Repubblica, *Scuola*, 300mila precari sperano "Bene Profumo, ma niente illusioni", 23th December 2011.

through the SSIS, some eligible from the last competitive exams in 1999, and some unqualified formally but in service in schools in any case.

The first important change came with Profumo; after 13 years of waiting, competitive exams were once again held, reserved for those with qualifications, and aimed at recruiting teaching staff for kindergartens schools, primary schools, and lower and upper secondary schools; and, at the same time, the new qualifying pathways mentioned above (TFA and PAS) were launched. Naturally, as important as the normalisation efforts were, the competitive exam was not only not enough to respond to the valid aspirations of the temporary employees, but also created a new pool of suitable candidates who asking to be employed, by keeping the competitive exam's merit ranking lists valid beyond the new two-year deadline established by Profumo.

This was the situation that Stefania Giannini found herself facing when, as Minister of Education in the Renzi government (which had succeeded the Letta government in 2014, after less than a year), she began working on what should have been a major reform project that, at the behest of the proponents themselves, assumed the name of the *Buona Scuola*³⁴⁴. The plan started with extensive consultation³⁴⁵ - according to the promoters "the most participatory consultation in history"³⁴⁶ - which, through a dedicated website, aimed to involve teachers, students, families and citizens in general in the new reform project. Indeed, the results were surprising: 1,300,000 visits to the site, 5,000 concrete proposals with 125,000 votes, 2,000 debates organized by schools and various types of association, and forty stops on the official tour³⁴⁷. On 15th November 2014 the consultation ended and a few days later, on 26th November 2014, the sentence of the European Court of Justice was published concerning the fate of at least 250,000 temporary school workers - with at least three years of service - who asked to be employed permanently on the basis of directive 70/1999 of the European Union. The Court - highlighting how the framework agreement on fixed-term work which appears in

³⁴⁴ Alessandro Fusacchia, Chief of Staff of the Minister's Office at the Ministry of Education at that time, stresses the exceptional nature of having given the law its name long before it was promulgated, relating the thoughts of the then head of the press office, Alessandra Migliozi, on this: "Laws usually get given a nickname at the end, say the night before the government approves them. It's useful to feed it to the journalists to make a headline of it the next day. Here instead, the name came up the start: it was already there, and complete with a logo, from well before we even started writing the first article of the new law" – A. Fusacchia, *Lo Stato a Nudo*, Bari-Roma: Laterza, 2022, p. 96.

³⁴⁵ One can find the document released as a report of the consultation process with some results online, on Ministry's website.

³⁴⁶ A. Fusacchia, p. 93.

³⁴⁷ See A. Fusacchia, p. 99.

the annex to the directive, aims to “limit the use of successive fixed-term contracts or employment relationships, seen as a potential source of abuse to the detriment of workers”³⁴⁸ - considered that the “objective reasons” for which systematic recourse to fixed-term employment relationships was necessary in Italian schools were not sufficient to make national legislation - which “in practice leads to an abusive recourse to a succession of fixed-term employment contracts”³⁴⁹ – with the European directive.

It was probably an expected storm, but the weight of the controversies that it brought with it, giving strength to the claims of the temporary-contract teachers, also determined, in fact, the fate of the *Buona Scuola* reform. A few months earlier the Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, when launching the listening campaign, had in fact announced the permanent recruitment of 150,000 temporary teachers³⁵⁰, but now this number corresponded to around half of those who, according to trade union estimates, had the right to assume the role in accordance with the European ruling. Giannini's reaction to the Court's ruling was based on precisely this commitment by the government³⁵¹, but if this effort was previously recognized by the world of schooling as the fruit of a significant political commitment, it now seemed more like a duty and this changed, not just a little, the political conditions when the draft reform reached the Cabinet.

With the budget law approved in December 2014, one billion euros was allocated for 2015 for the creation of the *Buona Scuola*³⁵² and three billion when fully operational, significantly reversing the trend compared to the cuts imposed on the sector in previous years.

On 12th March 2015, the Cabinet chose a bill as the instrument for the new school law (with a set of regulations and enabling laws) and not a decree (which would need to be converted within 60 days,

³⁴⁸ CORTE DI GIUSTIZIA EUROPEA, Sentenza della Corte (Terza Sezione) 26 novembre 2014, Cause riunite C-22/13, da C-61/13 a C-63/13 e C-418/13, Point 72.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., Point 104.

³⁵⁰ See Ansa.it, *La buona scuola di Matteo Renzi, 150 mila assunzioni e basta precari*, 4th September 2014.

³⁵¹ See Agi.it, *Scuola: Giannini, sentenza Ue anticipata da 'Buona scuola'*, 26 novembre 2014 where Minister Giannini said: “It seems to me that the performance and methods that the *Buona Scuola* provides for are perfectly in line, but anticipatory, with what the European Court has indicated in its ruling”.

³⁵² LEGGE 23 dicembre 2014, n. 190 “Disposizioni per la formazione del bilancio annuale e pluriennale dello Stato (legge di stabilità 2015)” (GU Serie Generale n.300 del 29-12-2014 - Suppl. Ordinario n. 99) “In order to provide the country with a school system that is characterized by a strengthening of the education offered and didactic continuity, by the enhancement of teachers, and by a significant realisation of school autonomy, including through evaluation, in the budgetary forecast for the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research, a fund called *Buona Scuola Fund* has been established, with the allocation of €1,000m for 2015 and €3,000m a year starting from 2016”.

under penalty of lapsing); based on this decision it was already clear how the pressure of the unions, felt particularly keenly by the Democratic Party parliamentarians, made extensive discussion in Parliament necessary, notwithstanding the fact that time for recruitment for the 2015-2016 academic year was actually already very tight. In part for this reason, the government was asked by many parties to extract the regulations for recruitment, transforming them into a separate decree law, and to then allow Parliament to address the thornier issues contained in the government's proposal without this 'blackmail' hanging over them³⁵³. Alongside the recruitment plan, which many of the amendment efforts focused on, the bill introduced important changes regarding, in particular, the autonomy staff (so-called *organico dell'autonomia*, which from 2016-2017 would be divided into regular posts, support posts, and posts aimed at enhancing what the school offers educationally and determined every three years on the basis of the PTOF)³⁵⁴, the evaluation and in-service training of teachers (compulsory, permanent and structural)³⁵⁵, the school's governing bodies, school buildings³⁵⁶, the National Digital School Plan³⁵⁷, school-work alternation, and the powers of school managers. If regarding the need to finally have a complete and public school building register and a plan aimed at securing and enhancing the buildings that house schools, often in more than precarious conditions, as well as the impetus to be given to digitization, there were no major divisions, the other issues, in contrast, led to a very heated debate which was followed by the approval of many amendments in parliament which, if they did not overturn the initial plan, nevertheless substantially modified many of the elements wanted by the government. Specifically: the reform of the governing bodies envisaged, with delegation to the government was cancelled; an overall reform of the recruitment system was introduced which was not envisaged in the original text³⁵⁸; the powers assigned to managers were reduced by the text issued by the Cabinet regarding the so-called 'direct call' of teachers, on the basis of which the managers could have drawn teachers from a geographical area to

³⁵³ Deputy Fabiana Dadone of the Five Star Movement wrote of "blackmailing Parliament, to which you would like to ascribe responsibility for the downsizing of the vaunted recruitment plan" from a letter addressed to Giannini, which Fusacchia reports a few lines from in his book – See A. Fusacchia, p. 142.

³⁵⁴ L. 107/2015, art.1 comma 5.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., Art. 1 comma 124-125.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., Art. 1 comma 159 establishes the watchdog for school buildings and the national day for safety in schools; comma 137 establishes that the Ministry publishes the data related to the school building registry in an open format

³⁵⁷ Ibid., Art.1 comma 56-59.

³⁵⁸ "Approved stealthily, a new delegation is introduced for the government to review the recruitment system for secondary schools [...] This last amendment has fallen on our heads. A comprehensive reform of the recruitment system approved with a blitz attack" – A. Fusacchia, p. 153.

be selected for their school, who now had to instead meet criteria established by the PTOF³⁵⁹; the composition of the committee for the evaluation of teachers - responsible for identifying the criteria used by managers as the basis for dividing the share of funds allocated for the enhancement of merit among the teachers of their school - was revised³⁶⁰, giving more weight to the teachers' component, and it was established that the criteria identified by the schools would be collected by the Ministry for the definition, after three years, of guidelines at the national level.

However, other bitterly contested provisions remained substantially unchanged, such as: the compulsory school-work alternation the last three years of upper secondary school, for a total duration of 400 hours in technical high schools and vocational institutes and 200 hours in *licei*³⁶¹; the introduction, as a requirement for access to the final state exam of the second cycle, of participation in the tests arranged by INVALSI; and the annual bonus of €500 (stored-value payment card for updating and training) assigned to each teacher employed for the purchase of tools that facilitate the updating of professional skills/knowledge and enrolment in training courses with bodies accredited by the Ministry³⁶².

The climate in the Senate when the law arrived in June 2015, after passing through the Chamber of Deputies, was incandescent, in part because about 65% of employees in the school sector had taken part in the general strike called by the trade unions for the preceding 5th May³⁶³, many of them having taken to the streets throughout Italy alongside tens of thousands of students. The tension led Prime Minister Matteo Renzi to publicly take a position, during a television broadcast, claiming that he was

³⁵⁹ The insistence of the rapporteur for the majority, Deputy Maria Coscia, on this point is indicative of how much the relative majority party feared the narrative of a turn towards the 'direct call', that is to say, the recruitment of teachers by school managers: "teachers will all be hired on permanent contracts by the regional school office. When they reach the level of the network of schools, at that moment the school managers, based on regulations that must ensure maximum transparency, can identify the professional skills needed to implement the academic programme", Chamber of Deputies stenographic transcript of the session n. 427 of 14th May 2015. The signing of the Supplementary National Collective Agreement in 2017 would introduce a further restriction of the managers' powers, making provision for the need for a resolution by the teaching staff on the manager's proposals regarding requirements (six at most, from a list given in the Annex) for comparison of the candidacies of teachers in individual geographical areas.

³⁶⁰ L 107/2015, art. 1 comma 129, The committee lasts for three years, is chaired by the school manager, and made up of three teachers (two chosen by the teaching staff and one by the *Consiglio di Istituto*), two parent representatives (for upper secondary schools, one parent and one student representative) chosen by the *Consiglio di Istituto*, an external member identified by the regional school office from among teachers, school managers and school technical directors.

³⁶¹ Ibid., art. 1 comma 33-34.

³⁶² Ibid., art. 1 comma 121-123.

³⁶³ For a description of the strike see *Il Corriere della Sera*, *Insegnanti e studenti in piazza. Renzi: «Ascoltiamo la protesta»*, 5th May 2005.

willing to cancel the work done over the previous months, to open a dialogue with the trade union organizations and the students and, therefore, to abandon the recruitment plan envisaged for a few months later³⁶⁴. This last emphasis led to thoughts of a bluff, in part because a few days later, on 25th June 2015, law 107/2015 was in fact subjected to a controversial vote of confidence³⁶⁵, only to be definitively approved by the Chamber on 9th July 2015. The recruitment plan *was* therefore effectively launched, but an error in the design of the algorithm generated a new wave of protests from teachers who believed - often rightly - that they had been penalized by the mechanism the Ministry had wanted. Admitting that these were 'gross mistakes' and 'glaring injustices' was the same Chief of Staff Alessandro Fusacchia who attributed the main responsibility for this chaos to the amendments approved by Parliament on the special mobility of teachers.

In December 2015, after the defeat suffered during the vote on the constitutional referendum, Matteo Renzi resigned and the government led by Paolo Gentiloni took office, who decided to keep almost the entire team of ministers in their posts, thus making the replacement of Stefania Giannini with Valeria Fedeli at the Ministry of Education even more striking, and testifying to the desire to mark a change of phase in this area and to attempt to reopen the, abruptly interrupted, dialogue with the world of schools. Fedeli would be responsible for overseeing the issuing of the enabling laws provided for in the text of L. 107/2015, specifically: a) the system of initial training and access to teaching in lower and upper secondary schools; b) the promotion of the inclusion in schools of pupils with disabilities; c) the review of vocational education; d) the establishment of an integrated education and training system for 0 to 6-year-olds; e) the right to study; f) the promotion and dissemination of humanistic culture; g) the reorganization of the legislation on Italian schools abroad; h) the adjustment of the legislation on the assessment and certification of students' competencies and on state exams. Only one of the nine mandates envisaged by the law, the one relating to the issuing of a new consolidation law (*Testo Unico*) for schools, would remain unimplemented. It is also in this phase that, with the signing of the renewal of the National Contract for 2016-2018, one of the most discussed provisions of L. 107/2015 was modified, the one relating to the fund for the enhancement of merit, which was merged into the new fund for the improvement of what schools offer educationally, providing for a

³⁶⁴ See A. Fusacchia, pp. 158-164.

³⁶⁵ See la Repubblica, *Scuola, Senato approva fiducia. Bagarre in aula*, 25th June 2015.

reduction of €80m (€100m starting from 2019) to finance the salary increases intended for all teachers.

This is the path the Italian Education system has followed for about twenty years and, as it will be seen in the third chapter - notwithstanding the rapid and constant changes in political majority that governed the country and, consequently, in the ideological views concerning the school - one can talk of a single reform process that, in the end, did not change lot of things in the scheme designed by Gentile one hundred years ago. Exceptions are the autonomy of the schools, the raising of compulsory education period, the attention reserved to the job market and to the skills considered related to it (English and digital education above all) and, mostly, the establishment of a national evaluation system that will be better analysed in the third chapter.

CHAPTER 2: International Large-Scale Assessments and EU Education Strategy

Section 1: OECD/PISA: History and Arguments For and Against

Even though, as mentioned in the first chapter, a penchant for international comparison of education systems cannot be seen as a specifically present-day one³⁶⁶, it is only post-World War II that this propensity has transformed into a series of initiatives promoted by various international organizations in order to identify ways of supranationally evaluating the output of individual states and comparing different education systems³⁶⁷.

It was with this aim that the first ILSAs (that is the acronym for International Large-Scale Assessments) were born, and one can here turn to Braun and Singer's definition: "an ILSA is a coordinated international effort to gather credible, comparable evidence of achievement in various cognitive domains, as well as additional information intended to enhance the interpretability of the findings"³⁶⁸.

Although the influence these international assessment systems have on education policies has not always been the same³⁶⁹, reading what Irwin Kirsch³⁷⁰ (a major protagonist in the development of studies on the international assessment of educational skills) writes in an article published together with Henry J. Braun when referring to the usefulness that the information provided by ILSAs can have for policy makers³⁷¹, one can immediately grasp that it is not possible to separate the goal of

³⁶⁶ See the mentioned report of the committee on the draft of the Orlando Law's provisions for elementary schools and teachers, sitting 21st May 1904, pp. 5-11.

³⁶⁷ "ILSAs [...] remain a relatively recent phenomenon that has evolved in line with increasing demand worldwide for greater accountability for educational inputs" Rutkowski L. et al. (edited by), *Handbook of International Large-Scale Assessment. Background, Technical Issues, and Methods of Data Analysis*, New York: Chapman & Hall/CRC, 2014 p.17

³⁶⁸ H.I. Braun & J.D. Singer, *Assessment for Monitoring of Education Systems: International Comparisons*. 'The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science', 683(1), 75–92, 2019, p. 77.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 76.

³⁷⁰ Irwin Kirsch has worked for the World Bank, UNESCO, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and he is the Ralph W. Tyler Chair in Large-Scale Assessment and Director of the Centers for Global Assessment and Research on Human Capital and Education at ETS in Princeton. He also chaired the reading expert panel of the first PISA assessment framework.

³⁷¹ "ILSAs enable developed countries to assess their relative standing with respect to the distribution of human capital, the relationships between specific skills and background factors as well as to the contexts for learning and for using these skills. This information enables policy makers to understand better the factors that (may) contribute to skill trends and

measurement from that of standardization and, therefore, from the drive for change within the individual education systems being evaluated. This issue will be extensively explored later, together with the political impact – expected and real – that ILSAs have had, but it is important to bear in mind from the beginning that, although the use of numerical scales may suggest objective measurement, that is to say, surveys that are neutral from an ethical and political point of view, on the contrary they operate in a minefield when it comes to precisely the choices that underlie both what is measured and the methods of detection and measurement themselves³⁷².

1.1 The History of Surveys before OECD/PISA

According to Kirsch and Braun, the roots of the efforts behind the first ILSAs can be found in the meeting promoted by UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE) in Hamburg in 1958³⁷³, chaired by the director of the NFER (National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales), and aimed at identifying a way of evaluating schools and student learning. The group of experts met twice more the following year, producing a pilot study³⁷⁴ that saw the participation of twelve national research institutes and the involvement of about ten thousand thirteen-year-old students, who were tested in reading comprehension, mathematics, science, geography and non-verbal ability with the findings then being published in 1962 under the auspices of the UIE³⁷⁵.

patterns [...]. For developing countries there are similar motivations” I. Kirsch, & H. Braun, *Changing times, changing needs: enhancing the utility of international large-scale assessments*. ‘Large-scale Assess Educ 8, 10’, 2020, p. 3.

³⁷² Regarding this point, see, for example, what Grek & Ydesen say: “Despite their promise of a factual, quantitative, and scientific approach to producing knowledge for policy, by now, education indicators have been well shown to be more than mere instruments in the making of policy; they are political constructs, always built on the verge of science meeting policy”, S. Grek & C. Ydesen, *Where science met policy: Governing by indicators and the OECD’s INES programme*, ‘Globalisation, Societies and Education’, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 122-137, 2021, p.122.

³⁷³ See I. Kirsch & H. Braun p. 3 – it was a seminar on ASPRO (Associated Schools Projects), a project that had been running for four years and involved 40 countries. The seminar, as T.I Davies reports, was held in Hamburg on 21st and 22nd July 1958, with 19 participants from 19 countries, with a view to exchanging experiences and better coordinating the programmes, methods and study materials used in schools - see T. I. Davies, *Seminar on the Associated Schools Projects Hamburg, July 1958*, ‘International Review of Education’ Vol. 4, no. 4, 1958, pp. 496–498.

³⁷⁴ According to the official IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) website “The aim of this research, known as the Pilot Twelve-Country Study, was to investigate the feasibility of more extensive assessments of educational achievement”.

³⁷⁵ See C. Morgan, *OECD Programme for International Student Assessment: unraveling a knowledge network*, Carleton University, 2007, p. 70.

It was precisely this effort that gave rise to the first nucleus of the Project for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement³⁷⁶ later named the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), which became a legal entity in 1967³⁷⁷, and whose pioneering role in the field of ILSAs since the 1960s is recognized by many³⁷⁸. In 1964, the first survey dealing specifically with mathematical studies (FIMS, First International Mathematics Study) involved 13-year-old and final-year secondary school students from 12 countries³⁷⁹ and the data processing techniques were improved thanks to the use of more sophisticated technologies³⁸⁰; early studies like this “were motivated more by an interest in comparative education research and less by collecting information that could be used to inform education policy making”³⁸¹. It will be seen below how the fundamental difference between these first surveys and those developed in a second phase, particularly under the aegis of the OECD, lies precisely in the diversity of objectives: on the one hand, the collection of data³⁸² - aimed at comparing the different opportunities to learn that educational systems give to their students - on the other, the desire to understand, using the indicators, critical elements of the education systems in order to be able to modify and improve them, an aim therefore not only statistical or simply comparative, but truly political as well.

³⁷⁶ The twelve national research centres involved in the pilot study formed a council in 1960, and the original members also included the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER), which we shall see was also an important protagonist in the development of the PISA tests – C. Morgan, p. 72.

³⁷⁷ See IEA official website.

³⁷⁸ See Rutkowski L. et al., p. 13.

³⁷⁹ According to Rutkowski L. et al., the first executive director of the IEA was not even sure, for months, that the package with the tests had been received and the tests actually administered in the 12 countries being surveyed, *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁸⁰ “The IEA community of practice was able to undertake the First International Mathematics Study during the 1960s because certain technologies were available to its members. Community members were able to store the answer sheet data on punch cards using the IBM 1230 Optical Mark Scoring Reader. This machine optically read the answer sheets and transferred them to the punch cards. Using IBM 7094 computers, the punch cards were then transferred onto magnetic tapes. The data were then manipulated (edited, sorted and organized into records) and statistically analyzed. The data were also stored as a data bank”. C. Morgan, pp. 74-75.

³⁸¹ I. Kirsch & H. Braun, p. 4.

³⁸² It should be said that the first ILSAs developed by IEA also received many critiques, as Morgan reports: “The First International Mathematics Study and the Six Subject Study were criticized for their lack of validity and reliability. One scathing critique came from Hans Freudenthal who was a leading expert in mathematics education. He scrutinized several of the studies, including the first mathematics study and the literature, science and reading assessments that were conducted as part of the Six Subject Study. In a lengthy journal article published in July 1975 in the journal, *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, Freudenthal pointed out systematically the weaknesses of the IEA studies, such as the exclusion of mathematics subject experts in constructing the mathematics tests; the lack of valid test instruments and population samples; the ambiguous use of variables; the lack of rigorous hypothesis testing; and errors in translation of the test items. He concluded that the data produced by these studies were unreliable” - C. Morgan p. 77.

The success of the first experiment carried out by the IEA had three main consequences: a) further developments within the IEA itself, among which the Six Subject Study of 1970-71³⁸³ and the first Reading Literacy Study of 1990-91³⁸⁴ should be mentioned, through to the steady growth of TIMSS (which already involved 46 countries in 1995)³⁸⁵ and PIRLS³⁸⁶; b) the growing interest in international assessments by other organizations such as the OECD; and c) the increase in the sphere of influence of ILSAs, also shown by a greater national interest in large-scale assessments (LSAs) of the results obtained within individual education systems³⁸⁷. In fact, measuring the output of school systems at the national level could be seen as an objective linked to the accountability of public policies³⁸⁸ in the education sphere, and one can see how, to this end, the use of methods validated at the supranational level could attract the attention of various policy makers. It is interesting to note here that within the context of the DeSeCo Project, which will be shortly discussed, one can count research related to the intelligence quotient (IQ) carried out since the early twentieth century among the precedents in this race to quantitatively evaluate educational output; which allows one, right from the start, to bring the risk of distortion that this kind of measurement can entail into focus³⁸⁹. As

³⁸³ The six subjects were: science, reading comprehension, literature education, English as a foreign language, French as a foreign language, and civic education. This time 13-year-olds were not involved, but rather 14-year-olds - “because by that time nearly all participating countries were keeping children in full-time compulsory education until they reached their 15th birthday” - as well as students aged 10 and in the final year of secondary school, but only for some subjects. See IEA official website.

³⁸⁴ It is interesting to note that Andreas Schleicher, who was chosen as International Coordinator of the project, later became Head of the OECD’s PISA programme and is still Director of the Education and Skills section of the OECD. See C. Morgan, p. 82 and OECD, *Measuring Student Knowledge and Skills. A New Framework for Assessment*, Paris, 1999, p. 4.

³⁸⁵ Administered every four years since 1995, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study is defined by the IEA as one of its flagships. See IEA website.

³⁸⁶ Administered every five years since 2001, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study “is recognized as the global standard for assessing trends in reading achievement at the fourth grade”. See IEA website.

³⁸⁷ For example, the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) began its surveys in 1969 – see NAEP website and H. Braun & J. Singer, p. 78 - whilst in Italy, D.P.R. 419/1974 established CEDE – the European Centre of Education - entrusting it with not only the task of disseminating pedagogical and didactic material, but also “of conducting studies and research on the school systems of other countries, with particular regard to those of the European Community, and on the activities of international organizations in the educational field” (Art.12).

³⁸⁸ In this regard, Clara Morgan and Louis Volante highlight how the growing interest in measuring educational performance is in fact linked to the question of accountability, which in turn arises from the emergence of neoliberal systems since the end of the 1970s that replaced Keynesian policies in OECD member countries. This change led to the introduction of New Public Management and the implementation of techniques typical of management in the private sector to measure the effectiveness of public policies. See C. Morgan & L. Volante, L. *A review of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s international education surveys: Governance, human capital discourses, and policy debates*. ‘Policy Futures in Education’, 14(6), 775–792, 2016, p. 778.

³⁸⁹ See J. Carson in D. S. Rychen & L. H. Salganik (edited by), *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, Göttingen: Hogrefe & Huber Publishers, 2001, pp. 33-44. He himself says: “the history of the abuses that have been perceived to be carried out in its [IQ’s] name have convinced many that the attempt to define and isolate fundamental human

regards the second consequence produced by the success of the experiment promoted by the IEA in the 1960s – that is, the interest provoked in other international organizations - it should be noted that in this area the efforts of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), founded in 1961, were, from the outset, devoted to research activities aimed at identifying a set of ‘ideal indicators’ in the field of education. Therefore, it was not simply a question of producing new measurements, but of defining what should be measured and how, within a framework which, given the nature of the organization, had a lot to do with the economic development of the involved countries, which was seen as increasingly linked to the enhancement of so-called human capital. Consequently, in 1967 the OECD set up an internal research section dedicated to education, called CERI (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation), and published, with the aim of starting to define the key indicators for the evaluation of educational outcomes, *Methods and Statistical Needs for Educational Planning*. In 1970, the conference organized in Paris to discuss educational policies gave impetus to the formation of a working group on the subject that in 1973 led to a significant new publication, *A Framework for Educational Indicators to Guide Government Decisions*. However, up to that point CERI’s outlook was “more conceptual and philosophical than evaluative and statistical”³⁹⁰. It was due to the pressure from some countries, and in particular from the United States - whose results in both the IEA surveys and the first tests developed at the national level had turned out to be far below expectations, and who consequently feared losing eminence in terms of the competitiveness of its human capital at the height of the Cold War technology race - that from the mid-1980s attention shifted towards the definition of wider-ranging and more precise statistical indicators than those of the IEA, but capable of giving rise to new quantitative measurements³⁹¹.

This is how the end of the 1980s (1988-89) saw the launch of the Education Indicators Program, and the project known by the acronym INES (International Indicators of Education Systems)³⁹², whose

characteristics is inherently problematic, if not simply racist, sexist, and ethnocentric [...] It is as part of the response to this history of potential abuse that the DeSeCo Project [the OECD project aimed at defining key competencies] may be best understood”. In this regard, see also how S. Sjøborg compares the results of the PISA tests to an IQ test applied to school systems, questioning the very validity of this system of measurement – S. Sjøberg, *PISA and Global Educational Governance – A Critique of the Project, its Uses and Implications*, ‘Eurasia Journal of Mathematics, Science and Technology Education’ 11 no. 1, 111-127, 2015, p. 112.

³⁹⁰ S. Grek & C. Ydesen, p. 126.

³⁹¹ Ibid., p. 127.

³⁹² “Actors such as the IEA, the OECD, CERI, the United States, and France, although setting off with quite different interests and values, ultimately found in INES, as we will see, a key boundary space that brought them altogether. On the

goal was not simply to perfect the surveys carried out until then but, indeed, to select new indicators³⁹³. This was a radical change in relation to both the initial philosophical approach and to what the IEA had produced up to that point. That is to say, it was a shift to a cross-curricular and extracurricular measurement, focussed not only on subject knowledge, but on the so-called transversal competencies that at this point it became essential to define³⁹⁴.

In 1987 and 1988, in two conferences held in Washington and Paris - and not by chance in the two countries most active in the promotion of this new system of international indicators³⁹⁵ - the desire to pursue this path was reaffirmed, and the extent of the challenge of comparing international education outcomes was more precisely defined. Although, as it has been seen, UNESCO had played an important role in the evolution of the ILSAs from the outset, at this stage the organization was excluded from the INES project (in part due to Reagan's 1984 decision to withdraw the United States' from UNESCO) with the organization's alleged politicization and leaning to the left being given as reasons³⁹⁶. In reality, according to Grek and Ydesen, the fundamental reason for the exclusion of UNESCO from the project (which would not, however, lead to a rift between the two organizations, destined to meet up again in various subsequent phases of the development of international

one hand, they became key players in the education performance data game; on the other, they could take home the particular discourses and ideas that worked within their own contexts and cultures" Ibid., p. 127.

³⁹³ See A. Caputo, *Ripensare le competenze filosofiche a scuola. Problemi e prospettive*, Roma: Carocci, 2019, p. 23

³⁹⁴ The thorny issue of defining key competencies will be tackled later, including examining the linguistic issue related to the use of the term 'competency' in preference to knowledge, ability and skill. The frequent use of this term is in fact one of the elements that makes the structure of the research promoted by the OECD more elusive. For now, it is important to anticipate here that the question at the heart of all of the efforts made by the OECD in this area can be expressed as follows: "Beyond basic skills such as reading, writing and calculating, what competencies are needed for the individual to lead an overall successful and responsible life and for contemporary society to face present and future challenges?", OECD, *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundation* (DeSeCo), Background Paper, Paris: 2001, p. 2.

³⁹⁵ The reasons for this drive differed. Whilst the United States needed to avoid losing ground in the race for technological development from a perspective determined by the Cold War, as it has been already seen (the crisis sparked by the launch of Sputnik in 1957 had led to various questions about the adequacy of research efforts and education and the need to compare its own system with those of Europe and the Soviet Union), the French government of Mitterand wanted the measurements to reveal a reason that would justify an education reform capable of identifying solutions that would make it possible to reduce the inequalities between children from different socio-economic backgrounds – see C. Addey et al, *The rise of international large-scale assessments and rationales for participation*, 'Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education', 2017, p.3 and C. Morgan, p. 61.

³⁹⁶ The Americans were not only concerned about the risk of excessive Soviet influence, but also hotly contested the distribution of the budget; see the TIME article of 9th January 1984, *Waving Goodbye to UNESCO*, The New York Times article of 20th December 1984 *U.S. AFFIRMS PLAN TO LEAVE UNESCO AT END OF MONTH*, and The Washington Post article of 20th December 1984 *UNESCO Withdrawal Announced*.

surveys)³⁹⁷ was a profound difference in the approach to these issues: “while the OECD has generally pursued an economistic approach to education [...] UNESCO was standing for a more holistic and humanistic approach”³⁹⁸.

The network of experts involved in the INES project repeatedly risked tearing itself apart in the attempt to answer the questions about which data should be taken into consideration, how to measure it, and how to compare results obtained in school systems that differ from one another³⁹⁹. The first fruits of this fatiguing work carried out within the INES project - which followed the conference held in Lugano and Cadro in Switzerland in September 1991⁴⁰⁰, during which some papers were presented and then collected in the publication *Making Education Count* - came in 1992 when the OECD published its *Regards sur l'éducation (Education at a Glance)*⁴⁰¹ for the first time; this contained the first list of indicators that would form the basis of the first experimental survey, which was named GOALS (Goals Orientation and Attainment in Learning Systems)⁴⁰² and was carried out in eight countries in 1994. When accepting the publication of this first volume, the group of scholars most reluctant to accept that rigid indicators could be imposed on the measurement of competencies that are not adequately defined (and in part not rigidly definable), demanded the insertion of “a note that unequivocally expressed their reticence and scepticism, and that sounded more or less like this: schools are organisms that are too complex and delicate to be put into figures; the indicators of pupils' achievement are reductive and too coarse to account for a school's mission. It was a sort of wake-up call”⁴⁰³. The last one, however. Because even though five of the ten indicators were meant to be seen

³⁹⁷ As Gruber reports, for example, UNESCO and OECD published a joint preface to the publication of a re-run of PISA2000, affirming their “intention to become joint standard-bearers of a global standards movement” – K.H. Gruber, *The German “PISA-shock”: Some aspects of the extraordinary impact of the OECD's PISA study on the German education system* in H. Ertl (edited by), *Cross-national attraction: Accounts from England and Germany* (pp. 195 – 208). Oxford: Symposium Books, 2006, p. 199; see also OECD & UNESCO Institute for Statistics, *Literacy Skills for the World of Tomorrow Further Results from PISA 2000*, Paris: 2003, pp. 3-4.

³⁹⁸ S. Grek & C. Ydesen, p. 129.

³⁹⁹ See D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Agire le competenze chiave. Scenari e strategie per il benessere consapevole*, Milano: Franco Angeli, 2007, pp. 28-29.

⁴⁰⁰ After the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the largely United States-led phenomenon of economic globalization began to take hold, attention to this kind of measurement increased further. At this point it was not simply a matter of competition between the two opposing blocks, but one of measuring the competitiveness and economic potential of each country by means of the output of the individual education systems - see C. Addey et al., p. 3.

⁴⁰¹ This publication, still issued annually, has, with time, become the fundamental point of reference for measuring the results of education systems at the international level.

⁴⁰² See A. Caputo, pp. 22-23.

⁴⁰³ N. Bottani in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Agire le competenze chiave*, pp. 29-30.

as completely provisional⁴⁰⁴, the race to measure continued unabated and the indicators became a stable part of the international evaluation of student outcomes in diverse education systems.

In fact, this new approach absorbed the methodology the IEA used to measure curricular competencies, adding, as has been seen, a more transversal approach and ending up replacing it due to the financial difficulties that the organization found itself dealing with in the 1990s, as related by Grek e Ydesen⁴⁰⁵. It is through the confrontation that occurred between the defenders of international disciplinary surveys and those of the new approach, that the OECD and UNESCO (which “stood out for its ambiguity with its identification of the global goals of education as learning to know, learning to do and learning to be”)⁴⁰⁶ found themselves on the same side again, that of cross-curricular measurement.

Three other studies arose during this period, defined by Salganik as ‘first generation’ ones⁴⁰⁷. The first was developed by the so-called Network A of the INES project (working on Educational Outcomes and chaired by the United States) which, after classifying learning outcomes by distinguishing between curricular-bounded knowledge and skills and non-curricular-bounded socio-cultural knowledge and skills, decided to investigate the feasibility of measuring non-curricular skills in order to try to more precisely identify the indicators of such measures. As a result, the Cross-Curricular Competencies (CCC) Feasibility Study was launched in 1993, involving 16-year-olds from nine countries with a view to “monitoring and distinguishing [cross-curricular] competencies”⁴⁰⁸ in four areas: politics, economics and civics; problem solving; self-perception/self-concept; and communication. “The overall goal of the CCC Feasibility Study was to see whether indicators not linked to school subjects could be developed. The answer was yes”⁴⁰⁹. The second study (among the first generation ones) that arose within the OECD, was the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), conducted in eight countries in 1994 and very important in terms of subsequent developments because, although it was designed to measure the skills of adults and not of students still involved in

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 30.

⁴⁰⁵ See S. Grek & C. Ydesen, p. 131.

⁴⁰⁶ D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Agire le competenze chiave*, p. 31. These are the three pillars of education according to Jacques Delors who has had a very important role, as it will be seen, in the process that is described in this section. See J. Delors, *Nell'educazione un tesoro*, UNESCO, 1997, translated by A. Coccia, Roma: Armando Editore, new ed., 2021.

⁴⁰⁷ See L.H. Salganik in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, pp. 18-21.

⁴⁰⁸ A. Caputo, p. 24.

⁴⁰⁹ L.H. Salganik in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies* p. 19.

formal educational processes in schools, it provided some definitions of concepts that would be taken up by PISA surveys (particularly the ‘literacy’ one)⁴¹⁰. The third and last of the first generation studies originated from a request made by the ministers of OECD member countries to produce a report on human capital, culminating in the publication, in 1998, of a report entitled *Human Capital Investment: An International Comparison*, which was also particularly important, above all because of some definitions that would later be taken up again, particularly the one for human capital: “the knowledge, skills, competencies, and other attributes embodied in individuals that are relevant to economic activity”⁴¹¹. It is interesting to recall here that starting in 1986, again within the OECD, a monitoring and evaluation system in the field of environmental education called ENSI (Environment and School Initiatives)⁴¹² had been launched and that therefore the interest in measurement kindled by the OECD was spreading ever more pervasively through the various fields of education.

1.2 The DeSeCo Project

In 1996 the Swiss government, through the Swiss Federal Statistical Office and with the support of the United States Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, proposed setting up a group called CORE (Competence Reference Group) within the OECD, and this group “prepared, discussed and reached decisions” on the DeSeCo Project⁴¹³, that is to say, the Definition and Selection of Competencies, “launched to provide theoretical and conceptual inputs and eventually a solid foundation for building a consensus about a set of key competencies to be assessed at the international level”⁴¹⁴. In Rychen’s introduction to the publication that collects the work of some experts involved in this effort, which will be shortly discussed, she highlights how the approach chosen by the OECD had been very practical up to that time, in other words, aimed at continuing the attempts at measurement (like the experiments described above), whereas at that point it was a matter of employing a more conceptual approach and a more general outlook in order to endow those

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., p.20 – see also Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema dell’Istruzione (CEDE), *Ricerche valutative internazionali 2000*, p. 195.

⁴¹¹ L.H. Salganik in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, p. 21.

⁴¹² Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema dell’Istruzione (CEDE), *Ricerche valutative internazionali 2000*, pp. 174-191.

⁴¹³ D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Agire le competenze chiave*, p. 35.

⁴¹⁴ D.S. Rychen in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, p. 2.

practical efforts with a theoretical basis, but without excluding empirical references⁴¹⁵. DeSeCo project was therefore set up with the following three main objectives: 1) “to develop normative, theoretical, and conceptual foundations for defining and selecting key competencies”; 2) “to develop reference points for the development and understanding of future indicators of competencies and for the validation of education indicators and to provide a basis for more accurate and appropriate interpretation of empirical results”; 3) “to respond in the long term to information needs of policymakers”⁴¹⁶. The main activities of the project then progressed through eight phases: 1) a study of the projects related to the indicators already conducted by the OECD in the 1990s; 2) a definition of the concept of competence in order to make it less ambiguous and clearer by taking a pragmatic approach to the question; 3) a collection of the opinions of experts from different disciplines in order to identify and define a set of key competencies; 4) the 1st International DeSeCo Symposium I (held in Neuchâtel in Switzerland, with about 60 participants); 5) an interim synthesis of what had emerged, particularly in phases 3 and 4, was included in a paper presented at the 4th General Assembly of the OECD Indicators of National Education Systems (INES) Program held on 11th-13th September 2000; 6) the publication of a book edited by Hogrefe & Huber Publishers in August 2001 with an explanatory introduction to the project and a collection of perspectives on key competencies from a range of academic fields and areas of policy and practice; 7) the Country Contribution Process (CCP), which was a consultation process approved by the Governing Board of CERI and the Education Committee of the OECD, and aimed at a review of national experiences of defining and selecting key competencies, and at gathering feedback on the DeSeCo project’s findings so far (12 countries responded with reports); 8) an exploration of activities in international organizations outside the OECD (such as the World Bank, the European Union, and the United Nations)⁴¹⁷.

This work was carried out in parallel with the first PISA survey, which will be shortly discussed, and demonstrates that theoretical reflection and concrete measurement did not follow one another in a chronologically linear direction, but rather temporally overlapped, making successive adjustments to the already tested measurement system and, as it will be seen, being destined to generate widespread public debate in the individual countries surveyed.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

⁴¹⁶ OECD, *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundation (DeSeCo)*, p. 3.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

However, before analysing the development of the PISA tests and their expected and real impact, it is very worth to look at the publication in 2001 of the papers by the experts involved in the DeSeCo Project (the sixth phase of those listed above), in order to gain a better understanding of the theoretical basis of the work that the OECD would carry out from the early 2000s through triennial measurements of PISA. The DeSeCo Project operated on a philosophical, social and political level and in effect enabled the OECD to legitimize the path that it had just embarked on. Indeed, as Bottani points out, on the one hand, the OECD was keen to specifically state in several official documents how the fruits of this project were not the result of its work but of the CORE group's, thereby distancing itself from any skepticism, whilst on the other, it has used some of the results for its own ends, selecting anything of interest in order to strengthen existing programmes. This has even prompted Bottani to say that "exploited in the service of an ambitious programme of international evaluation, the project lost the attraction it had had as well as its *raison d'être*"⁴¹⁸.

Turning to the substance of the publication *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, mentioned above, which lies at the heart of the project itself, the questions the various contributors were asked to answer were many and complex: "what it means to lead a successful and responsible life; what the potential consequences of defining a set of more or less universal key competencies are on society; what assumptions underlie the definition of such a set of competencies; and most importantly perhaps, what does the concept of competence actually entail"⁴¹⁹. The experts involved came from different disciplinary areas and countries: in addition to Dominique S. Rychen and Laura H. Salganik responsible for editing the publication, there were the American historian John Carson (who limits himself to a parallel with IQ, as mentioned above, in part to warn against possible distortions), the German psychologist Franz E. Weinert, the French philosophers Monique Canto-Sperber and Jean-Pierre Dupuy, the British psychologist Helen Haste, the Swiss sociologist Philippe Perrenoud, the American economists Frank Levy and Richard J. Murnane, and the British anthropologist Jack Goody. Voices from the world of education, policy-makers, entrepreneurs and trade unionists were added to these, among which the contribution of Jacque Delors and Alexandra Draxler on behalf of UNESCO stands out and would be widely used as a values-related reference point to justify the

⁴¹⁸ N. Bottani in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Agire le competenze chiave*, p. 36.

⁴¹⁹ H. Gilomen et al. in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, Foreword, p. V.

validity of the international measurement and comparison of competencies. Indeed, it is within these pages that can be found the most complete expression of the idea that - although there are evident differences between the countries where it was proposed to measure the transversal outputs of education, and although one cannot set aside the values and functions of a context when making these measurements - the validity of the ILSAs' approach is shown by the idea that "there are things that unite us, that is to say, universals or constants"⁴²⁰. In fact, if today there are doubts about the possibility of having international points of references for education that are valid above and beyond the local context, it should not be forgotten, according to the authoritative authors of this contribution, that the same thing has happened with regard to the definition of universal human rights which "were criticized as being Western invention and thus not appropriate to all regions of the world"⁴²¹, a debate that can now be seen as closed and outdated, they add. Therefore, in conclusion, the authors argue that just as the whole system of international cooperation is based on the acceptance of some shared principles that form the basis of international conventions and agreements, so, in this case, one can state that some key competencies exist, "based on standards of human behaviour, which enable both the individual freedoms our societies cherish and the social behaviour"⁴²². It is no coincidence that in the conclusions of the publication written by Dominique S. Rychen and Laura H. Salganik together with the Swiss Heinz Gilomen, this contribution is cited when taking the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights as a starting point for defining some fundamental shared elements on which to build a shared notion of key competencies for a successful life in a well-functioning society⁴²³. This is, as Caputo points out, more than an argument, a *petitio principii* that does not solve the problem of explaining why what our culture believes about a successful life and a well-functioning society should be universally valid (always assuming that there is an unequivocal interpretation even within so-called Western culture itself)⁴²⁴. The arguments of the two experts from the field of philosophy involved in the publication were also used to support this approach, and they strived to provide an acceptable definition of a 'successful' or rather 'good' life, albeit expressly limiting themselves to

⁴²⁰ J. Delors & A. Draxler in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by) *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, p.214

⁴²¹ Ibid., p. 217.

⁴²² Ibid., p. 219.

⁴²³ See Gilomen et al. in D.S. Rychen e L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies, Concluding Remarks*, pp. 247-251.

⁴²⁴ See A. Caputo, p. 37.

the sphere of industrialized democracies⁴²⁵, and to link it to competencies that can be referred to that context but which nevertheless remain very vague⁴²⁶. The fundamental problem for all those involved in the project was, as is clear, to fully define what these key competencies for a successful life in a well-functioning society are. Even if one wanted to accept as a given that a well-functioning society, based on universally shared values, is the one described by Delors and Draxler, and that a successful life, based on physiological needs and shared psychological abilities, is the one presented by Canto-Sperber and Dupuy, the question of what key competencies means and, even more importantly, of what should be understood by competence here, remains very open. It is therefore no coincidence that in the book's *Foreword*, it is clearly stated that “there is no general agreement as to precisely what competencies are, and furthermore, which are the ones that warrant being systematically tested”⁴²⁷. Salganik and Rychen add fuel to the fire by arguing that in the initiatives that preceded DeSeCo, not only was there no uniformity but also no rigour in the use of the term competence⁴²⁸. The task of clarifying was actually entrusted to Weinert (who would be repeatedly cited in OECD documents), who in turn notes how the term competence has become “fashionable with a vague meaning not only in public use, but also in many social sciences” and he speaks of a sort of conceptual inflation whereby the lack of a precise definition is accompanied by “considerable surplus meanings”. The definition that Weinert provides can, in his opinion, be extended to all disciplines, from philosophy to economics via sociology and psychology, and is as follows: “a roughly specialized system of abilities, proficiencies, or skills that are necessary or sufficient to reach a specific goal”⁴²⁹. Starting from this assumption, Weinert examines different approaches to the topic of competencies and meta-competencies, among which, what he defines as the ‘Action Competence’ model, is an interesting one. In fact, according to Weinert, this conception of competence also contains the cognitive, motivational and social prerequisites needed for successful learning and action and

⁴²⁵ See M. Canto-Sperber and J.P. Dupuy in D.S. Rychen e L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, p. 72.

⁴²⁶ See A. Caputo, p. 41.

⁴²⁷ H. Gilomen et al. in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies, Foreword*, p.V.

⁴²⁸ See D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Agire le competenze chiave*, p. 83. Regarding this matter, it is interesting to note what Philippe Perrenoud – sociologist, author of a famous 1999 text on the ten competencies for teaching, and one of the contributors to the DeSeCo text – writes, arguing that no one can claim to provide “the definition” of competence, but rather than “resign oneself to the Tower of Babel” one can try to provide a clear one and stick to it”, P. Perrenoud, *Costruire competenze a partire dalla scuola*, Roma: Anicia, 2004, p. 29.

⁴²⁹ F.E. Weinert in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, p. 45.

includes among its components general problem-solving ability, critical thinking skills, domain-general and domain-specific knowledge, realistic, positive self-confidence, and social competencies, in other words, the elements that recur in the OECD documents related to key competencies; documents that would define this approach as pragmatic⁴³⁰. It is important to note, however, that Weinert himself is actually quite skeptical about the possibility of having a set of well-defined key competencies; so much so that he highlights no less than eight elements that need to be kept in mind whenever one nevertheless wishes to proceed in this direction, given the broad disagreement about what these competencies should be. Among these critical elements is the point that “key competencies can easily become catchwords which refer only to desired states”, that there are “large individual differences in [...] psychological features” that must be considered as they are constituent components of the competencies themselves and, above all, that the more one provides a general and therefore acceptable definition of key competencies, the less one is able to concretely measure them⁴³¹. Goody, a truly critical voice among the expert contributors to the book, seems to be of the same opinion when he says that “except in a very general way, a small or limited set of key competencies cannot be determined” and adds that “the basic problem is that the questions have been posed about competencies that are *necessary* for a successful life. But all competencies are contingent and have only contextual relevance, both within and across societies”⁴³².

It is to respond to this skepticism that in the introduction and conclusion of the book, but also and above all in the DeSeCo Background Paper, it was clearly stated that defining key competencies is simultaneously “an ethical, a scientific and a political issue”⁴³³ and that it would be impossible to do it without making ethical and political choices. By shifting the plan from neutral measurement made using simple numerical indicators and stating that “defining and selecting a valuable, useful and legitimate set of key competencies are ultimately the result of a political process”⁴³⁴, one sidesteps the methodological and practical criticisms highlighted in the previous paragraph. This is therefore a political choice, certainly one based on the opinion of experts, but still a political one, or to put it another way - unsaid but very clear - not simply a technical one. From my point of view, this

⁴³⁰ See D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Agire le competenze chiave*, p. 84.

⁴³¹ See F.E. Weinert in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies* pp. 52-54.

⁴³² J. Goody in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, p. 188.

⁴³³ OECD, *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundation* (DeSeCo), Background Paper, p. 3.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

admission is highly significant because admitting that there is a crucial element of political decision-making presents an opening for extremely important question in terms of accountability that will return in the conclusions of this research: who made this decision and where does their legitimacy come from? Answering these questions is not simple, but it is clear that there is no properly understood process of democratic consultation underlying this decision given that the Country Contribution Process (CCP) mentioned above, being conceived as merely consultative, certainly cannot be viewed as such. Therefore, even though, as it will be seen, national governments are involved in a Governing Board of the structuring of the PISA tests, the lack of sharing and public discussion in democratic contexts (composed of elected officials or by figures identified by elected bodies) regarding the basic principles of these surveys, in other words, what the key skills they should measure are and how this measurement should be done, is a very significant weak point that opens the path to many criticisms (which will shortly be examined, together with some responses provided by the OECD itself and by other scholars who support the PISA approach).

The result of the DeSeCo Project work therefore included breaking down the theoretical efforts of the experts involved by defining three categories that make it possible to organize key competencies: 1) join and interacting in socially heterogeneous groups; 2) operating autonomously; 3) using tools interactively⁴³⁵. Each of these categories involves the development of competencies that are linked to each other and also have ties with other aspects such as “attitudes, motivation, focus on values, and emotions”⁴³⁶. What is expected of evaluation programmes, therefore, is that they correlate “cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions” and link then these with “social, economic and political”⁴³⁷ contexts. And it is a lot ambitious.

⁴³⁵ See D.S. Rychen in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, Introduction, p.12. This breakdown is also related by A. Schleicher in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Agire le competenze chiave* p. 203.

⁴³⁶ T. Scott Murray, *Ibid.* p. 183.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

1.3 The Advent and Development of the PISA

The first *Education at a Glance*, mentioned above, was published in 1992 and based its research on new indicators, but used data derived from IEA studies, even though the latter's data collection system "was deemed to be too fragmented and its data collection practices were not adapted to those of national education systems"⁴³⁸. Shortly afterwards, as has been said above, the OECD claimed that it needed to internally develop a measurement system that would enable it to own the data and to steer the survey system towards cross-curricular and extra-curricular observation, which would therefore differ from the one chosen by the IEA until that time. In addition, the IEA faced the difficulties of a non-governmental organization that had never achieved real independence from a financial point of view, despite having tried to structure itself more effectively⁴³⁹. As it has been seen, the process triggered by the first OECD studies had by now begun and the first in-house developed measurement of adult skills came soon (via the International Adult Literacy Survey, conducted in 1994), whilst the next step was the strategy presented to the members of the INES project, in 1995, for the launch of the first Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), approved, in its final version, in 1997. The same year also saw the creation of the Board of Participating Countries (BPC), which, when considering three proposals received from the University of Burgundy, the IEA, and a consortium led by ACER⁴⁴⁰ in response to a first call for tenders, chose that of the last-named because it was more oriented towards extra-curricular and cross-curricular measurements⁴⁴¹. This consortium was therefore entrusted with the first design and implementation of the surveys. Subsequently, as PISA was conceived as a survey to be carried out regularly, every three years, the Governing Board (the name that the BPC would later be given) would, through an international call, assign the survey to an international contractor, called the PISA consortium.

PISA was described by its promoters as a collaborative effort aimed at bringing together experts from the various participating countries, and governments, on the basis of "shared, policy-driven

⁴³⁸ C. Morgan, p. 83.

⁴³⁹ Starting from 1988, the IEA secretariat would be permanently based in Amsterdam in the Netherlands, under the leadership of Tjeerd Plomp, while the Data Processing centre would be located in Hamburg in Germany. See C. Morgan, p. 83.

⁴⁴⁰ In addition to the Australian Council for Educational Research, other members of the consortium included: the Netherlands National Institute for Educational Measurement, the Experimental Pedagogy Service of the University of Liège in Belgium, and WESTAT in the United States. See OECD, *Measuring Student Knowledge and Skills*, p.17.

⁴⁴¹ See C. Morgan e L. Volante, p. 783.

interests”⁴⁴², and, in particular, at answering a question seen as fundamental: “how well are young adults prepared to meet the challenges of the future?”⁴⁴³. A decidedly broad and rather vague question which, however, as it will be seen, is really the starting point of this new ILSA model, designed to “provide empirically grounded information which will inform policy decisions”⁴⁴⁴. This point of the impact on policies (and the politics, in the strict sense) will reappear later, but it is worth keeping in mind that this aim is cited as fundamental in the document which defines the new framework for assessment that underlies PISA.

To gain a better understanding of how this collaborative effort manifests itself in practice, it is useful to read the FAQs on the website dedicated to the PISA programme. First of all, it clarifies that the programme is “developed and implemented under the responsibility of education ministries through PISA’s decision-making body, the PISA Governing Board”⁴⁴⁵, which is responsible for defining priorities and checking that the work carried out is in line with them, and is made up of the representatives of all OECD member countries (plus others with associate status); representatives are nominated by the individual ministries of education⁴⁴⁶. However, it is up to a group of independent world-class experts (TAG, the Technical Advisory Group) to ensure the technical robustness of the surveys and methods employed, and the international comparability of the data produced. The OECD Secretariat is responsible for the “day-to-day management of PISA”, while the National Project Managers “oversee the implementation of PISA in each participating country/economy”⁴⁴⁷. It is the countries themselves who fund the testing, usually through their ministries of education.

The first PISA, that of 2000, which involved 32 countries (of which 28 were OECD members)⁴⁴⁸ and 265,000 students, was preceded by the OECD’s publication of a text, which have been already mentioned, about the definition of the new framework for assessment: *Measuring Student Knowledge and Skills - A New Framework for Assessment*. It is interesting to note, first of all, that although the DeSeCo Project was already being developed in parallel, this publication in the title talks about skills

⁴⁴² OECD, *Measuring Student Knowledge and Skills*, p. 3

⁴⁴³ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴⁴⁵ OECD-PISA website’s FAQs.

⁴⁴⁶ “Representatives comprise a mix of government officials and staff of research and academic institutions”, OECD-PISA website’s FAQs.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid. The National Project Managers for Italy belongs to INVALSI (formerly CEDE).

⁴⁴⁸ “Together, these countries represent more than a quarter of the world population, more than that covered in any international educational assessment to date” OECD, *Measuring Student Knowledge and Skills*, p. 9.

and knowledge but not of competencies (stoking a certain terminological confusion, the same one lamented by Rychen and Salganik, as have been seen, as a defect of not only everyday language but also of the specialist literature)⁴⁴⁹.

This document is very useful, first and foremost, in terms of helping one to understand what the creators of PISA saw as the most significant differences between this new programme and the measurements produced by the IEA. Among those listed, two stand out as the most important: PISA was brought into existence at the behest of governments and, therefore, on the basis of an interest clearly more oriented towards policy making; the knowledge and skills tested “are defined not primarily in terms of a common denominator of national school curricula but in terms of what skills are deemed to be essential for future life”⁴⁵⁰. In short, skills and knowledge that lie outside the curricula are measured for the political purposes defined for the governments, but the end goal is to in some way measure “the effectiveness of education systems”⁴⁵¹, including through comparison. PISA is therefore designed, as maintained by Morgan and Volante, as an ‘accountability engine’ for governing education in the 21st century⁴⁵². This is a very interesting statement because the problem of accountability actually seems to be the one that is underestimated the most when it comes to evaluation systems; whilst it is true that ILSAs are valuable tools for political decision-makers in terms of measuring an education system’s ability to shape ‘human capital’, the issue of the theoretical bases and, still more, of the political bases, of ILSAs, generates some very important questions. Establishing what human capital needs to be shaped and, before even that, deciding that the training of human capital - with all of the ideological implications that this formula brings with it⁴⁵³ - must be the function of an educational system, through the development of key competencies and skills, all of which must also be defined, is an act that needs democratic legitimisation in order to make an underlying process of accountability visible. However, this legitimisation does not exist, apart from the Governing Board, which has a purely bureaucratic function, as it mostly acts *ex post facto*, as a rubber stamp. If tests are a thermometer⁴⁵⁴ for measuring the state of educational systems, it is right

⁴⁴⁹ See D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Agire le competenze chiave* p. 83

⁴⁵⁰ OECD, *Measuring Student Knowledge and Skills*, p. 11.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴⁵² See C. Morgan & L. Volante, p. 185.

⁴⁵³ See N. Bottani in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Agire le competenze*, p. 33.

⁴⁵⁴ The metaphor is widely used in the public debate about these tests, both by supporters and detractors. See, for example, the interview with Pino Turi, one of the trade unionists most strongly opposed to the use of this tool in Italy in *Orizzonte Scuola*, *Prove Invalsi, Turi (Uil Scuola): “Le competenze non si misurano con il termometro”*, 19th July 2021.

to ask who established the measurement scale, what should be seen as an ‘illness’ and, above all, what is being measured⁴⁵⁵. This topic will be developed in greater detail in the conclusions of this research.

Returning to how the PISA tests work, they are now administered to fifteen-year-olds from over 80 countries every three years and compare their reading, mathematics and science skills (with a rotating prevailing focus on one of these three: for the first, in 2000, the major domain was reading, for the second in 2003, mathematical literacy, for the third in 2006, scientific skills, and so on) as well as those relating to an innovative domain, which in 2022 was Creative Thinking, and in 2025 will be Learning in the Digital World⁴⁵⁶. Unlike the IEA's TIMSS, therefore, PISA tests students by age (fifteen-year-olds) and not by level of education, it does not interview teachers and, in addition to mathematics and science, it also tests reading⁴⁵⁷.

For each of these three main domains, when administering the first PISA tests, a panel of experts was set up to define the assessment framework, all under the direction of Raymond Adams of ACER: the reading expert panel was entrusted to the guidance of Irwin Kirsch, whom has been already mentioned, the mathematics panel to Jan de Lange of the University of Utrecht, and the science expert panel was headed by Wynne Harlen of the Scottish Council for Research in Education⁴⁵⁸. These experts were entrusted with the task of better defining the scope of the tests and the methods of measurement.

With regard to reading literacy, which, as mentioned, was the main domain of that first year, it was first and foremost defined as “understanding, using, and reflecting on written texts, in order to achieve one's goal, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society”⁴⁵⁹, and when breaking down this definition some crucial elements are worth highlighting. The first is that in this case reading is not just decoding or reading aloud, but something broader, and this is why the term

⁴⁵⁵ Bottani, for example, states that the project linked to PISA “aims at school education for success in life, for the acquisition of the skills needed to actively integrate into society. But in which society? Herein lies the ambiguity of the project”. N. Bottani D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Agire le competenze*, p. 28.

⁴⁵⁶ See OECD-PISA website.

⁴⁵⁷ See M. Carnoy, *International Test Score Comparisons and Educational Policy: A Review of the Critiques*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center, 2015, p. 1.

⁴⁵⁸ See OECD, *Measuring Student Knowledge and Skills*, p. 4.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 20. It is interesting to note, once again, the absence of the word competency, so important, in contrast, in the DeSeCo Project.

‘literacy’ is used, which, as has been said, is taken from the earlier experience with the IALS⁴⁶⁰. The second is that it is not enough to measure comprehension, and that it is also necessary to evaluate the ability to reflect on a text, because here reading literacy is conceived of as an interactive concept. The third is that in addition to developing the level of knowledge, reading is here understood as an act that has the function of supporting the development of each individual’s potential and of also supporting their participation in society, which includes “social cultural and political engagement” as well as “personal liberation, emancipation and empowerment”⁴⁶¹. Lastly, it is important to highlight one thing that applies to all three areas (Reading, Mathematics and Science), which is that, as reported in the executive summary of the publication of the results for 2000, “PISA does not measure literacy as an ‘all or nothing’ set of knowledge and skills. Rather, each student receives a score on a continuous scale. The score obtained by a student indicates the most difficult type of task that the student is likely to perform correctly [...] For reading, five levels of literacy are described, Level 5 being the highest”⁴⁶². Given below (Fig.2a and Fig.2b) by way of example, are two of the charts that summarize the results of these first reading literacy measurements, specifically, the percentage of students placed at Level 1, the lowest level, and at Level 5⁴⁶³, the highest.

⁴⁶⁰ See I. Kirsch *The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS): Understanding What Was Measured*, ETS Educational Testing Service, Statistics & Research Division, Princeton, 2001: “Definitions of reading and literacy have changed over time in parallel with changes in our society, economy, and culture. The growing acceptance of the importance of lifelong learning has expanded the views and demands of reading and literacy. Literacy is no longer seen as an ability that is developed during the early school years, but is instead viewed as an advancing set of skills, knowledge, and strategies that individuals build on throughout their lives in various contexts and through interaction with their peers and with the larger communities in which they participate”, p. 4.

⁴⁶¹ OECD, *Measuring Student Knowledge and Skills*, pp. 20-21.

⁴⁶² OECD, *Knowledge and Skills for Life. FIRST RESULTS FROM PISA 2000*, Executive Summary, Paris: 2001, p.3. Naturally, this makes the measurements more complex and should also make it more difficult to have an out-and-out ‘ranking’ which, however, is still produced and garners most of the attention of the media and political decision-makers. Regarding this, see how Braun and Singer also maintain that “the obsession with rankings can lead to ridiculous conclusions”, H. Braun & J. Singer, p. 85.

⁴⁶³ “Students proficient at Level 5 on the combined reading literacy scale are capable of completing sophisticated reading tasks, such as: managing information that is difficult to find in unfamiliar texts; showing detailed understanding of such texts and inferring which information in the text is relevant to the task; evaluating critically and building hypotheses, drawing on specialized knowledge, and accommodating concepts that may be contrary to expectations” - OECD, *Knowledge and Skills for Life. FIRST RESULTS FROM PISA 2000*, p. 5.

Fig. 2a⁴⁶⁴

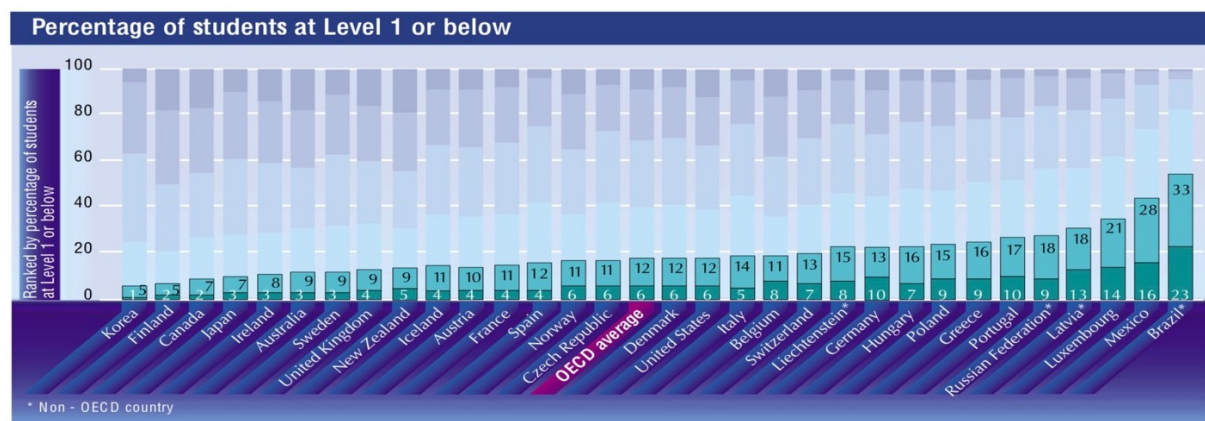
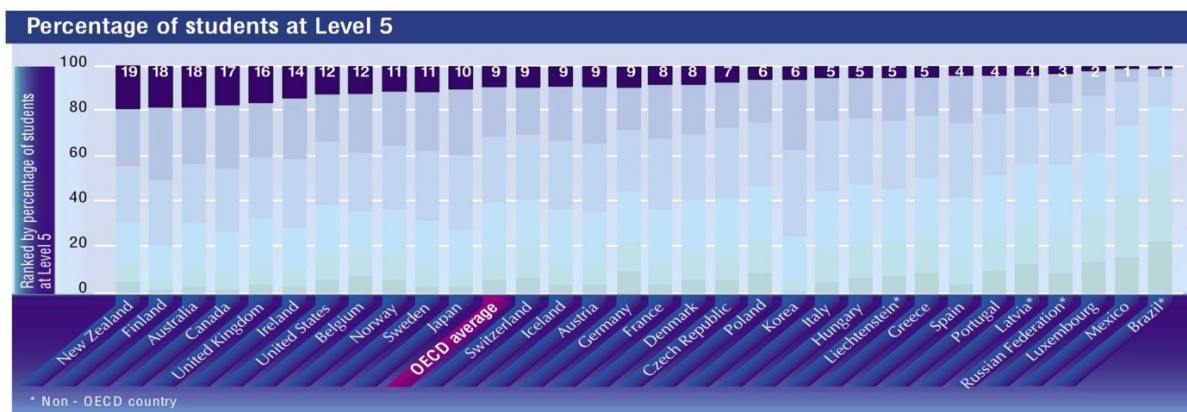


Fig. 2b⁴⁶⁵



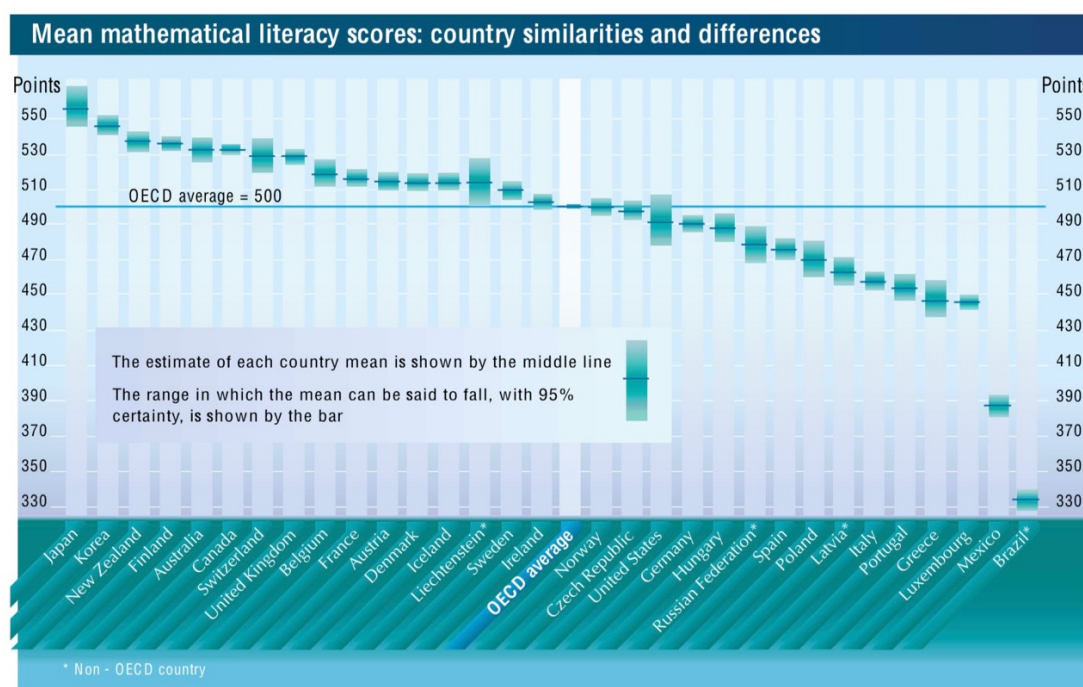
Moving on to mathematical literacy, here too the document guiding here the understanding of how the first PISA test operated, first of all provides a definition: it “is an individual's capacity to identify and understand the role that mathematics plays in the world, to make well-founded mathematical judgments and to engage in mathematics, in ways that meet the needs of that individual's current and future life as a constructive, concerned and reflective citizen”. The writers feel the need to first of all clarify that with the decidedly broad expression ‘the world’, they refer to the “natural, social and cultural setting in which the individual lives”. Likewise, they clarify that ‘engage’ should be understood in the broadest sense, also including “communicating, taking positions towards, relating to, assessing and even appreciating mathematics”. Lastly, when speaking of present and future life, it

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., chart p. 4.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., chart p. 5.

is specified that this includes “private life, occupational life and social life” as well as life as a citizen of a community⁴⁶⁶. Fig. 3 shows the ranking that is created for the Mathematics’ domain; this kind of league-table has received the most media attention since it was first published in 2001. As explained in the figure, there is a 95% confidence interval when determining the literacy level of each country, therefore the numerical ranking may not always totally reliable (the ‘places’ in the ranking could change depending on which part of the bar one highlights; the OECD has chosen to use the mean). This aspect lies at the root of one of the most robust technical points of contestation raised by some academics, as it will be seen further on.

Fig.3⁴⁶⁷



The last domain that is regularly tested by PISA is scientific literacy, defined as follows: “scientific literacy is the capacity to use scientific knowledge, to identify questions and to draw evidence-based conclusions in order to understand and help make decisions about the natural world and the changes made to it through human activity”⁴⁶⁸. Once again the breadth of the concepts calls for some

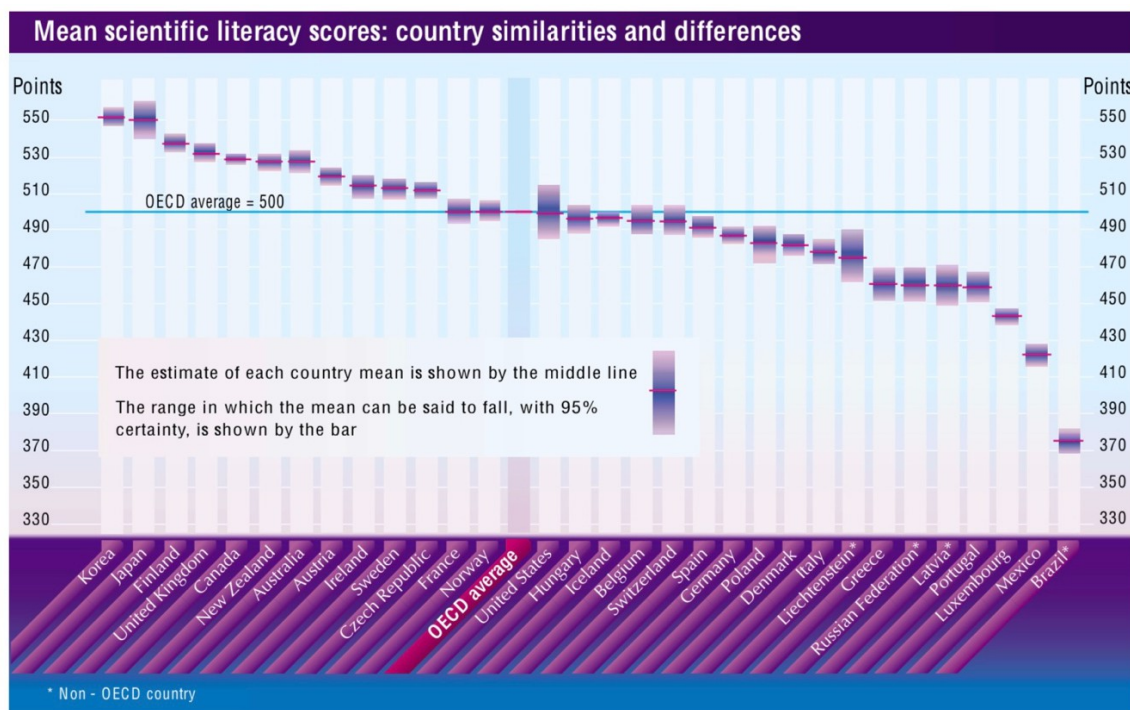
⁴⁶⁶ OECD, *Measuring Student Knowledge and Skills*, p. 41.

⁴⁶⁷ OECD, *Knowledge and Skills for Life. FIRST RESULTS FROM PISA 2000*, chart p. 10.

⁴⁶⁸ OECD, *Measuring Student Knowledge and Skills*, p. 60.

clarification, which is provided in the 1999 text *Measuring Student Knowledge and Skills, a New Framework for Assessment*, used here as a point of reference. In particular, it specifies that scientific knowledge and the process that generates it should be seen as inextricably linked when speaking about scientific literacy; that scientific knowledge is much more than a knowledge of names, facts and terms, and instead includes a knowledge of fundamental concepts, of the limitations of science, and of the nature of science as a human activity; that understanding the natural world is a goal in itself, but also a tool for making decisions; that the expression the natural world means the “physical setting, living things and the relationships among them” taken as whole; and that the changes resulting from human activity are caused by planned, or otherwise, adaptations of nature for human ends and their consequences⁴⁶⁹. Just as it has been seen for mathematical literacy, Fig.4 shows the final ranking for scientific literacy published in the OECD-PISA summary in 2001, and the considerations expressed in the chart, and already clarified above, are also applicable here.

Fig.4⁴⁷⁰



⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 60-61.

⁴⁷⁰ OECD, *Knowledge and Skills for Life. FIRST RESULTS FROM PISA 2000*, chart p. 12.

In the third chapter, some of the test results will be analysed in greater depth, particularly regarding the position of Italy - which is the main focus of this research - and of two other European countries, Finland and Germany. For now it is enough to note, in this regard, that Italy and Germany were positioned significantly below the average in all three ‘rankings’ of this first survey, while Finland was consistently positioned among the top places. This would provoke a very interesting public discussion and consequent political echo in all three countries, which will, indeed, lie at the centre of the analysis conducted in Chapter 3 regarding the influence of ILSAs and, in particular, of the PISA tests on education reforms.

Another element that needs to be added in order to form a clearer picture of the functioning of the tests which, as it has been seen, are administered every three years through national agencies with, from the one side, the political mediation of the governments that make up the board, and from the other, the technical intercessions of OECD’s specialists, concerns the use of computers as tools for carrying out the tests themselves, that is, the transition to the so-called DBA (Digitally Based Assessment)⁴⁷¹. This recent innovation has made it possible to make the design more complex and to reduce errors, as well as to manage data and processing systems more efficiently. In addition - and this is the most significant innovation - the reading tests that have been carried out with this new methodology since 2018 have become adaptive, that is to say, they do not have a fixed structure but are capable of presenting different items based on a student’s previous responses⁴⁷². This makes it possible to have much more precise measurement and more information available. As Kirsch and Braun explain, “as the transition to DBA evolves, ILSAs are likely to generate more information with

⁴⁷¹ See I. Kirsch & H. Braun, p.12.

⁴⁷² “In order to improve the accuracy of [...] measurements, PISA 2018 introduced adaptive testing in its reading assessment. Instead of using fixed, predetermined test clusters, as was done through PISA 2015, the reading assessment given to each student was dynamically determined, based on how the student performed in prior stages of the test. There were three stages to the PISA 2018 reading assessment: Core, Stage 1 and Stage 2. Students first saw a short non-adaptive Core stage, which consisted of between 7 and 10 items. The vast majority of these items (at least 80% and always at least 7 items) were automatically scored. Students’ performance in this stage was provisionally classified as low, medium or high, depending on the number of correct answers to these automatically scored items. The various Core blocks of material delivered to students did not differ in any meaningful way in their difficulty. [...] Students who displayed medium performance in the Core stage were equally likely to be assigned an easy or a difficult Stage 1. Students who displayed low performance in the Core stage had a 90% chance of being assigned to an easy Stage 1 and a 10% chance of being assigned to a difficult Stage 1. Students who displayed high performance in the Core stage had a 90% chance of being assigned to a difficult Stage 1 and a 10% chance of being assigned to an easy Stage 1. Students were assigned to easy and difficult Stage 2 blocks of material in much the same way. In order to classify student performance as precisely as possible, however, responses to automatically scored items from both the Core stage and Stage 1 were used” OECD, *PISA 2018 Results (Volume I) What Students Know and Can Do*, Paris: 2019, pp. 37-38.

greater relevance to stakeholder queries. This, in turn, leads to novel questions, placing new demands on ILSAs that require further innovations in tools and procedures. Such ongoing interactions [...] should lead to a long-term increase in ILSA policy utility”⁴⁷³.

The last element that is important to highlight regarding the structure of the PISA tests is their expected and real political impact and impact on policy. First of all, it is interesting to note that in the introduction to the text that is used here to clarify the technical aspects of the functioning of the tests and the definitions that underlie the whole system, the main aim of this type of ILSA is given as follows: “the primary reason for developing and conducting this large-scale international assessment is to provide empirically grounded information which will inform policy decisions”⁴⁷⁴. In order to make decisions about the functioning of education systems one needs robust information and tests can provide this. Thus far the political impact appears rather limited and the aim, all things considered, barely questionable. A few lines below this, however, it is added that the results of OECD-PISA assessments “will also help to focus and motivate educational reform and school improvement, especially where schools or education systems with similar inputs achieve markedly different results”⁴⁷⁵. As pointed out by Laura Figazzolo, PISA, unlike other surveys aimed at comparison, such as TIMSS or PIRLS, must therefore “provide policy recommendations for governments to improve their country's education system's performance and to enhance its competitiveness”⁴⁷⁶.

Then, the information obtained from the tests is not truly neutral, just as the operation as a whole is not neutral, as it has already been said. The PISA’s aim is to promote or justify reforms of education systems that enable those with the worst results, despite the presence of similar inputs, to improve their output. Naturally, these are the outputs selected by proponents of the programme and measured by the tests. Taking a step back, however, it must be emphasized that the idea of large-scale measurements with an impact on policy dates back to the 1980s, when Messick in particular, analysing the American LSAs (those of the NAEP - National Assessment of Educational Progress - decidedly improved compared to the first surveys of the 1960s)⁴⁷⁷ showed the importance of the

⁴⁷³ I. Kirsch & H. Braun, p. 19.

⁴⁷⁴ OECD, *Measuring Student Knowledge and Skills*, p. 7.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴⁷⁶ L. Figazzolo, *Testing, Ranking, Reforming: Impact of PISA 2006 on the Education Policy Debate*, Brussels: Educational International, 2009, p. 6.

⁴⁷⁷ See S. Messick, *Large-scale educational assessment as policy research: Aspirations and limitations*. *Eur J Psychol Educ* 2, 157–165, 1987. For Messick there are three fundamental characteristics of a LSA that works: “comparability of

impact on policy they were expected to have: the success of these surveys should - in his opinion – be measured precisely on the basis of their political utility⁴⁷⁸. It is no accident that this shift “from more traditional academic research toward informing policy makers”⁴⁷⁹, coincides with the development of the new OECD projects, very different in this regard, as it has been seen, from those of the IEA, and with the relative growth in interest from some governments - above all the American government, as it has been said - in the data and comparative analyses that derive from large-scale surveys. This willingness to influence political decisions by providing the information needed to promote reforms of education systems may, in itself, appear to be a goal devoid of any ideological implications. However, it is Rychen, in his introduction to the publication of experts’ contributions to the DeSeCo Project, who adds some other aspects, first of all by clarifying, as it has been already said, that “no frame of reference is neutral” and then by immediately adding that “defining and selecting a valuable and legitimate set of key competencies is ultimately the result of a political process in which researchers are partners among other constituents such as policy-makers and practitioners”⁴⁸⁰. In short, the expected political impact of these tests is not only related to the use that individual policy makers may decide to make of the neutral information provided by developing the tests and analysing the data. This survey system is already political in itself, the moment it selects which information needs to be collected, measured and compared, and therefore, what foundations underpin an education system that is capable of promoting a ‘successful life’ in a ‘well -functioning society’, according to the definitions provided by the same developers of the survey system. It is no coincidence, therefore, that part of the work of the branch of OECD dedicated to educational research is spent on measuring the impact that the information produced through the PISA surveys has on political decisions and, in particular, on regulations. An article by Simon Breakspear published in 2012 as part of the OECD Education Working Papers, analysed exactly this kind of impact using a questionnaire given to representatives of 37 countries, members of PISA’s Governing Board. When asked how influential the PISA test results and analyses were in terms of informing the policy-making process, 17 of them responded that they were “very influential” and 11 others that they were

measures across time periods and population groups, the interpretability of measures in terms of integrative constructs with predictive power [...], and the relevance of performance measures to manipulable program and process variables amenable to policy influence”, p. 158.

⁴⁷⁸ See I. Kirsch & H. Braun, p. 7.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 4.

⁴⁸⁰ D.S. Rychen in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, p. 6.

“moderately influential”⁴⁸¹, although to further exploration with questions about whether performance has led to effective policy changes, only 15 answered in the affirmative⁴⁸². Italy was not among these countries, although in the final part of the questionnaire dedicated to some open questions about the use of PISA tests as a model for national surveys, the Italian representative replied that “the frameworks used as a basis for national assessments are specifically modelled on PISA”⁴⁸³. Not exactly an irrelevant fact. In his conclusion Breakspear – and this is what is of great interest here – states that “PISA is becoming an influential element of education policy-making processes at the national level [...] This study provides evidence that the majority of countries/economies have initiated policy reform and initiatives [...] in direct response to the PISA evaluation at some point across the survey rounds”. And, moreover, that “PISA seems to have become accepted by policy-makers as a valid and reliable instrument for internationally benchmarking system performance and the relative changes in outcomes over time”⁴⁸⁴, so much so that even the European Union has adopted its targets (that will be discussed in detail in the next section). Less optimistic, if one may put it like that, are Fischman et al., who in their analysis of the influence ILSAs have on national education policies, published in 2018, and while highlighting the potential that these tools have in terms of playing “an increasingly vital role” in educational policies and reform efforts⁴⁸⁵, clarify that it is not at all easy to trace a direct cause-and-effect relationship between test results and regulatory changes and, in fact, that what emerges is that “ILSAs are effectively being used to legitimize [...] various educational policy reform agendas” that are often pre-existing⁴⁸⁶. However, the most interesting element of this article is, in my opinion, its insistence on the rhetorical rather than political influence of the tests, that is to say, on the fact that it is not so much the data or the analysis of it produced by the OECD that shapes the debate on the need to implement certain reforms, but rather the summaries disseminated by the media and, in particular, the rankings⁴⁸⁷. It is no coincidence that Braun and

⁴⁸¹ S. Breakspear, *The Policy Impact of PISA: An Exploration of the Normative Effects of International Benchmarking in School System Performance*, OECD Education Working Papers 71, OECD Publishing, 2012, p. 11.

⁴⁸² Ibid., p. 12.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., p. 22.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 27-28.

⁴⁸⁵ G. Fischman et al., *Examining the influence of international large-scale assessments on national education policies*, ‘Journal of Education Policy’, 34(4), 470-499, 2019, p. 470.

⁴⁸⁶ G. Fischman et al., p. 477. Figazzolo also agrees on this point, i.e., on the idea that politicians often use data to justify their ideas for reform: “Education Ministers and their advisers, who get advance notice of the report, will try to put ‘spin’ on the data to suit their own purposes”, and adds that this is nothing more than a “misuse of the report and the data it contains”, L. Figazzolo, p. 8.

⁴⁸⁷ G. Fischman et al., p. 479.

Singer also warn against what they define as the obsession with rankings and suggest, precisely for this reason, the development of new communication strategies that de-emphasize this aspect, moving beyond “the conventional, media-driven narrative that treats league tables as the key outcomes and offers policy prescriptions based on countries' current ranks or changes in ranks over time”⁴⁸⁸.

Returning to the issue of the political impact that of interest here, even if it seems true that the rhetorical side, more than the technical one, influences the public debate in individual countries when the rankings are published by the national and international media, this does not, from my point of view, actually change the terms of the question, because it is still true that some reforms and regulatory changes are produced precisely as a consequence of that debate⁴⁸⁹. It is no coincidence, therefore, that 96% of the participants in the two questionnaires⁴⁹⁰ carried out by Fischman and the other co-authors of the article mentioned “agreed that ILSAs are used in national education contexts”, but that at the same time 38% say that the “ILSAs are generally misused in national policy contexts”, particularly to highlight a ‘crisis’ or ‘need’ that necessities to be resolved by means of regulatory changes or reforms⁴⁹¹. “Policymakers in some countries are more likely to make political or symbolic references to ILSAs to invoke a ‘name, shame, and blame’ strategy or compare their country's standing in global rankings [...] Policymakers do not use metrics, they are just concerned about the rankings”⁴⁹². This is because politicians are under a certain pressure, due to the public debate mentioned above⁴⁹³, to demonstrate improvements in the rankings, but also often because those

⁴⁸⁸ H. Braun & J. Singer, p. 88. See also L. Figazzolo, who is of the same opinion when she states that through this emphasis on rankings the media “contribute to a simplistic interpretation of PISA results” often ignoring context related elements, p. 26.

⁴⁸⁹ In the first chapter some parliamentary debates in Italy have been seen where exponents of various political forces cited the OECD data as clear evidence of an educational crisis that needed to be overcome quickly by means of the law they were promoting. About this point see also Svein Sjøberg when he says that “since the first publication of PISA results in 2001, based on the testing in 2000, the results have become a kind of global ‘gold standard’ for educational quality. [...] In many countries educational reforms are launched as direct responses to the PISA results” S. Sjøberg, p.111

⁴⁹⁰ This involved two stakeholder surveys where “a combined total of 90 people responded [...] including 24 experts directly working with ILSAs, 40 researchers and policymakers, and 13 graduate students pursuing research on ILSAs, as well as other education stakeholders (teachers, university administrators, and foundations/donors personal)” – G. Fischman et al., p. 481.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 482-484.

⁴⁹² Ibid., p. 484.

⁴⁹³ The OECD itself collected and listed the number of pages of printed articles concerning PISA test two months after the first publication of the results – see K.H. Gruber in H. Ertl (edited by), *Cross-national attraction*, p. 2.

responsible for making important decisions about their country's education system suffer from a "lack of 'PISA-literacy'"⁴⁹⁴.

One political impact of the tests - which was the one expected by the promoters of the DeSeCo Project – does therefore seem to exist, although, as it has been said, this has little to do studying the data and much to do with the debate that the narrative about the data generates. This also occurs because the OECD is able, due to its status as an international organization and its widely recognized authority, to exercise "a sort of peer pressure and 'soft governance' on national governments, in virtue of its mandate and, in particular, of its status of authoritative impartial source of evidence"⁴⁹⁵. Although it does not have a democratic mandate or the ability to issue rules or impose sanctions, the OECD is therefore able, with its guidelines and recommendations derived from the results of the tests and their analysis, to exercise considerable soft power. Here then, is the reappearance, in all its complexity, of the issue of accountability and, even more, of democratic legitimacy, which has been already mentioned above and will return in the conclusions. The problematic point is that this reliance on ILSAs inevitably ends up taking the definitions that form the basis of this work, and, in particular, the idea of what a successful life in a well-functioning society is, for granted, and thereby imposing "a neoliberal education reform agenda globally, focusing on policy performativity and outcomes rather than on the process of education and whether or not that process is just"⁴⁹⁶ and again - as Grek and Ydesen underline when pointing out that many countries have experienced full-on PISA shocks - ILSAs "do provide relevant comparative information to member countries that does not simply shape policy agendas but contributes to a degree of global policy convergence"⁴⁹⁷. This is, not surprisingly, one of the harshest and strongest criticisms of the PISA tests among those made by scholars and observers from various countries.

⁴⁹⁴ G. Fischman et al., p. 487.

⁴⁹⁵ L. Figazzolo, p. 7.

⁴⁹⁶ G. Fischman et al, p. 487.

⁴⁹⁷ S. Grek & C. Ydesen, p.134.

1.4 Criticism of and Support for the PISA Tests

Providing a complete picture of the various criticisms levelled at PISA tests in the more than twenty years of their use, does not fall among the objectives of this research, but it is important to look at some of them, together with (where possible) the responses provided by their supporters, in order to give some idea of the debate that has been generated by an instrument that has influenced, as has been mentioned, some of the policies implemented in various countries (and also Italy, as it will be seen in the next chapter), including through the very significant mediation of EU institutions. To try to give an idea of what has been written, and is being written, on the topic, the criticisms will be divided between those related to technical aspects, i.e., concerning the methodology and tools used, and those relating to the theoretical framework that supports them and their expected political impact.

Therefore, starting with the purely technical issues, it is necessary to first clarify that the approach used by the PISA tests is based on the Item Response Theory and the Rasch model⁴⁹⁸. These are very complex paradigms and statistical/psychometric models for test design and data analysis, the details of which lie, once again, outside the scope of this research. However, what is important for the purposes of this work is that the choice to use this type of analysis technique is not universally accepted as valid and, indeed, is bitterly contested by some scholars. It must also be said that the PISA tests, contrary to what one might think, do not present students all over the world with exactly the same questions or even the same number of questions, but rather set a degree of difficulty that should, overall, be identical for different questions, in different quantities, presented to different students. The way in which, starting from this diversity, it is possible to establish a measurement of skills and, consequently, a real ranking is, as one can imagine, a far from trifling thing, and this is precisely what applying the so-called Rasch model - named after the Danish mathematician George Rasch - does. One of the toughest criticisms related to this, and also one of the most difficult to counter is made by Svend Kreiner: by analysing the available data from the 2006 PISA tests, this scholar demonstrates how the position in the ranking of two countries such as Denmark and the UK can, in actual fact, vary considerably depending on how this data is interpreted and then processed⁴⁹⁹.

⁴⁹⁸ For a deeper understanding of how this model operates see *The Rasch Model* in OECD-PISA Data Analysis Manual: SAS, Second Edition, 2009.

⁴⁹⁹ See S. Kreiner *Is the foundation under PISA solid? A critical look at the scaling model underlying international comparisons of student attainment*, Dept. of Biostatistics, University of Copenhagen, 2011. Specifically, regarding Denmark and the UK, Kreiner found that: "Using all twenty items, the probability that the rank of UK is in the [19.24]

Right from the start, with its title, his paper raises a question about the soundness of the PISA tests, and the answer he reaches in his conclusion is this: “to answer the question of the title first: no; PISA's measurement foundation is not solid. It is crumbling. Our analyses of data on reading from 2006 shows that responses to items violate all assumptions of the Rasch model on which they base their conclusions: items are locally dependent, item discriminations do not appear to be the same for all items, and, worst of all, there is extremely strong evidence of DIF [Differential Item Functioning] relative to Country with a potentially strong effect on how countries are ranked”⁵⁰⁰. The point is that to correctly apply the Rasch model, developed as a psychometric model, there must be no differential item functioning (DIF), and it is no coincidence that Kreiner reports, in the introduction to his work, admissions regarding this drawn from articles by some of the leading experts involved in the development of the PISA tests, including Kirsch and Adams, showing the contradiction between what the former states - that is, that where cases of DIF have occurred, the data concerned has been removed - and what the latter says, which is that the elimination of the data only took place in the case of clerical errors⁵⁰¹. Aside from the high level of technical complexity, it is difficult, reading these pages, not to agree with those who identify the lack of transparency in data management as one of the most significant limitations of the PISA tests⁵⁰², a criticism that will be analysed shortly. Kreiner admits that he owes his analysis to what Prais argued in a 2003 paper⁵⁰³ where he expressed serious doubts about the reliability of the PISA tests, starting from the fact that the mathematics performance of English students tested by TIMSS in 1999 and by PISA in 2000 differed enormously: “which survey, if any, are we to believe?”⁵⁰⁴. Prais seems to prefer the IEA's methodology, both because of the curricular nature of the measurements, and because it makes it possible to connect schools, students and teachers, surveying the latter with questionnaires and testing students identified not by age (like

interval is 0.949. For Denmark, the probability that the rank is in [14-20] is equal to 0.943. Under the Rasch model, the probability that the Subset 1 rank of UK is equal to 8 or higher is equal to 0.0082, and the probability that the Subset 2 rank is 36 or lower is 0.0086. The probability that Denmark is ranked among the first three countries by Subset 3 is 0.0030, while the probability that Denmark is number 42 or lower if Subset 4 is used for ranking is equal to 0.00001. The results confirm that the rankings by the subsets are beyond what we would expect from the Rasch model and, therefore, that it cannot be ignored that the effect of the DIF in PISA's items of the ranking of countries could confound the ranking of countries”. Basically, by changing some statistical parameters, Denmark could be 2nd or 42nd in the rankings, p.18

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 28.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵⁰² For this reason PISA tests have even been described as a “black box, with little public knowledge about what goes on inside”, See TES Magazine, *Is Pisa fundamentally flawed?*, 26th July 2013. This article will be quoted again later on

⁵⁰³ See S.J. Prais, *Cautions on OECD'S Recent Educational Survey (PISA)*, ‘Oxford Review of Education’, vol. 29, no. 2, 2003, pp. 139–63.

⁵⁰⁴ S.J. Prais, p. 140.

the 15-year-olds of the PISA tests), but by level of education⁵⁰⁵. Moreover, according to Prais, those who analyse PISA test results willfully ignore the fact that some schools and some students do not take the tests (in particular, he says, test participation in England in 2000 was less than 50% compared to the sample initially identified), and that in most cases they are those who come from more disadvantaged situations, thus ending up completely invalidating the validity of ranking by country⁵⁰⁶. Another element contested by Prais refers to the idea that PISA tests want to measure, through testing, the ability to deal with problems related to real life and not simply cognitive skills in the strict sense. For Prais, the point is that there are “great difficulties in framing ‘real life’ questions equally appropriate for candidates from such widely disparate social backgrounds”⁵⁰⁷. Nina Bonderup Dohn is of the same opinion, and when arguing that “many of the concrete PISA test items are misleadingly formulated, faulty or culturally biased”, states that the very idea of giving a representation of real life problems is completely fallacious because, given the need to formulate specific questions in the form of tests, “most problem-setting requirement characteristics of the represented ‘real life’ situation can *not* be represented at all”; all of which “invalidates the PISA claims to assess ‘knowledge and skills for life’”⁵⁰⁸. Consequently, says Bonderup Dohn, a PISA test can measure, at best, “knowledge and skills for PISA. No more, no less”⁵⁰⁹. This point will be taken up shortly, with the criticisms related more to the theory underlying the tests than to the method of measurement and analysis, which as it has been seen is invoked when making this type of observations. Stepping back to the use of the Rasch model, it is also important to mention the very severe criticisms made by the mathematician Hugh Morrison, not simply regarding the scope for using this system to analyse data obtained from tests, but regarding the legitimacy of the model itself. In fact, according to him, and as reported in an

⁵⁰⁵ “The very definition of the age-group of pupils covered by the PISA survey presents problems of international comparability” due to differences in the organization of the various school systems involved in the PISA testing, S.J. Prais, p. 145.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁵⁰⁸ N. Bonderup Dohn, *Knowledge and Skills for PISA—Assessing the Assessment*, ‘Journal of Philosophy of Education’, 41: 1-16, 2007, pp.6-8. One of the most important elements that, according to Bonderup Dohn, cannot be measured through tests that prohibit collaboration between students is, perforce, collaborative problem-solving, which is actually a fundamental part of the strategies used to tackle real problems. Similarly, PISA tests give no importance to oral skills, which are also very important in life.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

interesting article by William Stewart for TES magazine⁵¹⁰, the Rasch model is “utterly wrong”⁵¹¹ and completely inconsistent, as it confuses subjects and objects and states that “when students of the same ability answer the same question - in perfect conditions, when everything else is equal - some students will always answer correctly and some incorrectly. But [Morrison argues that] in those circumstances, the students would by definition all give a correct answer or would all give an incorrect one, because they all have the same ability”. Concluding, Stewart then reports Morrison's key and very strong criticism of the tests: “There are very few things you can summarise with a number and yet PISA claims to be able to capture a country's entire education system in just three of them. It can't be possible. It is madness”⁵¹².

There are three other interesting issues concerning the measurement and analysis of PISA test to relate here. The first is that applying national ranking systems to countries where education systems differ enormously from state to state or region to region (for example, the United States and Germany) can be misleading and mistaken⁵¹³. The second concerns the enormous number of errors that the tests contain, often minimized by the OECD's experts. Bonderup Dohn is particularly insistent on this, stating that “one is dismayed at the number of test items that are culturally biased, ambiguously formulated, confusing on account of misprints, down-right erroneous or furnished with highly questionable answering keys”⁵¹⁴. The third, touched on just above, concerns the lack of transparency, highlighted by many observers, including the Norwegian Svein Sjøberg, according to whom, “the road from the actual responses to the final numbers in the publicly available tables is long and not very transparent, even for statisticians and other well-informed readers”⁵¹⁵. What the OECD publishes about the PISA tests is very little compared to the data that is collected and, therefore, it is difficult

⁵¹⁰ TES Magazine, *Is Pisa fundamentally flawed?*, 26th July 2013. TES magazine is a weekly publication, first published in 1910 as a supplement in *The Times*, that is aimed at education professionals and addresses school-related issues. In this article Stewart poses a very important question when he writes: “What if these rankings - that so many reputations and billions of pounds depend on, that have so much impact on students and teachers around the world - are in fact ‘useless’?”, and he believes that he also has an equally important answer: “This is the worrying reality of PISA, according to several academics who are independently reaching some damning conclusions about the world's favourite education league tables. As far as they are concerned, the emperor has no clothes”.

⁵¹¹ See also an interesting article in *The Independent* from 2013, which, quoting Kreiner and Morrison, questions the reforms of the Secretary of State for Education Michale Goove, because they are based on the results of the PISA tests, *The Independent*, *Utterly wrong! Flawed! Academics deride league tables that guide Michael Gove's reforms*, 19th July 2013.

⁵¹² TES Magazine, *Is Pisa fundamentally flawed?*, 26th July 2013.

⁵¹³ See M. Carnoy, pp. 16-17.

⁵¹⁴ N. Bonderup Dohn, p. 11.

⁵¹⁵ S. Sjøberg, p. 122.

to fully understand the validity of the analyses disseminated through the published tables and, obviously, the rankings based on them.

Raising this problem make it possible to move on to the second macro set of criticisms of the PISA tests, namely those relating to the theoretical framework that supports them, which come from many quarters. Here it is necessary to begin by citing some of the experts involved in the DeSeCo Project's publication mentioned above, especially Franz E. Weinert, Philippe Perrenoud, Jack Goody and Bob Harris. Weinert in particular - whose definition of action competencies was widely used in the OECD publications about key competencies⁵¹⁶ - as it has been already mentioned above, is rather skeptical about the possibility of defining a set of key competencies that is universally valid⁵¹⁷, whilst according to Perrenoud - who has attempted to provide a list of this kind of competencies - one must be honest in admitting that "the question of key competencies is not ideologically neutral. To reply to it is to defend, implicitly or explicitly, a vision of mankind and of society"⁵¹⁸. In fact, Goody, also already mentioned, is of the same opinion, but goes much further and concludes his contribution by stating that "except in a very general way, a small or limited set of key competencies cannot be determined" and that in any case all competencies are always relative to the context in which they are examined"⁵¹⁹. In addition to these voices, and in the same publication, which was, as it has been seen, of considerable significance in the development of the OECD-PISA project, one can add that of Bob Harris, one of the founders of Education International, which today has 383 organizational members, including many trade unions in the education sector (among them Italian unions CGIL, CISL and UIL) and represents "more than 32 million teachers and education support personnel in 178 countries and territories"⁵²⁰. Specifically, Harris raises an issue that also lies at the heart of other criticisms: as it is not possible to evaluate all competencies, one must choose some that are measurable; the DeSeCo Project aimed to identify the skills that can lead to success in life. The point, however, is that this concept of success cannot and must not be defined in entirely economic terms. And, once again, as the other three experts discussed here do, Harris contests the idea that very different situations, influenced by contextual and cultural factors, can be compared with each other using numerical

⁵¹⁶ See D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik, *Agire le competenze chiave*, pp. 83-101.

⁵¹⁷ See F.E. Weinert in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik, *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, pp. 45-63.

⁵¹⁸ P. Perrenoud in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik, *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, p. 122.

⁵¹⁹ J. Goody in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik, *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, p. 188.

⁵²⁰ See Education International website.

surveys and the concept of competence, and he suggests using qualitative analysis instead, which whilst certainly having significant limitations, can still “reveal more, and come closer to reality than artificially constructed, compromise-bound quantitative research”. And he concludes by saying that policy-making in education cannot avoid the limitations of any democracy, that is to say, a certain degree of imperfection and probably even confusion, but that this is absolutely preferable to a rigid system of measuring and comparing our abilities, motivations and emotions that, through the coldness of numbers, aims to give life to a “brave new world”⁵²¹. The point is that this idea of using quantitative analysis to improve the functioning of educational systems derives from a broader approach which in the same period, according to some scholars, such as Sjøberg, substantially changed the approach to public administration problems, that is to say, the so-called New Public Management, which aims to make public machinery more efficient by adopting an approach borrowed from the private sector: “the PISA project [...] can be seen as a part of a current international policy trend, where concepts and ideas from the market economy are used in the education sector”⁵²². This happens for a reason that is very precise (and self-evident if one considers that these tests are developed not by UNESCO or by other organizations whose primary objectives are the promotion of literacy and access to good quality education, but by the OECD, the organization for *economic* cooperation and development)⁵²³: the focus of the PISA-project is the economy, in other words, the function that an education system performs in relation to the economic competitiveness of a country⁵²⁴.

Caputo's analysis points in the same direction, and she observes how the certification of competencies originated in the world of work and then spread from there to the world of education, adding that the cornerstone of the DeSeCo Project and of the theory that supports the PISA tests is not a simply didactic proposition, but a philosophical-political one, sustained by a clear ideological system⁵²⁵, the liberalism. In fact, the aim of the tests seems to be not so much analysing the differences between the

⁵²¹ B. Harris in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik, *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, pp. 222-227.

⁵²² S. Sjøberg, p. 115.

⁵²³ In the open letter that a group of academics wrote to Andreas Schleicher in 2014, in addition to the lack of transparency and unclear links with some for-profit companies, contested the mandate with which the OECD carries out this task of measuring and comparing competencies: “we fail to understand how your organization has become the global arbiter of the means and ends of education around the world”, The Guardian, *OECD and Pisa tests are damaging education worldwide* – academics, 6th May 2014.

⁵²⁴ An interesting fact noted by Sjøberg is that in its desire to highlight the pervasiveness of its analyses, the OECD expresses itself in terms of global economies (90%) and not of the number of inhabitants of the countries involved, p. 111.

⁵²⁵ See A. Caputo pp. 32-37.

different school systems, as comparing the results of their students and trying to reduce the distances or, better, the differences between these systems. And to the centrality of the economic and market perspective, this adds the globalization perspective: “the economy is getting globalized”, says Sjøberg, “nations and multinationals compete in a common market. Hence, there is a need for common standards in education”⁵²⁶. After all, as Figazzolo says, “PISA focuses on the linkage between learning outcomes and labour market needs” and this linkage has an ever more global aspect, given the way the world economy has developed⁵²⁷. It is therefore not surprising that one of the central themes of educational research in the OECD is the one concerning human capital, which derives from the growing tendency to identify humanity as a whole precisely in terms of human capital⁵²⁸, starting from the fact that competencies such as Reading, Mathematics and Science are considered central to a ‘successful life’ in a ‘well-functioning society’ as they “are seen to be key elements for the competitiveness in a world economy driven by science and technological development”, whilst social sciences, ethics, history, geography, physical education and, in general, the so-called humanities, are not held to have any real importance⁵²⁹. Murray is very clear in this regard: “the primary objective of evaluating competencies is to understand how they affect worker productivity in the labour market”⁵³⁰. This is why Bottani defined the DeSeCo Project as ambiguous, because while a making a successful life in a well-functioning society the goal of school education, it did not set itself the problem of questioning a model of society or of establishing its preferability over others, suggesting that one of the aims of the operation was simply to extend the model of society typical of the countries promoting the project to all of the systems involved, including the economies outside the OECD and those in the developing world⁵³¹. If one reads Rychen’s introduction to the DeSeCo publication from this perspective, it takes on a different meaning; at the moment she says that the point is to identify key competencies, she herself asks what constitutes a ‘successful life’ and what kind of society one should imagine or desire, and she concludes by saying that the challenge is to “construct and endorse key competencies in a manner that is consistent with the principles of human rights and human development, in particular with the values of autonomy and liberty and, at the same time, with ideals

⁵²⁶ S. Sjøberg, p. 116.

⁵²⁷ L. Figazzolo, p. 5.

⁵²⁸ See A. Caputo, p. 41.

⁵²⁹ S. Sjøberg, p. 113.

⁵³⁰ C. Murray in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Agire le competenze chiave*, p. 179.

⁵³¹ N. Bottani in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Agire le competenze chiave*, p. 28.

of equality and social justice”⁵³². Disagreeing is difficult but, wanting to explore the meaning that each of these terms – freedom, equality, autonomy, justice – can take on in contexts that are as different as the countries where the PISA tests are administered, one understands how the idea that underlying the project there is, consciously or otherwise, the desire to conform to a single model, is difficult to contest. Benedetto Vertecchi, an Italian educationalist and President of CEDE (then INVALSI) until 2001, shared this view when - finding himself in disagreement with the policies of the new government and the Minister of Education Letizia Moratti - he was pressured to resign⁵³³. He states that “the naturalization of a model, starting from modal conformations results in [...] the further strengthening of the model itself” and that this is precisely the defect of a large part of comparative research. And, in conclusion, he adds a very stark warning, pointing out “the risk of an educational globalization based on consumerism and on the elimination of the elements of identity that derive from specific national traditions. If such globalization were to finally take hold, the debate on education would be no more varied than the McDonald's recipe book”⁵³⁴.

However, even if one accepts the liberalist model that underlies this idea of measuring competencies in this way, another criticism could emerge, namely the one raised by scholars such as Carnoy, according to whom arguing that the average scores in mathematics surveys are “good predictors of future economic growth” is a clear example of the “misuse of correlational analysis”⁵³⁵. And one finds the same kind of problem - deducing a cause from a relationship - when, by comparing several education systems, one tries to understand from which policy or set of policies a particular result derives in order to be able to replicate it. Braun and Singer observe this, concluding that “attempting to infer causation from correlation, even when correlations are high, can lead to false, incomplete, or misleading conclusions”⁵³⁶.

⁵³² D.S. Rychen in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik, *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, p. 7.

⁵³³ See the solidarity with him expressed by the CGIL with a statement published on the website on 13th September 2001, which considered the matter very serious as it highlighted, according to the union, a willingness on the part of the new government to undermine the scientific autonomy of the INVALSI.

⁵³⁴ B. Vertecchi in Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema dell'Istruzione (CEDE), *Ricerche valutative internazionali 2000*, pp. 15-16. In this text, Emma Nardi points out how most of the references taken into consideration in the tests are of Anglo-Saxon origin and that there is a very worrying tendency towards uniformity in addition to the “very questionable task of making comparisons between the text read and particular ‘moral and aesthetic rules’”, Ibid. p. 142.

⁵³⁵ M. Carnoy, *Executive Summary*.

⁵³⁶ H. I. Braun & J. D. Singer, pp. 79-80.

So far have been listed some of the most important criticisms levelled at the PISA tests, their theoretical framework, their structure and how they function. They can be summarized into criticisms of the statistical model, its application and the transparency of data management, and broader criticisms of the very idea that upholds the possibility of measuring and comparing key competencies in very different countries, regardless of the specific nature of the context and, on the contrary, endorsing the idea of an on-going standardization of educational models, in line with an economic outlook.

However, there is no lack of positions supporting the importance of this type of evaluation, as well as attempts to respond to the most significant criticisms. The focus will be put, above all, on the latter, starting by clarifying - regarding the heavy criticism aimed at the desire to bring different education systems in line with a single model, particularly those of smaller or less developed countries - that most of the supporters of the importance of PISA tests agree with Murray's statement that "the international comparative approach has the merit of providing even the smallest and least wealthy nations with access to measurement technologies, as well as data that would otherwise be beyond their means"⁵³⁷. It is, therefore, a question of opening up new development opportunities and not of simply eliminating differences. It is no coincidence that Andreas Schleicher, when replying to the highly critical letter from some academics regarding the PISA tests⁵³⁸, not only try to dispel the alleged opacity in the functioning of the tests and in the financing of the body that organizes them, but affirms that the PISA tests have had the merit of creating extraordinary opportunities for collaboration between policy-makers of different countries, so as to promote changes and reforms that are at the root of some significant progress such as, for example, that made by Germany⁵³⁹. Moreover, with regard to this element, identified as critical by the many scholars mentioned above, the point made by Delors and Draxler in the DeSeCo publication seems valid; even the idea that universally accepted human rights could be established was widely criticized as the result of a purely Western outlook, whilst today this kind of criticism in this area has largely disappeared⁵⁴⁰. Delors and Draxler also take on the task of dispelling the idea that there is a contradiction between the utilitarian mindset, according to which the development of competencies should be understood as conducive to

⁵³⁷ C. Murray in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Agire le competenze chiave*, p. 181.

⁵³⁸ The letter mentioned above in note 523.

⁵³⁹ See The Guardian, *Pisa programme not about short-term fixes*, 8th May 2014.

⁵⁴⁰ See J. Delors & A. Draxler in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik, *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, p. 215.

the economic growth of a country, and the one which instead views education as an end in itself: in the long-term, they say, “economies are better served by a broadly educated population”⁵⁴¹.

With regard to criticisms relating to the methodology used for the measurement and, above all, for the analysis of the data, the response to Prais and Kreiner is most notably provided in two articles by R. Adams of ACER. In the first, he replies to Prais's objection about the decision to not use students of a given level of education as the sample, but rather students aged between 15 years and three months and 16 years and two months, maintaining that this demonstrates the consistently affirmed desire of the promoters of the PISA tests to not evaluate individual students, teachers or schools, but rather the educational systems, whose functionality emerges precisely by considering the level reached by students at a given age regardless of which grade they are in, which may differ with the country⁵⁴². Adams then states that the assertion that the students who do not take part in the tests are primarily low attainers is in no way founded and that in any case, when analysing the data, PISA takes full account of the variation in the sample on the basis of who answers and who does not answer the questions⁵⁴³. As for Kreiner's criticisms about the use of the Rasch model, Adams replies to those by arguing that “it should [...] be noted that PISA does implement a form of data purification through its field trial process. Before use in a main survey all PISA items are tested in all participating countries and reviewed for compatibility with the Rasch model. Furthermore, at this stage items with the most substantial DIF are excluded from further consideration and not used in the main PISA surveys”⁵⁴⁴. There is therefore no danger that the presence of particularly significant DIFs invalidates the process and, therefore, the rankings (within the provisions found in the table regarding the results validity ‘bar’ explained above).

As has been said, it is not the intention of this research to run through the full gamut of criticisms levelled at the PISA test system from a technical and theoretical perspective over the course of twenty years, nor of all of the responses made to them, but rather to show the nature and liveliness of the still ongoing debate.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., p. 216.

⁵⁴² See Adams R. J., *Response to ‘Cautions on OECD’s Recent Educational Survey (PISA)’*, ‘Oxford Review of Education’, vol. 29, no. 3, 2003, p. 381.

⁵⁴³ Ibid., p. 385.

⁵⁴⁴ Adams R.J., *Comments on Kreiner 2011: Is the foundation under PISA solid? A critical look at the scaling model underlying international comparisons of student attainment*, OECD, Paris: 2011, p. 5.

Therefore, without wishing to side with one side or the other here, but acknowledging that some of the criticisms have a decidedly solid foundation and that some of the responses to the criticisms lack the same solidity, I can conclude this section by borrowing the metaphor that Sjøberg uses when stating that international comparisons have a ‘Janus face’, as “they can be understood and used in two opposing ways. Such studies may be eye-openers to acknowledge and celebrate the great variety between youth, nations and cultures on aspects of education, and as such serve as a source of inspiration. But such studies can also be used normatively, providing a pressure to oblige and fit to allegedly universal and commons standards set by the authority of external specialists”⁵⁴⁵. Many of the criticisms levelled at the tests depend on which of these two sides one chooses to consider and, of course, also on which one prevails in the public reporting of the results.

Section 2: The Europeanizing of Education⁵⁴⁶

The European Union is, far more than a place, a project or, in the words of Martin Laws and Sotiria Grek: “a space of meaning, a state in process, and [has] education as a core technology”⁵⁴⁷ in which governance ordering and meaning can be constructed”⁵⁴⁸. Although it is difficult to disagree with the idea that the construction of a space for action for Europe involves the education and training of its citizens, it is not surprising that the question was, initially, largely taboo⁵⁴⁹; the first efforts at coordination between states were all aimed at building an economic community that would enable individual states to strengthen themselves thanks to cooperation at a supranational level, but no one, in the immediate post-war period, had any intention of delegating anything related to education,

⁵⁴⁵ S. Sjøberg, p.125

⁵⁴⁶ The expression used here is taken from the title of the precious text by Lawn and Grek published by Symposium in 2012, See M. Lawn e S. Grek, *Europeanizing Education: governing a new policy space*, Oxford: Symposium Books Ltd., 2012. The concept of Europeanization will be briefly analysed also in the conclusions of this research. In the introduction it has been already clarified what is the definition of Europeanization used in the context of this research as a reference.

⁵⁴⁷ R. M. Hutchins - who would have a highly important role in defining what a ‘learning society’ - in his book on the topic, also believes that “every educational system is a technology”, Hutchins Robert M., *The Learning Society*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970, p. 21.

⁵⁴⁸ M. Lawn & S. Grek, p. 13.

⁵⁴⁹ See European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Pépin, L., *The history of European cooperation in education and training: Europe in the making: an example*, Publications Office, 2006, p. 22.

rightly viewing it as a key element of a nation state⁵⁵⁰. As such, there is no reference in the Treaty of Rome of 1957 to education (whilst there is some to vocational training, as it is related to the world of work)⁵⁵¹: “since they could not build the ‘Europe of their dreams’ [...] the founding fathers of the European Community built the ‘Europe that was possible’, a Europe that focused on the economy”⁵⁵². It would take several decades to see how any economic progress is intrinsically linked to the question of education and it would be the challenges presented by the progressive enlargement of the Union, and by globalization (one of the most decisive symptoms of which is the process of European integration itself)⁵⁵³, that would determine a decisive change in direction. An early indication of change can be seen in the growing pressure to create a shared image, which can be seen from the 1970s (for example with *People's Europe*, as it will be seen), but only starting from the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 would this pressure begin to be transformed into legislative references capable of giving legitimacy to concrete action regarding the field of education, and also sustained by data, statistics, networks and groups of experts involved in the effort to define shared objectives, benchmarks and indicators. This process would undergo further acceleration in 2000 with the Lisbon Strategy and with the translation of what it established into a series of concrete objectives to be achieved through a programme of national reforms with deadlines. This section will explore the details of these developments, the path that led to the Lisbon Strategy, and the turning point that it then marked in educational policies at the European level. So radical was the change of course compared to the original one, that during the Spanish Presidency in the first half of 2002, it was argued that education should even be seen as the ‘fourth pillar’ of the European edifice⁵⁵⁴. In the light of this turning point, one can clearly comprehend what is written in the Commission's report *The*

⁵⁵⁰ Following what Walkenhorst states on this point: “Education, similar to social policy, is an important part of the national welfare systems which state governments generally protect from supranationalisation. Furthermore, education policy is one of the remaining parts of identity politics where national governments still possess the power of control. Here, education policy represents a cross-generational transmitter of political culture”, H. Walkenhorst, *Europeanisation of the German Education System* ‘German Politics’, Vol.14, No.4, 2005, pp.470–486, p. 470.

⁵⁵¹ It was precisely vocational training that would be the primary focus of the action carried out in the world of training as Lawn e Grek state: “It took some time for an economic community, originally focused on coal and steel, to work towards educational activity and even policy, although it should not then be surprising that its first steps were made in vocational education” - M. Lawn & S. Grek, p. 35

⁵⁵² European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 22.

⁵⁵³ See J. Field, *European Dimensions: Education, Training and the European Union*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1997, p. 4.

⁵⁵⁴ See A. Novoa & W. deJong Lambert when they say: “The reference to education as a *fourth pillar* is [...] a conceptually meaningful move, signifying an attempt to isolate education policy as primary in the content of EU policy-making”, A. Novoa & W. deJong-Lambert, *The education of Europe: apprehending EU educational policies*, 2002, p. 2.

concrete future objectives of education systems of 2001, published a year after the Lisbon Council: “while we must preserve the differences of structures and system which reflect the identities of the countries and regions of Europe, we must also recognize that our main objectives, and the results we all seek, are strikingly similar. We should build on those similarities to learn from each other, to share our success and failures, and to use education together to advance European citizens and European society into the new millennium”⁵⁵⁵. It was not, therefore, a question of eliminating differences, still less one of removing an important and delicate sphere of action like education from member states’ responsibility, but rather one of coordinating efforts, through the exchange of good practices, the discussion of shared problems and the measurement of everyone’s progress, in order to transform the European Union into an advanced economy based on knowledge and on the progress that derives from knowledge, from high-quality education systems, and from the lifelong training of all citizens. The success of this action - supported by the process of European integration, including at the economic level – would largely depend on the building of mutual trust between member states and between them and the Commission⁵⁵⁶.

Before moving on to the analysis of the processes that led to the Europeanization of education and to an evaluation of the concrete results of the efforts made in this direction by the European Commission, Parliament and Council, it is necessary to remember the legal foundation that European cooperation is based on in the educational field. First and foremost, Article 14 of the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* of 2000 establishes that every person “has the right to education and to have access to vocational and continuing training”, that this right includes access to free compulsory education and that, finally, “the freedom to found educational establishments with due respect for democratic principles and the right of parents to ensure the education and teaching of their children in conformity with their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions shall be respected, in accordance with the national laws governing the exercise of such freedom and right”⁵⁵⁷.

Then there are the provisions of the *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union*, in its consolidated version: Article 6, in Part One on Principles, establishes that “the Union shall have

⁵⁵⁵ Report from the Commission - The concrete future objectives of education systems /* COM/2001/0059 final */ par.37.

⁵⁵⁶ See A.J. Hingel, *Education policies and European governance – contribution to the interservice groups on European governance* ‘European Journal for Education Law and Policy’ 5, 7–16, 2001, p. 14.

⁵⁵⁷ EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, Title II: Freedoms, Article 14 – Right to Education.

competence to carry out actions to support, coordinate or supplement the actions of the Member States” in seven macro areas, which cover education and vocational training⁵⁵⁸. It is therefore clear that in the education field the Commission does not have direct legislative power, but only a supporting role (which, however, exercised as ‘soft governance’⁵⁵⁹, has a very evident influence on the legislative action of member states, as it will be seen). Another important point of reference is Article 165 of the same treaty, particularly Paragraph 1, which reaffirms the principle of subsidiarity⁵⁶⁰ underlying the relationship between member states and the Union in this field, and establishes that “the Union shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between member states and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the member states for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity”. Paragraph 2 of the same article then deals with some of the objectives that this cooperation between States and between the Commission and States should aim to pursue: “Union action shall be aimed at: developing the European dimension in education, particularly through the teaching and dissemination of the languages of the member states; encouraging mobility of students and teachers, by encouraging inter alia, the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study; promoting cooperation between educational establishments; developing exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the education systems of the member states; encouraging the development of youth exchanges and of exchanges of socio-educational instructors, and encouraging the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe; encouraging the development of distance education”. Lastly, there is Article 166, which more specifically deals with vocational training⁵⁶¹. Naturally, there are many other elements to add to these, included in communications from the Commission, recommendations from the Parliament, and resolutions, directives and conclusions from the Council⁵⁶², which will be shortly examined in detail, revealing their historical development.

⁵⁵⁸ CONSOLIDATED VERSION OF THE TREATY ON THE FUNCTIONING OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, Part One: Principles, Article 6.

⁵⁵⁹ See M. Lawn & S. Grek, p. 15.

⁵⁶⁰ As A.J. Hingel argues, “education is an ideal-type of a policy area for subsidiarity to play its full role”, p. 3.

⁵⁶¹ CONSOLIDATED VERSION OF THE TREATY ON THE FUNCTIONING OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, Article 166.

⁵⁶² In an interesting paper Carrera and Geyer have collected the content of the provisions on educational matters produced from 2000 to 2006, listing them in chronological order. See S. Carrera & F. Geyer, *EU Policy on Education: The Impact on the Social Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups*, CEPS Special Report, 21 September 2009, pp. 7-25.

2.1 The First Steps, from the Foundation to Maastricht

According to Novoa and deJong-Lambert, the evolution of European cooperation on education can be metaphorically compared to the three states of matter – solid, liquid and gas⁵⁶³. The first phase - the one that comes chronologically between the Treaty of Rome of 1957 and the Treaty of Maastricht of 1992 - is, within the context of this metaphor, defined as “the liquid state of politics”⁵⁶⁴, that is to say, a time when the link between schooling and identity formation can be seen, but with a fundamental limitation owing to the absence of references to education, in the strict sense, in the treaty⁵⁶⁵. Another useful categorization is the one proposed by Walkenhorst, which subdivides this first period into Initiation (1951-1969), Consolidation (1969-1983) and Expansion (1983-1993)⁵⁶⁶. Whilst in the first case attention is directed towards the substance of the process that would lead the European Union to give action in the educational field legitimacy in the context of the Maastricht Treaty, in the second case the focus is more on the individual steps that led to this outcome. While extending this metaphor, which is a useful one, this section will try to more thoroughly examine these progressive changes of approach, that lie at the root of the 1992 turning point.

Starting from the beginning, therefore, within the framework of the Treaty of Rome (the *Treaty establishing the European Economic Community*) one can see, in Article 41 and Article 128, explicit references to vocational training⁵⁶⁷ - for reasons linked only to the economic integration which was the fundamental focus of the document - whilst there is no mention of education in the strict sense, as it was seen by the member states as an issue closely linked to national sovereignty⁵⁶⁸. Thanks to the initiative of the Dutchman Jo Cals, what is seen - in retrospect - as the First Conference of European Ministers of Education, was held at The Hague in 1959, two years after the Treaty of Rome, and saw particularly significant views being adopted regarding the need for cooperation between Western European Ministers of Education⁵⁶⁹ and with other international organizations⁵⁷⁰ engaged in

⁵⁶³ A. Novoa & W. deJong Lambert, pp. 15-16.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 15.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

⁵⁶⁶ See H. Walkenhorst, *The Changing Role of EU Education Policy - a Critical Assessment*, European Union Studies Association (EUSA) > Biennial Conference > 2005 (9th), March 31-April 2, 2005, pp. 3-4.

⁵⁶⁷ Treaty establishing the European Economic Community, Treaty of Rome, Document 11957E/TXT, 25 March 1957

⁵⁶⁸ See European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 22.

⁵⁶⁹ These were the countries of the Western European Union, specifically: the Netherlands, the UK, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy and West Germany. Resolution No. 3.

⁵⁷⁰ Specific reference was made to the WEU, the OEEC, NATO, Euratom, the EEC and the Council of Europe

education-related activities, and expressed a positive opinion regarding the desirability of holding further meetings of this kind at regular intervals⁵⁷¹. Another particularly significant meeting was held in Hamburg in 1961, where, within the framework of the Council of Europe, the ministers of 16 countries⁵⁷² discussed various problems relating to education and similarly expressed the need to better coordinate their efforts and the importance of regularly convening these ministerial conferences⁵⁷³. The first real meeting of the EEC's six education ministers only took place in November 1971⁵⁷⁴, but it heralded important innovations, including the decision to create an embryonic administrative nucleus responsible for working on these issues, reporting directly to Commissioner Altiero Spinelli and forming a working group of 35 experts (including, for example, Aldo Visalberghi⁵⁷⁵) led and guided by Professor Henri Janne "to give thought to the content of a Community education policy, with the support of a group of top experts"⁵⁷⁶. In 1973 this work was translated into a report published in the Bulletin of the European Communities⁵⁷⁷: "at the time when many European countries were reflecting on the future of their education and training systems, the merit of the 'Janne report' was that it summed up the challenges facing these systems while trying to define the possible significance of a European dimension to educational content and based on this, outline the elements of a potential Community education"⁵⁷⁸. In his report, Janne first of all shows how educational policy cannot be separated from economic (and therefore 'professional') needs⁵⁷⁹, from cultural policy or from scientific policy⁵⁸⁰. There was thus an evident attempt to give a

⁵⁷¹ See A. Haigh, *The Conference of European Ministers of Education* in Landheer, B. (eds) 'Annuaire Européen / European Yearbook'. Springer, Dordrecht, 1972 pp. 56-57. Specifically regarding the regularity of the meetings see Resolution No. 4.

⁵⁷² See A. Haigh, p. 58.

⁵⁷³ Of particular significance was Resolution No. 2, on educational problems requiring European intergovernmental cooperation, which anticipates topics that we will see emerge much later within the contexts of the European Council and the European Commission, namely: "[the Ministers of Education] undertake to keep each other informed of the progress made in working out these reforms and of the results obtained, and to provide mutual assistance in carrying out their educational plans in the hope of gradually achieving educational systems which, while conserving the originality of national cultures, shall give practical effect to the determination to promote European cooperation; and consider, moreover, that certain steps may be jointly taken forthwith to promote European and international understanding by suitably adapting history, geography, literature, civic education and other curricula".

⁵⁷⁴ See M. Lawn e S. Grek, p. 36.

⁵⁷⁵ Italian educationalist and politician, one of the leading Dewey scholars in Italy.

⁵⁷⁶ European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 23.

⁵⁷⁷ See H. Janne (report by), *For a Community policy on education*, Bulletin of the European Communities Supplement 1 0/73.

⁵⁷⁸ European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 65.

⁵⁷⁹ See H. Janne, p. 11.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

foundation of legitimacy to the European Community's actions in the educational field, citing the links between education and some areas explicitly mentioned in the treaty, and, at the same time, emphasizing the potentially positive consequences for economic development of supranational efforts in the educational field: "It is a whole Education-Culture-Science sector which must tomorrow be covered by a Community policy rendered indispensable by the requirements and consequences of the development of economic policy (with its social aspects)"⁵⁸¹. In general, however, the report does not introduce major new elements regarding the need to respect the autonomy of individual states nor, therefore, propose to modify the provisions of the treaty in order to expand the European Community's sphere of influence⁵⁸². Notwithstanding this, the report places an interesting emphasis on the need to better clarify the relationship between the work of the European Community in this area and that of other bodies - including UNESCO, the OECD and the Council of Europe - in order to avoid unnecessary duplication and, above all, it insists on the importance of having an administrative structure with an adequate budget to oversee action in this area, including research activities⁵⁸³. Lastly, another element found in many discussions and, subsequently, deliberations, was the importance of studying different languages within the European community, of exchanges and of the mobility of teachers and students⁵⁸⁴. It is important to bear in mind that this discussion was taking place at the time of the first enlargement of the EEC with the entry of three new member, Denmark, Britain and Ireland, on 1st January 1973. The tradition of decentralization, particularly in two of these three countries, would weigh heavily in the debate on the ceding of some degree of sovereignty by the states to the European Community⁵⁸⁵ and would pave the way for a greater emphasis on cooperation: "the idea of cooperation as a governing approach, distinctively educational, risked anarchy in action but faced the impossibility of top-down approaches in this field"⁵⁸⁶. To respond to the need for a new administrative structure, a directorate for education and training was created (within the Directorate-General responsible for research and science)⁵⁸⁷.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., p. 13.

⁵⁸² Ibid., pp. 21-22.

⁵⁸³ Ibid., p. 23.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 33-38.

⁵⁸⁵ See M. Lawn & S. Grek, p. 39.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 40.

⁵⁸⁷ See European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 23.

In the wake of the report and what was established at the ministers' meeting came the Communication from the Commission of 11th March 1974 *Education in the European Community*⁵⁸⁸, in which much emphasis was placed on cooperation in the sphere of education, on mobility, on language learning, and on the study of Europe in schools and, while once again citing the link between education and work, a very important concept was affirmed, which would be somewhat lost sight of in some subsequent developments: education cannot be seen as simply a component of economic life⁵⁸⁹.

The turning point in terms of the function that the European Community recognized itself as having and of its awareness regarding the role that it needed to play in the field of education came in 1976 with the formal adoption by the Council and the Ministers of Education of the *First Community Action Program on Education*⁵⁹⁰: “this resolution laid the foundations for Community cooperation in the area of education”⁵⁹¹. Within this document, which has a very practical structure, one finds a list of some of the priority areas for action, including: 1) the reception of the children of citizens of non-member countries living in the European Community, and the facilitation of their adaptation to the host country's school system; 2) the exchange of information and experience in the educational field, also with the aim of developing some pilot projects to assess and compare the systems themselves; 3) the collection of documentation and statistics on the education sector; 4) the teaching of foreign languages. Once again it was emphasized that the primary objective of the attention given to education at a community level was that of preparing young people for work and reducing the risk of unemployment, an objective which therefore remained primarily linked to the economic dimension. This action plan was particularly significant, however, because of its connection to the creation and formalization of an Education Committee that includes representatives of both the member states and the Commission, whose presidency is assumed by the country holding the rotating presidency of the Council, and which would perform a very important function: “in retrospect, it can be said that, while the Education Committee was the forum in which political caution and sensitivity in relation to Community intervention in education were expressed the most, it also allowed cooperation to

⁵⁸⁸ See European Communities Commission, *Education in the European Community* (Communication from the Commission to the Council, presented on 11 March 1974), Bulletin of the European Communities Supplement 3/74.

⁵⁸⁹ See European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 67.

⁵⁹⁰ Resolution of the Council and of the Ministers of Education, meeting within the Council, of 9 February 1976 comprising an action programme in the field of education OJ C 38, 19.2.1976, p. 1–5.

⁵⁹¹ European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 24.

progress steadily and, in 1992, to find its place in the treaty”⁵⁹². It is from this action plan that one can trace the origins of the efforts that would lead to the creation of Eurydice (see the third priority, relating to statistics, listed above) – “an institutional network that collects, updates, analyses and disseminates information on the policies, structure and organisation of the European education systems”⁵⁹³ - whose target audience was originally limited to policy makers at the national and Community level, who were granted access to a question-and-answer service that helped to stimulate exchange between decision-makers and to favour their open-mindedness by making them aware of education policies developed elsewhere⁵⁹⁴. Lastly, also originating from the 1976 document, is Arion, the study visits programme for teachers and educators aimed at promoting greater knowledge of the various school systems in the community and the exchange of experiences⁵⁹⁵.

Nevertheless, the issue of the lack of references to education in the treaty continued to constitute a very significant limitation on the possibility of implementing new measures at the Community level, and the only progress in this regard, from a bureaucratic perspective, was the reunification of education and vocational training under the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Education⁵⁹⁶. From a practical point of view, however, new European programmes⁵⁹⁷ in the field of education and training had been developed since 1985, some of which would play a very important role in the process of Europeanization: Commett (I and II)⁵⁹⁸, Erasmus⁵⁹⁹, PETRA⁶⁰⁰, Youth for

⁵⁹² Ibid., p. 89.

⁵⁹³ Eurydice is a network with a base in Brussels and national units in all EU member countries as well as in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of North Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey. Since 1985, this role has been performed for Italy by INDIRE, which “implements, updates and looks after the dissemination of information on the Italian education system”. See Eurydice and INDIRE websites.

⁵⁹⁴ European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 79.

⁵⁹⁵ See A.J. Hingel, p. 5.

⁵⁹⁶ See European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 90.

⁵⁹⁷ Most of the names that has been given to these programmes are chosen for emphasizing the continuity of European cultural inheritance. See J. Field, p. 8.

⁵⁹⁸ A programme for cooperation between universities and enterprises for training in the technology field. The first was launched in 1986, the second in 1990.

⁵⁹⁹ Launched in 1987, now it is called Erasmus+.

⁶⁰⁰ Launched in 1988: an action programme for vocational training and the preparation of young people for adult and professional life.

Europe⁶⁰¹, Lingua⁶⁰², Eurotecnet⁶⁰³, FORCE⁶⁰⁴ and Tempus⁶⁰⁵. The progressively recognized importance of these programmes is also evident from the funds invested in their operation: for the period 1990-94, total funding of one billion ECU⁶⁰⁶ was dedicated to them, whereas in the period 1980-85, only 14 million ECU were used to this end⁶⁰⁷.

These programmes were, on the one hand, the result, given the provisions of the treaty, of the impossibility of implementing general policies in the educational sphere, while still wanting to encourage greater integration, and on the other, the consequence of a drive that can be seen in the so-called Adonnino Report *On a People's Europe*, that is to say, a drive to create, through exchange and cooperation, a shared outlook originating from shared roots and shared values. It was at the European Council Meeting at Fontainebleau in 1984⁶⁰⁸ that it was decided to set up an ad hoc committee aimed at strengthening and promoting the Community's identity "and its image both for its citizens and for the rest of the world"⁶⁰⁹. This committee would be chaired by the Italian Pietro Adonnino and would produce a report that was a "combination of specific proposals to be implemented without further delay and longer term objectives which would make the Community more of a reality for its citizens"⁶¹⁰. In terms of concrete objectives to pursue, it was recommended, among other things, that the Community should: 1) ensure that as many students as possible know, before the end of compulsory education, two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue; 2) ensure that foreign language teachers are trained in countries where the language they will later teach in school is spoken; 3) allow as many students as possible to visit another member country of the European Community, preferably one where a language other than their own is spoken; 4) strengthen and support exchanges between schools, including supporting them financially; 5) develop a pilot project

⁶⁰¹ Launched in 1988: an action programme for the promotion of youth exchanges in the Community.

⁶⁰² Launched in 1990: an action programme aimed at promoting knowledge of foreign languages in the European Community.

⁶⁰³ Launched in 1989: an action programme to promote innovation in the field of vocational training resulting from technological change in the European Community.

⁶⁰⁴ Launched in 1991: an action programme (EEC) for the development of continuous vocational training in the European Community.

⁶⁰⁵ Trans-European mobility for university studies, launched in 1990.

⁶⁰⁶ European Currency Unit, the unit of account used before the advent of the euro.

⁶⁰⁷ European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 109.

⁶⁰⁸ See Fontainebleau European Council, 25 and 26 June 1986, Presidency Conclusions.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

⁶¹⁰ Report to the European Council by the ad hoc committee, *The Adonnino Report - 'On a People's Europe'*, A 10.04 COM 85, SN/2536/3/85, p. 4.

of voluntary work camps for young people working cooperatively with peers from other countries; 6) prepare appropriate textbooks and other support materials for teachers; 7) confirm 9th May of each year as 'Europe Day', to be celebrated also in schools⁶¹¹.

The drive towards a people's Europe, the numerous concrete proposals, and the programmes developed in the educational sphere provided fertile ground for the discussion which, within the context of the drafting of the Maastricht Treaty, led to a very important qualitative leap: education would finally be mentioned in the text of a treaty. With the treaty signed by the 12 member states in 1992, the EEC became the European Community, the powers of the Parliament were strengthened (with the codecision procedure i.e.)⁶¹² and the three pillars that the Union would be based on were established: the European Communities (first pillar), Common Foreign and Security Policy (second pillar), and Justice and Home Affairs (third pillar)⁶¹³. What is of interest here is the content of some of the articles: Article 3 under letter p) says that the Community's powers include making "a contribution to education and training of quality and to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States" while Articles 126 and 127 better clarify the actual areas of action: the first establishes that "the Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organization of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity"; the second (whose novelty was decidedly less disruptive bearing in mind that vocational training, as it has been seen, had already been discussed in the Treaty of Rome) says that "the Community shall implement a vocational training policy which shall support and supplement the action of the Member States, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content and organization of vocational training".

What happened with Maastricht, however, in addition to its being a legislative clarification that would be fundamental for subsequent developments, was that it also had great symbolic value because it

⁶¹¹ Ibid., pp. 14-17.

⁶¹² "With the Treaty of Maastricht and the introduction of the codecision procedure, the Parliament became a co-legislator on an equal footing with the Council, except in the cases provided for in the Treaties where special legislative procedures apply" see Eu-Lex website about ordinary legislative procedure.

⁶¹³ See TREATY ON EUROPEAN UNION, Official Journal of the European Communities NoC 191 / 1, 7th February 1992.

marked a milestone in a long and not always linear process⁶¹⁴. Indeed, as Hywel Ceri Jones⁶¹⁵ argues, “the wording of these Articles and the terms of reference set out in them are no accident, as they are in the logic of everything that has been developed at Community level since 1976. They represent the natural culmination of that period of work and the achievements to date. And they represent, too, an expression of the mutual confidence and trust of the member states’ authorities and their goodwill to further develop education co-operation”⁶¹⁶. Whilst the innovation of Maastricht is therefore undeniable, one must not forget that the roots of this process can be traced back over a period of about 20 years⁶¹⁷ (and even much further according to Lawn and Grek)⁶¹⁸, a period during which “there was a trade in ideas, designs and knowledge between people, cities and universities in Europe”⁶¹⁹ which would carry much weight when determining this regulatory destination point. Another element that should be seen as important on the path that led to Maastricht – because of its ability to stimulate and bring together a public and specialized debate on the subject at a supranational level - is the project that led to the creation of a specialist education journal, initially called *Paedagogica Europaea* and then the *European Journal of Education*, founded by the European Cultural Foundation and the European Commission⁶²⁰.

To summarize, it can therefore be said that “the period before the Maastricht Treaty can be characterised by leading towards a genuine EC education policy without legal basis”⁶²¹ and that “the Treaty on the European Union was the first time that education and culture was being acknowledged as an inherent part of the integration process”⁶²² in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity that lies at the heart of the treaty itself⁶²³. It is therefore thanks to Maastricht that “education in general

⁶¹⁴ European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 143.

⁶¹⁵ Hywel Ceri Jones, Head of Department for Education and Youth Policies of European Commission 1973-1979. Director for Education, Vocational Training and Youth Policy 1979-1988. Then Director of the EC’s Task Force for Human Resources, Education, Training and Youth.

⁶¹⁶ H.C. Jones, *Education in a Changing Europe*, *Educational Review*, vol 44, No 3, 1992 quoted in European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 143.

⁶¹⁷ To the Janne report of 1973.

⁶¹⁸ “The formation of the nascent European Space for Education was founded on mid-century, and particularly post-war, networks of experts, researchers and policy actors, who came together in new national and then European centres and institutions working in education” M. Lawn & S. Grek, p. 23.

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁶²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶²¹ H. Walkenhorst, *The Changing Role of EU Education Policy - a Critical Assessment*, p. 5.

⁶²² M. Lawn & S. Grek, p. 43.

⁶²³ European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 146.

became a legalized community matter, assigning the supranational institutions with respective political powers”⁶²⁴.

As already mentioned in the introduction to this section, although, on the one hand, the innovation of mentioning educational policies in the Treaties was highly significant and would have important consequences, on the other, the letter of the 1992 document repeatedly reiterates the responsibility and autonomy of Member States in this area through what Walkenhorst calls “safeguards against Europeanization”⁶²⁵. Therefore, whilst acknowledging the importance of this regulatory change, it must also be underlined that strong formal limitations continued to operate on the ability of the Commission and European institutions in general to take action in the educational field, so much so that Theiler stated that although “the Maastricht Treaty has enhanced the legal status of education policy in the EU, it has not strengthened the Commission's and the EP's ability to promote the ‘European dimension’ in national school curricula in a significant way”⁶²⁶. This is also why Novoa and deJong-Lambert can speak of the period following the turning point of Maastricht as a phase of a “vaporous state of politics”, characterized by strong rhetoric and a great emphasis on the society of the future, quality education and lifelong learning, that is to say, a rhetoric capable, just like substances in a gaseous state, of occupying the whole public space, and of thereby delegitimizing any different way of approaching educational matters⁶²⁷. In fact, in the 1990s there were two challenges that would heavily influence the process of Europeanization, one within the structure of the European Community, the other of a broader nature: the enlargement of the Union and globalisation⁶²⁸. Both of these challenges would make it necessary to reflect on the “ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe” already laid down in the 1957 Treaty of Rome.

⁶²⁴ H. Walkenhorst, *The Changing Role of EU Education Policy - a Critical Assessment*, p. 5.

⁶²⁵ “The novel education articles [...] helped to elucidate the role of the EU in education matters (as a forum) and revealed the strong political interest of the member states in maintaining their national education policies and systems” H. Walkenhorst, *The Changing Role of EU Education Policy - a Critical Assessment*, p. 5.

⁶²⁶ T. Theiler, *The European union and the ‘European dimension’ in schools: Theory and evidence*, ‘Journal of European Integration’ 21, 1999: 307-341, p.325. Just under this, insisting on the point, with reference to the wording of Article 126, he adds that it does not give the Union any competence that could allow it to “define and enforce legally binding standards”.

⁶²⁷ See A. Novoa & W. DeJong-Lambert, p. 16.

⁶²⁸ See J. Field, p. 13: “The economic challenges of globalization influence much of the Commission’s thinking”.

2.2 From Maastricht to Lisbon

No matter how ‘vaporous’ this political phase running from 1992 to 2000 may be considered, it is far from intangible or insignificant and, indeed, the documents produced in this period are actually the most important theoretical point of reference for Europeans educational policies available. They lie within a clear rhetorical framework that does not nullify the effectiveness of policies but, as it has been said, just like a substance in its gaseous state, tends to occupy all of the space in the discussion on the topic: first of all there is the idea of a shared past of member states that legitimizes the efforts of European institutions to build a future together⁶²⁹; then there is the belief that lifelong learning can be seen as a single solution to a multitude of problems; and lastly, there is the drive to identify, through reflection, the most important elements in the educational field in order to be able to develop a future policy and specific actions to tackle the issue⁶³⁰. From this perspective, it is very important to consider some elements of the text which - on the basis of the request formulated in the Conclusions of the Copenhagen Council of 1993⁶³¹ - Jaques Delors, then President of the European Commission, presented in Brussels on 11th December 1993, namely the *Growth, Competitiveness, Employment: The Challenges and Ways Forward into the 21st Century: White Paper*. The goal set is decidedly challenging and harks back to precisely the aforementioned idea of building a possible future on the foundation of shared roots that must not be forgotten: “we are faced with the immense responsibility, while remaining faithful to the ideals which have come to characterize and represent Europe, of finding a new synthesis of the aims pursued by society (work as a factor of social integration, equality of opportunity) and the requirements of the economy (competitiveness and job creation)”⁶³². Growth,

⁶²⁹ This idea in the Report of the Commission of the European Communities of 1997 was defined as “the sense of belonging to a common civilization”, European Communities Commission, *Accomplishing Europe through education and training; report*, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1997, p. 16. This same text identifies the fundamental values Europeans identify with and which must be the point of reference for greater cooperation, so that they are taught in all member states: “human rights/human dignity; fundamental freedoms; democratic legitimacy; peace and the rejection of violence as a means to an end; respect for others; a spirit of solidarity (within Europe and vis-à-vis the world as a whole); equitable development; equal opportunities; the principles of rational thought: the ethics of evidence and proof; preservation of the ecosystem; personal responsibility”, p.18. See also, in the same sense, the text of Cresson's *White Paper*, which will shortly be discussed here, when she states that “The diversity of the education systems of the EU notwithstanding, there is a European approach to education based on common historic roots”, Commission of the European Communities, *White Paper on Education and Learning – Teaching and Learning: towards the learning society*, Brussels, 29.11.1995 COM(95) 590 final, p. 3.

⁶³⁰ See A. Novoa & W. deJong-Lambert, p. 17.

⁶³¹ See Copenhagen European Council, 21 and 22 June 1993, Presidency Conclusions: “The European Council invited the Commission to present a white paper on medium-term strategy for growth, competitiveness and employment”, p. 6.

⁶³² European Commission, Secretariat-General, *Growth, competitiveness, employment: The challenges and ways forward into the 21st century: White paper*, Publications Office, 1994, p. 3.

competitiveness and employment are three concepts that refer to the economic dimension, which, even after the progress of Maastricht or, more probably, as a result of it, continues to lie at the centre of European policies. Therefore, whilst it is true that education is mentioned in Delors' white paper 89 times, it is seen as closely linked to these three concepts and, therefore, to the economic sphere⁶³³. It is no coincidence that lifelong education and training is given as a priority for taking action in relation to jobs⁶³⁴: training is inextricably linked to work here. Not a particularly original concept, but, as one immediately understands, not a neutral one either. The fundamental concern is rising to the challenge of the demands of tomorrow's trades, which will "require the ability to make diagnoses and propose improvements at all levels"⁶³⁵, and this is why the member states, notwithstanding the different approaches that characterize their education systems, must be more willing to cooperate in this area. It is with this intention that an entire chapter of the white paper is devoted to the "Adaptation of education and vocational training systems", including an accurate analysis of the weakest elements found in Europe: first of all, the excessive number of students who leave their studies without having acquired the basic elements, most of whom are subsequently found among statistics on the long-term unemployed, destined for social exclusion⁶³⁶. Another area of weakness is the inadequacy of continuous training systems, especially for people employed in small and medium-sized enterprises. The third problem, no less important, is "the real lack of skills in a number of areas related to the applications of science and technology and the interaction between them and society: information technologies; applications of biotechnologies; applications of regulations on the environment; combinations of technical and management skills, etc."⁶³⁷. Lastly, the lack of a real "European market in skills and occupations" due to limited transparency and limited mutual recognition of the educational paths followed in individual European countries⁶³⁸. Although the important steps forward

⁶³³ See J. Field when he says: "globalization has acted to reinforce the EU's tendency to focus on the potential economic contribution of its policies for education and training, and to regard other aspects as secondary", p. 13.

⁶³⁴ See *Growth, competitiveness, employment: The challenges and ways forward into the 21st century: White paper*: "Preparation for life in tomorrow's world cannot be satisfied by a once-and-for-all acquisition of knowledge and know-how", p. 16.

⁶³⁵ Ibid.

⁶³⁶ This insistent focus on early school leavers can be seen in all Commission documents. Here Delors focuses on the differences in this area between Europe and other partners, seeing Europe's weakness as a factor leading to less competitiveness: "In the Community, the proportion of people of normal school-leaving age who leave the education system with a secondary qualification is 42%, against 75% in the United States of America and 90% in Japan" *Growth, competitiveness, employment: The challenges and ways forward into the 21st century: White paper*, p. 134.

⁶³⁷ Ibid., p. 135.

⁶³⁸ Ibid.

that member states have made regarding the quality of their education systems should not be ignored, according to the white paper there is still much to be done, starting from building a school that is capable of connecting more and more effectively with the world of work, and that also teaches students how to learn, bearing in mind that it will be essential for them to get used to doing so throughout life. There is also a strong focus in the text on the role of the business sector and on the support that is expected from the private sector in the form of both ever closer cooperation between it and the world of education and training, and of the continuous training of its employees. In fact, it is not enough to increase public funds destined for education, the system needs to be reorganized so that these stakeholders have their own direct involvement, incentivised by fiscal measures aimed at favouring precisely this continuous training of people⁶³⁹. In short, the end goal seems to be the one declared on page 149 of the white paper, that of “raising the stock of human capital”⁶⁴⁰.

In order to understand the direction that the Europeanization of educational policies was taking, we should consider, alongside this fundamental theoretical work, the practical efforts promoted by Commissioner Antonio Ruberti⁶⁴¹ and then implemented by Commissioner Edith Cresson⁶⁴², aimed at bringing European education and training programmes together within two macro-programmes: LEONARDO (in support of vocational training) and SOCRATES (for school and university education) established in 1995. The first, with 19 specific objectives⁶⁴³, would incorporate PETRA and Comett and would be financed with 620 million ECU, later raised to 794 million⁶⁴⁴; the second, with nine specific objectives⁶⁴⁵, would bring together ERASMUS, LINGUA, Eurydice and ARION, subsequently adding COMENIUS⁶⁴⁶, and would be financed with 850 million ECU, later increased to 920 million⁶⁴⁷. Starting in 1997, these programmes would be the first Community programmes that

⁶³⁹ Ibid., p. 136.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 149.

⁶⁴¹ Commissioner for Research 1993-1994.

⁶⁴² Commissioner for Research, Education and Training 1995-1999.

⁶⁴³ See European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p.172. That objectives range from “improve the quality and innovation capacity of Vocational Training systems” to the promotion of equal opportunities between men and women and the inclusion of disadvantaged people in terms of accessing professional training, aiming to “promote the development of an open European area for vocational training and qualifications through the exchange of information and experience”.

⁶⁴⁴ See European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 175.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., p.170, objectives such as: “develop the European dimension in education in order to promote citizenship”, “encourage the mobility of teachers”, “encourage the mobility of students” and “foster the exchange of information and experience”.

⁶⁴⁶ A programme for school partnerships.

⁶⁴⁷ European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 175.

were also open to candidate countries⁶⁴⁸, which would continue to take part in SOCRATES II, LEONARDO and Youth for Europe until their actual accession to the Union⁶⁴⁹.

Many of the topics dealt with in Delors' white paper, can also be found, in a more in-depth form and with the practical implications more precisely defined, in a white paper on education and training entitled *Teaching and Learning*, drawn up in 1995 by the Commission under the guidance of the Commissioner for Education Edith Cresson. Its subtitle - *Towards the Learning Society* – is already indicative of both the starting point of the reflections contained in the paper, and of the end goal it proposes. In fact, it deals with acknowledging the role of knowledge in society and, of consequently adapting educational systems to the new challenges, making learning - including lifelong learning - the centre of policies for the future. Starting from the role that training plays in employment and, more generally, in the competitiveness of economic systems, and from the reflections of the earlier white paper by Delors, following which it was also decided to establish a European year of lifelong learning⁶⁵⁰ (set for 1996)⁶⁵¹, the paper does not propose imposing common rules (given that, as it has been seen, the Maastricht Treaty recognizes legislation in the educational field as a prerogative of the member states), but rather identifying points of convergence⁶⁵². In short, it deals with “an initial idea that is first and foremost a practical one: having a common framework of reference for the various European systems, in terms of knowledge and skills, that will also make qualifications comparable and thereby also enable greater mobility among students (future workers)”⁶⁵³. Cresson's paper is divided into two parts; the first dedicated to the challenges - the impact of the information society, of internationalization, and of scientific and technological knowledge - the second, entitled *Building the Learning Society*, listing five general objectives to achieve, namely: a) to encourage the acquisition

⁶⁴⁸ Cyprus, Malta, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania.

⁶⁴⁹ See European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 179. Accession would take place in 2004, with the exception of Bulgaria and Romania which joined in 2007.

⁶⁵⁰ With the objective being “to make the European public aware of the importance of lifelong learning, to foster better cooperation between education and training structures and the business community, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, to help to establish a European area of education and training through the academic and vocational recognition of qualifications within the European Union, and to stress the contribution made by education and training to the equality of opportunities”, European Parliament and Council Decision n° 95/2493/EC of 23 October 1995 establishing 1996 as the European Year of Lifelong Learning.

⁶⁵¹ It is interesting to note that in the same year the Ministers of Education of OECD countries adopted “Lifelong learning for all” as a policy framework.

⁶⁵² See *White Paper on Education and Training – Teaching and Learning*, p. 3.

⁶⁵³ A. Caputo, p. 31.

of new knowledge; b) to bring schools and business closer together; c) to combat exclusion; d) to develop proficiency in three community languages; e) to treat capital investment and investment in training on an equal basis. These are topics which, as it has been seen, had already been anticipated in the Delors' white paper and are further developed here. It is worth dwelling, for a moment, on the concept of a learning society, which is central to Cresson's paper - so much so that it peremptorily affirms from the very first pages that the society of the future will be a learning society⁶⁵⁴ - and this idea can be found in many other EU documents from here on. It is a vision according to which the whole of society collaborates in the training of individuals, seeing the personal fulfilment of them as a benefit for everyone, as having a collective value. The aim, however, even though there is a strong emphasis on equality of opportunity⁶⁵⁵, is not knowledge, nor the educated individuals, but transforming information and knowledge into effective, shareable, operable knowledge⁶⁵⁶. This still lies, in fact, fully within the framework drawn up by Delors - aimed at *raising the stock of human capital* - because the structure within which Europe talks about education is, as it has been said, still the economic one. This is also the case when Cresson's paper, in its introduction, tries to highlight that "to examine education and training in the context of employment does not mean reducing them simply to a means of obtaining qualifications. The essential aim of education and training has always been personal development and the successful integration of Europeans into society through the sharing of common values, the passing on of cultural heritage and the teaching of self-reliance" as the same text adds, immediately afterwards, that the only way to combat social exclusion is, indeed, employment⁶⁵⁷. Seen in this way, one could almost say that it is a sort of *excusatio non petita*.

Returning to the structure of Cresson's white paper, as mentioned, the first part clarifies that in order to understand how to improve the educational systems of European countries and cooperation within the Union in this area, it is first of all necessary to mention the trends that were conditioning all of society. The first aspect concerns the impact of the information society, which was leading to a truly new industrial revolution that would radically change the nature of work and the organization of production, necessitating, first and foremost, a change in teaching methods that transform the student-

⁶⁵⁴ See *White Paper on Education and Training – Teaching and Learning*, p. 2, consequently "Education and training will increasingly become the main vehicles for self-awareness, belonging, advancement and self-fulfilment" The idea of a 'learning society', as it has already been said, was first present by Robert Hutchins in his book of 1970

⁶⁵⁵ *White Paper on Education and Training – Teaching and Learning*, p. 2.

⁶⁵⁶ See A. Caputo p. 31.

⁶⁵⁷ *White Paper on Education and Training – Teaching and Learning*, p. 3.

teacher relationship from passive to interactive⁶⁵⁸. The second is related to the impact of the internationalization of the economy, which has given rise to an unprecedented freedom of movement of goods and people. The Union, if it manages to demonstrate “that it is not there just to make regulations”, actually has much to gain from this process because in an ever more uncertain world Europe is a natural level for supranational organization⁶⁵⁹. The third and last aspect is linked to the impact of scientific and technological knowledge, which many citizens have a fear of that stems from the idea that scientific and technological development is in fact a danger rather than an opportunity. The response to this must be, at the same time, both a cultural and an ethical one, because new discoveries and technological applications also have ethical implications that should not be underestimated. The main objective, however, at this juncture, is to reduce the “risk of a rift in society between those that can interpret; those who can only use; and those who are pushed out of mainstream society and rely upon social support: in other words, between those who know and those who do not know”⁶⁶⁰. Faced with these objectively very important challenges, this first part of the paper puts forward two responses: “the development of a broad knowledge base, namely the ability to grasp the meaning of things, to comprehend and to make judgements”, also fundamentally important to ensuring the maintenance of democracy⁶⁶¹, and the development of “everyone's employability and capacity for economic life”⁶⁶². To achieve this second objective, it is necessary to ask oneself which skills are required, starting from the basic ones – the 3 Rs – i.e., reading, writing and arithmetic, to which one must add a knowledge of at least two foreign languages in addition to one's own, a technical knowledge linked not only to new technologies, but also to long-established industries, and social aptitudes, such as the ability to work in a team. To all of this, in order to ensure that everyone is fully employable, one should add pre-work experience (the separation between education and professional training makes less and less sense and must be overcome) and mobility, encouraged by European programmes. In short, from an employability perspective, attention must be paid not only to the qualifications obtained, but also to each person's skills, regardless of how they were acquired⁶⁶³. Here

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶⁶² Ibid., p. 12.

⁶⁶³ See Ibid. p. 14, where one reads: “we need to make the best use of skills and abilities irrespective of how they were obtained and to enhance everyone's potential by catering more closely for the needs of the individual, business and industry”.

one can therefore see a tendency to shift the focus from the inputs of education and training systems to the outputs, the same one that, as it has been seen, differentiates the measurement system of the ILSAs developed by the OECD from earlier ones promoted, for example, by the IEA. Cresson's white paper pushes this view, and the need for mutual recognition in the member states of the skills of their citizens, to the point of proposing a personal skills card, a European skills card that records validated basic, technical and occupational skills, irrespective of they were acquired⁶⁶⁴. However, such a card was not implemented.

Moving on to the second part of this white paper, the one dealing with building the learning society, one finds a fundamental concept being expressed: human resources are Europe's most important economic asset. As such it is crucial to invest in reducing the mismatch between the qualifications and skills required in the world of work and those actually possessed, in order to significantly increase the competitiveness of the European economy. Everything begins at school, where the learning society has its roots, but schools - which also need to open up and change - are not enough⁶⁶⁵. It is necessary to define both the objectives and the related action needed to achieve them because "the learning society will not come about overnight. It cannot come about by declaration. It has to emerge from an ongoing process"⁶⁶⁶. Building the learning society is a long process and based on the acknowledgment of three factors: a) making the quality of education systems a priority has become vital for the competitiveness of the European economy; b) the demand for continuous training is growing and the information society creates an opportunity that absolutely must be seized; c) social exclusion, caused by the difference between those who possess certain knowledge and those who do not, has assumed unacceptable proportions. This, therefore, is the thinking behind the five general objectives mentioned above, and for each of them the paper identifies "guidelines, suggestions and measures which the Community could undertake to complement and support national action"⁶⁶⁷. With regard to the first objective – that is, to encourage the acquisition of new knowledge – the areas of action identified are the recognition of skills (the idea of the card rears its head again, but above all

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 26-27.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 30.

the focus is on the mutual recognition of educational pathways in the member states)⁶⁶⁸, mobility (of all students), and multimedia educational software (having European tools for education is seen as essential and technology can help in this sense)⁶⁶⁹. As regards the second objective, to bring schools and business closer together, the actions identified are the promotion of apprenticeship schemes at the European level (based on the Erasmus model) and the setting up of a European observation system for vocational training (to facilitate the sharing of innovative ideas and the exchange of good practices). To achieve the third objective, combatting exclusion, the paper advocates promoting European voluntary service (going beyond the modest Youth for Europe programme and eliminating bureaucratic barriers to the mobility of volunteers in Europe) and the diffusion of second chance schools - aiming to ensure that such schools exist, above all, in the most disadvantaged areas in order to give students excluded from the school system the first time around a second chance, that the schools employ the best teachers, possibly paid more than their colleagues in other schools, and that both schools and teachers are always open to families and the community, even outside school hours.

Regarding the fourth objective, developing proficiency in three community languages, it is naturally necessary for this to become part of schools' curricula and it is also suggested to establishing a European quality label and encouraging the exchange of material and experience and mobility of students and teachers⁶⁷⁰. The fifth and final objective, to treat capital investment and investment in training on an equal basis, is probably the one where the fewest practical suggestions are made, the paper limiting itself to a generic invitation to compare the fiscal systems of member states in relation to investments in human capital and research and to find a way of adequately promoting them by using the fiscal lever at the national level⁶⁷¹.

At this point, the European Commission had set itself clear strategic objectives and defined concrete actions to develop in order to achieve them. The following years would be characterized, until Lisbon, by the repetition of these concepts on different occasions and in different ways, from the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 – which, in Article 2, established that the preamble of the Maastricht Treaty needed

⁶⁶⁸ Here the white paper also talks about the ECTS - European Credit Transfer System –which pertains to the university field and is therefore not directly relevant to our paper, but of interest in understanding how the process of integration was accelerating through mutual recognition, Ibid. p. 33.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 30-33.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 45.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 33-49.

to be amended by adding this to the fundamental premises: “DETERMINED to promote the development of the highest possible level of knowledge for their peoples through a wide access to education and through its continuous updating”⁶⁷² – through to the Report of the Commission *Accomplishing Europe through Education and Training* of the same year, the fruit of the work of 25 experts. This second document in particular focuses on the same issues that lie at the centre of Delors’ and Cresson’s white papers, specifically on the need to improve “relations between general and vocational education and training”, “the definition and the comparability of acquired competencies/skills”, and the “definition and the acquisition of new occupational profiles”⁶⁷³, as well as on lifelong learning, predicting that “the coming years will become a benchmark in the history of education” if governments fully adopt lifelong learning as a goal⁶⁷⁴. Nothing new then, at least not until the Council’s adoption of a rolling agenda in 1999, which essentially anticipated the Open Method of Coordination introduced as an instrument by the Lisbon Strategy. In fact, under the Finnish Presidency it was decided to base the Education Council’s future work on a rolling agenda, built on the basis of a limited number of priority issues to be addressed on a cyclical basis. A cooperative approach was ensured by a circular process that went from discussion in the Council about the priorities of shared interest, to an invitation to Member States to inform the Commission about the most important national initiatives related to the chosen topics, to the analysis and summary by the Commission of the information gathered (with the addition of the Commission’s own actions regarding the matter) which, on the basis of these documents, concluded with any decisions made about the matter by the Council⁶⁷⁵. 1999 was also the year of the *Bologna Declaration*, which (together with the previous year’s *Sorbonne Declaration*) would mark a significant step forward in the process of integrating university education - known as the Bologna Process - and would lead to the creation of a European Higher Education Area, which, whilst not the subject of this research, still deserves a mention here because it shows the centrality of the education topic in the European panorama during this period and reveals the acceleration that from this moment on characterised an

⁶⁷² TREATY OF AMSTERDAM AMENDING THE TREATY ON EUROPEAN UNION, THE TREATIES ESTABLISHING THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES AND CERTAIN RELATED ACTS, Official Journal of the European Communities C 340/ 1, 2 October 1997, Art. 2.

⁶⁷³ Commission of the European Communities, *Accomplishing Europe through education and training*, p. 21.

⁶⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁶⁷⁵ See A.J. Hingel, p. 9.

ever greater convergence regarding the organization of national systems whilst leaving the provisions of the Treaties unchanged. At this point EU was ready for the Lisbon Strategy.

2.3 Lisbon and the Knowledge-Based Economy: Setting Indicators, Measuring Quality, and Achieving Objectives

“The European Council held a special meeting on 23-24 March 2000 in Lisbon to agree a new strategic goal for the Union in order to strengthen employment, economic reform and social cohesion as part of a knowledge-based economy”⁶⁷⁶. These lines denote the beginning of a new phase for European policies in the educational sphere, even though, as one can discern, it remained firmly anchored to the economic sphere⁶⁷⁷: from now on, a real strategy, consisting of concrete actions, precise measurements and reform plans, would be implemented and supported through ad hoc funding. This is why Novoa and deJong-Lambert can talk of a transition to a ‘solid state’, even though the rhetoric remained unchanged, “characterized by repeated differences to principles such as ‘diversity’, ‘full responsibility of member states’, and so on” - but now “coupled with references to ‘common objectives’, ‘reinforced co-operation’, and ‘mutual accountability’”⁶⁷⁸. And a clear deadline was also set: these results would have to be achieved within ten years, by 2010. All of this happened as a result of what is defined in the conclusions of the Council as ‘the way forward’, or rather, “a new strategic goal for the next decade: to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion”⁶⁷⁹. The European Union did not simply want to improve the quality of the education systems of its member states, nor its competitiveness based on the employability of individuals, concepts that emerged clearly from the two white papers analysed above, now the EU wanted to incorporate these partial objectives within a much broader and more ambitious strategic goal: to become the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in

⁶⁷⁶ Lisbon European Council 23 and 24 March 2000, Presidency Conclusions.

⁶⁷⁷ See M. Lawn & S. Grek: “the Lisbon Agenda was essentially an economic agreement [...] focusing on employment and the economy” even though “it was also the education ministers who were appointed with the mission to achieve the Lisbon goals”, p. 87.

⁶⁷⁸ A. Novoa & W. DeJong-Lamber, p. 20.

⁶⁷⁹ Lisbon European Council 23 and 24 March 2000, Presidency Conclusions, par. 5.

the world⁶⁸⁰. The economy and education therefore essentially merge and human capital becomes the founding element of the new society that Europe intends to build: “education and learning have now become central in constructing Europe itself”⁶⁸¹. Following the timeline of the documents listed and analysed above, this would appear to be the natural destination point of the thoughts expressed, and it is in fact the “key culminating point in the history of education governance in the EU, as education and its role and significance were to set to dramatically change: from now on education would become the key element in the new Knowledge Economy goals of Europe”⁶⁸². This is how the phenomenon of education gradually became ever more one of learning, and the attention paid to looking at the quality of systems focused ever less on the stakeholders in education - schools and teachers - and ever more on the competencies that individuals develop and should develop while following their educational pathway. This is why it would become very important to have a system for measuring these competencies⁶⁸³. It is no coincidence that this evolution takes place at the same time that the nature of ILSAs was changing, shifting their focus from the inputs of training systems to the outputs, nor that among those who would be involved as experts in drafting the document drawn up as part of the DeSeCo Project in order to give the new evaluation method a solid theoretical foundation, one finds figures such as Jacques Delors who, as it has been seen, played a very important role in the process of the Europeanization of education. This is exactly the phase that Grek, with a highly effective expression, describes as ‘governing by numbers’⁶⁸⁴, in which data became central to guiding policies. This is why the collaboration between Eurydice and the OECD would become ever closer and the data generated through the PISA tests would be widely used in the European measurement systems⁶⁸⁵: “PISA has been a major instrument in providing data for the European education systems” says Grek - adding a further element that presages some of the reflections that will be developed in

⁶⁸⁰ On this point see T. Zgajewski and K. Hajjar, *The Lisbon Strategy: Which failure? Whose failure? And why?*, ‘Egmont Paper’, no. 6, May 2005., 2005 when they say: “In light of the United States’ and China’s level of growth, Europe had no other choice, its viability being at stake”, p. 4.

⁶⁸¹ M. Lawn & S. Grek, p. 98.

⁶⁸² Ibid., p. 83.

⁶⁸³ See again M. Lawn & S. Grek where they say: “The European policy space in education is being created [...] especially in recent years – through the production of data”, p. 117.

⁶⁸⁴ See S. Grek, *Governing by Numbers: The PISA ‘Effect’ in Europe*, ‘Journal of Education Policy’, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 23-37, 2009.

⁶⁸⁵ “As OECD members, all EU countries are participating in the (quite costly) PISA process” says Gruber, who adds that is “for pragmatic reasons” that EU decided “to give up the idea of developing its own system of educational standardization” and “uses PISA levels of achievement as benchmarks” – K.H. Gruber in H. Ertl (edited by), *Cross-national attraction*, p. 5.

the conclusions of this research – “and shaping the ways that European experts and networks operate and the policy areas they focus on”⁶⁸⁶. Over the years, PISA tests have not only provided European institutions, and in particular the Eurydice network⁶⁸⁷, with valuable data for measuring the quality of education systems and comparing them, but have also influenced the way experts work and, to an even greater extent, determined which areas to focus on. Returning to some of the thoughts developed in the previous section, it is clear how the issue of accountability (in the terms already clarified: who can we consider accountable and in relation to whom/what?), which was important in the case of the tests, reappears here even more forcefully: how can European institutions - given that their legitimacy to operate in the education area is strictly dictated by the Treaties than assign the supranational level the sole function of encouraging cooperation and supporting member states - base their decisions on those defined by an organization which, by its very nature, does not enjoy a clear democratic legitimacy? The conclusions of this research will, as it has been said, develop these reflections, so here it will suffice to bear in mind the existence of a fundamental problem that deserves attention. With regard to the focus of this section, one needs to consider that among the most powerful stakeholders in the Europeanization process, there is “not a European agency but a global one, the OECD”⁶⁸⁸ not only because of the contribution it makes with its data, nor just because of the influence that, as it has been said, it had on the decisions made about which strategic areas to focus measurement on, but also because it pushed the European Commission to establish “its own technical capacity” and not simply to produce “better or more relevant data”, but because of a political decision about the “education market and the development of statistical expertise at sites much closer to home”⁶⁸⁹. The European Union has thus been able to develop its specificity, reducing the tendency to simply ‘name and blame’ countries and trying to focus more on the context within which statistical data is applied

⁶⁸⁶ S. Grek, *Governing by Numbers*, p. 11.

⁶⁸⁷ Eurydice has published its *Key Data on Education in the European Union* report every year since 1994, a few years before the first publication of the PISA test results in 2000. However, the data used for that publication – as clarified by Eurydice in its 2000 edition (see European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Eurostat, Eurydice, *Key data on education in the European Union 1999/2000*, Publications Office, 2000, p. XXVI) – from that year on came from a tool called UOE data collection, that is, from the cooperation between UNESCO, the OECD and Eurostat (the statistical office of the European Union) on the collection of comparable data on key aspects of education systems.

⁶⁸⁸ M. Lawn & S. Grek, p. 117.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.131. Anyway, as it will be seen, OECD-PISA’s data will remain fundamental point of reference of many, if not all, European official documents on this topic.

because “the only way to explain the reasons that some countries perform better than others is to examine the political, cultural, and institutional specificities of the context”⁶⁹⁰.

Coming back to the Lisbon turning point, according to Hingel there were four factors that made it possible: 1) historical evolution: 25 years of cooperation and the painstaking building of mutual trust had led the member states to shift their attention from the differences between them to what unites them; 2) internationalization of education: cooperation in the education sphere on a global level was one of the effects of the internationalization processes underway in many fields, above all the economic one, and European cooperation in education had followed the same trend, generating a kind of ‘mutual accountability’ between the member states (referred to in point 1); 3) preparing for enlargement: to welcome new members into the Union it was necessary to define procedures, principles and information that could serve as points of reference, and this applied to the field of education as well; 4) politicization of initiatives: the initiative in the educational sphere was no longer left with experts or technicians, but came directly from top politicians, ministers or heads of state, and the acceleration that led to the strengthening of European cooperation in educational matters was also conceived as a response to the often conservative educational policies of individual national authorities⁶⁹¹. This last factor is, in my opinion, the most important one. Interest in education was not new, nor was the belief that investing in education meant increasing economic competitiveness, as it has been seen, but with Lisbon the approach to working together changed: until then the national education systems had remained substantially the same, with some ‘extras’ based on input from the programmes conceived at the European level; from now on, through indicators and benchmarks, a new European identity was being created, consisting of “responsible individualism”⁶⁹² where each Member State was required to do its part - a regularly monitored and measured part⁶⁹³ - so that the Union could achieve the objectives it set itself. In short, a new policy defined “through ‘benchmarks’, creating an educational discourse that includes indicators, outcomes, data and knowledge, which functions as a *regulating rule*, obliging everyone to refer back to it”⁶⁹⁴. There was no need to change the Treaties, what mattered was establishing shared objectives and clarifying the way ahead so that

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 113.

⁶⁹¹ See A.J. Hingel, pp. 18-19.

⁶⁹² M. Lawn & S. Grek, p. 98.

⁶⁹³ Ibid., p. 99: “Numbers have become an objective, irreversible, truth”.

⁶⁹⁴ A. Novoa & W. deJong-Lambert, p. 23.

everyone could contribute to achieving them. And this would be possible, without any regulatory changes, thanks to the introduction of the Open Method of Coordination⁶⁹⁵, “based on identifying and defining shared objectives at European level, jointly specified means of measurement (indicators, benchmarks) and comparative tools for cooperation contributing to mutual improvement of systems by dissemination of good practice, peer review and pilot projects”⁶⁹⁶.

However, the most difficult part would be defining benchmarks, indicators and objectives. In June 2000, in Bucharest, at the conference of the Ministers of Education of member and candidate countries (26 countries in total) the *European report on the quality of school education: sixteen quality indicators*⁶⁹⁷ was presented. It was the product of the work of a working group of experts⁶⁹⁸ set up at the suggestion of the Prague Conference of 1998, to respond to five challenges - the knowledge challenge; the challenge of decentralisation; the resource challenge; the challenge of social inclusion; and the challenge of data and comparability – proposing some indicators. These started with the more traditional ones, namely performance in Mathematics, Reading and Science⁶⁹⁹, to which ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) and Foreign Languages were added. Then one finds Learning to Learn⁷⁰⁰, Civics (preparing for citizenship), School dropout rates, Completion of upper secondary school, Participation in higher education, Evaluation and steering of school education, Parental participation (in their children's education), Education and training of

⁶⁹⁵ “The open method of coordination (OMC) is a policy instrument that aims to improve the effectiveness and coordination of a range of policies in the European Union (EU) by using ‘soft law’ as opposed to traditional legal prescription” N. Alexiadou, *The Europeanisation of Education Policy: Researching Changing Governance and ‘New’ Modes of Coordination*, ‘Research in Comparative and International Education’, 2(2), 102–116, 2007, p. 102. Furthermore, “the OMC varies according to the specific policy field in which it is employed [...] so there is not one OMC but a number of OMCs” Ibid., p. 104.

⁶⁹⁶ European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 212.

⁶⁹⁷ “The European report on the quality of school education represents the Commission's first response to the conclusions of the special European Council meeting in Lisbon on 23 and 24 March 2000” European Commission, *EUROPEAN REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF SCHOOL EDUCATION SIXTEEN QUALITY INDICATORS*, Report based on the work of the Working Committee on Quality Indicators, p. 6.

⁶⁹⁸ See V. Scalera in Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema dell'Istruzione (CEDE), *Ricerche valutative internazionali 2000*, p. 151.

⁶⁹⁹ Not by chance the three OECD-PISA's areas of test.

⁷⁰⁰ “An old pedagogical concept that is redefined by constructivism, but also by the business world in terms of lifelong learning” A. Novoa & W. DeJong Lambert, p. 25. The report specifies that, although there is no European data on this indicator - and the first data from the PISA tests would only become available in 2001 (p.29) - the competencies in this area are probably “the most critical and enduring [...] in the society of the third millennium” *EUROPEAN REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF SCHOOL EDUCATION SIXTEEN QUALITY INDICATORS*, p. 9. It then clarifies that “Learning to learn encompasses intellectual skills, attitudes and motivation. For example, attitudes to one's self, perceptions of one's own competence, ability to think about one's thinking (metacognition), inferring meaning from a text, awareness of one's own preferred learning style, persistence in the face of difficulty, motivation to learn.”, p. 29.

teachers, Participation in pre-primary education, Number of students per computer, and Educational expenditure per student. “The objective was not to create new indicators in such a short time but to identify the quality-related problems which were politically most relevant for European countries and then to determine which of the existing indicators [...] could shed most light on these problems”⁷⁰¹.

While the approval of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union of 7 December 2000, recognized the Right to Education as a right of all individuals (Article 14), implying the right to access compulsory education for free and recognizing the freedom of teaching and educational freedom as fundamental principles, the work on indicators and objectives continued in order to provide a performative content for what would be defined as the Lisbon Agenda or Lisbon Strategy because it originated from the Conclusions of the Council of 2000⁷⁰². In this sense, there are a series of documents that should be taken into consideration in order to understand the evolution taking place. The first was presented in Stockholm in March 2001 and is the Report from the Commission entitled *The concrete future objectives of education systems*, which in the first part gives a brief analysis of the answers provided by member states to the questionnaire produced by the Commission and of the work done thus far at the European level⁷⁰³, in the second part lists some concrete objectives to achieve, and in the third and final part collects proposals for structuring a working programme aimed at achieving these objectives by 2010⁷⁰⁴. Specifically, three strategic goals are identified – “making systems more effective and improving their quality, making them more accessible [...] and making them more open” – and concrete objectives are identified for these strategic goals, 13 in total⁷⁰⁵.

The second important document is the Communication from the Commission of November 2001, entitled *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*⁷⁰⁶. Right from the title one can clearly infer that the focus has shifted to the need to create a real European area of lifelong learning – “the aims of which are both to empower citizens to move freely between learning settings, jobs ,

⁷⁰¹ European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training* pp.196-197

⁷⁰² This request was also expressed in the Conclusions of the Council of Feira of June 2000: “The Member States, the Council and the Commission are invited, within their areas of competence, to identify coherent strategies and practical measures with a view to fostering lifelong learning for all, to promote the involvement of social partners, to harness the full potential of public and private financing, and to make higher education more accessible to more people as part of a lifelong learning strategy” Santa Maria de Feira European Council, 19 and 20 June 2000, Presidency Conclusions.

⁷⁰³ See the functioning of the Rolling Agenda, which anticipated the Open Method of Coordination in this regard.

⁷⁰⁴ Report from the Commission - *The concrete future objectives of education systems*, p. 3.

⁷⁰⁵ European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, pp. 209-210.

⁷⁰⁶ See Communication from the Commission, *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality*, Brussels, 21.11.2001, COM(2001) 678 final.

regions and countries, making the most of their knowledge and competences, and to meet the goals and ambitions of the European Union and the candidate countries to be more prosperous, inclusive, tolerant and democratic”⁷⁰⁷ - and that building it will involve implementing a series of concrete actions. Here too the objectives are listed in a very precise manner, and are naturally broadly the same as those in the documents already examined above, giving a group of ministers' representatives a mandate to work on implementing a work programme as a follow-up to the *Report on the Concrete Objectives of Education and Training Systems*, thus drawing up the proposals that the Spanish Presidency would present to the Council the following year. When determining the indicators and measurement methods, it would in fact be necessary to bear in mind that “creating a culture of learning requires that the question of how to value learning in formal, non-formal and informal settings, must be addressed in a coherent way”⁷⁰⁸. The Barcelona Council of March 2002⁷⁰⁹ would welcome the Conclusions of this Communication from the Commission and would consequently invite the Council to adopt a resolution on lifelong learning before the next meeting in Seville, taking account of the European employment strategy⁷¹⁰. Then “in July 2002, the Commission set up a standing group on indicators and benchmarks (SGIB) [composed of] experts nominated by the Member States in the fields covered by the 13 programmes objectives⁷¹¹, along with representatives of the social partners and civil society, in accordance with the spirit of the open method of coordination”⁷¹². The follow-up came in November 2002⁷¹³ with a Communication from the Commission which finally set some measurable targets grouped into the following six areas: investment in education and training; early school leavers; graduates in mathematics, science and technology; population having completed upper secondary education; key competencies; and lifelong learning. Specifically, it established that: 1) “By 2010, all Member States should have at least halved the rate of early school leavers compared with the rate in 2000, to achieve a European Union (EU) average rate of 10% or less” (the EU average

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 15.

⁷⁰⁹ See Barcelona European Council, 15 and 16 March 2002, Presidency Conclusions.

⁷¹⁰ Launched within the Luxembourg Jobs Summit in November 1997.

⁷¹¹ Those approved at Stockholm, as it has been seen.

⁷¹² European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 213.

⁷¹³ Also in November 2002, a few days later, came the ‘Copenhagen Declaration’, that is to say, the *Declaration of the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training, and the European Commission, convened in Copenhagen on 29 and 30 November 2002, on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training*, which, recapitulating all of the steps forward made in vocational education and training up to that time, reiterated the priority areas of intervention and the need to constantly measure the progress made.

at that time was 19%, among the worst rates was Italy at 26%); 2) “by 2010, all Member States should have at least halved the level of gender imbalance among graduates in mathematics, science and technology, while securing a significant overall increase in the total number of graduates compared to the year 2000” (here Italy was among the countries with the best figures in 2002); 3) “Member States should ensure that, by 2010, the average proportion of 25-64 year olds in the EU with at least upper secondary education is 80% or more” (Germany figures in the top 3, already showing an average of 83% in 2002, whilst in Italy it was at 46%); 4) “by 2010, the percentage of low-achieving 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science should be at least halved in each Member State compared with the rate in 2000” (the points of reference are the results obtained in the PISA tests, which are explicitly mentioned, citing the outstanding performance of Finland and the incredibly disappointing performance of Germany); 5) “by 2010, the EU average level of participation in lifelong learning should be at least 15% of the adult working age population (25-64 age group) and in no country should it be lower than 10%” (here too Finland was among the best, with an average of 19.6% compared to a European average of just over 8%). The last objective, fundamental in terms of achieving all of the others, was the “substantial annual increases in per capita investment in human resources”⁷¹⁴. This Communication would formally be the subject of the discussion of the Council on 5 May 2003, and in its Conclusions it said that it had “agreed to establish a series of reference levels of European average performance, while taking into account the starting point of the individual Member States”⁷¹⁵. It is interesting to note that, before clarifying the targets agreed on in the Council, it reiterated that they must be based on data that are comparable and, above all, that no national targets would be defined and nor would any decisions taken at the national level by individual governments to achieve those goals be prescribed. This was because, as it has been more than once pointed out, the provisions of the Treaties had not changed at all, and the role of the European institutions at a regulatory level, notwithstanding the centrality the issue of education had assumed, continued to be limited in this area to supporting the work of member states to raise the quality of their education systems, and to coordination efforts aimed, above all, at the sharing of good practices. However, the European Union had finally managed to set itself concrete measurable objectives to be achieved by

⁷¹⁴ Communication from the Commission of 20 November 2002 on European benchmarks in education and training: follow-up to the Lisbon European Council [COM(2002) 629 final - Not published in the Official Journal].

⁷¹⁵ Council Conclusions of 5 May 2003 on reference levels of European average performance in education and training (Benchmarks) (OJ C, C/134, 07.06.2003, p. 3, CELEX).

2010, which would be the benchmarks of the Lisbon Strategy and would consequently spur individual member states to implement effective measures in order to contribute to the achievement of these goals. The targets officially set by the European Union at this point were as follows: the percentage of early school leavers, as stated in the Communication from the Commission, should be reduced to 10%; the number of mathematics, science and technology graduates should increase by 15%, while simultaneously decreasing the gender gap (here, however, no numerical targets were set); at least 85% of European 22-year-olds should complete upper secondary education; the percentage of low-achievers in reading literacy among 15-year-olds should drop by at least 20% compared to the 2000 results; the level of participation in lifelong learning of the adult population of working age (between 25 and 64 years of age) should be at least 12.5%. Regarding investments, it was once again pointed out that the need to annually increase the share of resources destined for human capital was established at Lisbon, but no targets were set, postponing any decision on this point to future Council meetings⁷¹⁶.

Four years had passed since the Lisbon Council and despite the great work done to clarify what the targets were and suggest actions for achieving them, the progress made in this period appeared disappointing. It was the European Commission and the Council in a joint report of February 2004 who “sounded the alarm” with a long list of “warning lights on red”⁷¹⁷. Entitled *Education & Training 2010 - The success of the Lisbon strategy hinges on urgent reforms*, it showed how important the involvement of individual States and the implementation of reforms at the national level were if they wanted to achieve the objectives they had set themselves⁷¹⁸. Moreover, the report *Enlarging the European Union - Achievements and Challenges*, written by Wim Kok, the former Dutch prime minister charged with drafting this document by the President of the Commission Romano Prodi, had already, in March 2003, defined the progress made regarding the Lisbon Strategy as “unsatisfactory”⁷¹⁹ since the “high-minded words” contained in the Conclusions of that Council of 2000 “have not been accompanied by the structural reforms needed for stable growth in the long term,

⁷¹⁶ Ibid., p. 134/4.

⁷¹⁷ European Commission, *The history of European cooperation in education and training*, p. 219.

⁷¹⁸ See Joint interim report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the detailed work. programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe, “*Education & Training 2010 - The success of the Lisbon strategy hinges on urgent reforms* — (OJ C, C/104, 30.04.2004).

⁷¹⁹ European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, *Enlarging the European Union. Achievements and Challenges - Report of Wim Kok to the European Commission*, 26 March 2003, p. 43.

and for a dynamic response to globalisation”. And it had added, with concern, the admonition that: “the world is not waiting for us”⁷²⁰.

Coming back to the 2004 report from the Commission and the Council, one finds a rather scathing snapshot (complete with tables)⁷²¹ of the then current situation regarding the implementation of the Lisbon Agenda, but also some suggestions for speeding up the process, such as constant monitoring and inviting the “Standing Group on Indicators and all the working groups in place [...] to propose by the end of 2004 a limited list of new indicators and their modalities of development”⁷²². The problem was always the same one: the European Union had no tools, other than ones that were little more than moral suasion, to force member states to implement the reforms needed to achieve the Lisbon objectives. What could be done, was continuing to measure progress by asking all of the countries to regularly communicate their results in the individual areas of interest in order to apply some form of pressure through the publicity the documents⁷²³. An attempt was then made to streamline the objectives, narrowing the field to those related to growth and employment, thus making a list of nine indicators: key competencies and particularly learning to learn; investment efficiency; Information and Communication Technology (ICT); mobility; adult education; vocational education and training; languages; professional development of teachers and trainers; social inclusion and active citizenship⁷²⁴.

It would be Wim Kok himself who was appointed by the Brussels European Council of 2004 to draw up a new report, together with a high-level group of experts, aimed at supporting the mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy and, above all, at identifying possible action to take in order to effectively achieve the objectives, still very distant, without moving the 2010 deadline⁷²⁵. In fact, the report said

⁷²⁰ Ibid., p. 3

⁷²¹ Joint interim report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe, *Education & Training 2010, The success of the Lisbon strategy hinges on urgent reforms*, pp. 104/13-104/19.

⁷²² Ibid., p. 104/12.

⁷²³ “The Council and the Commission will submit every two years a joint report to the Spring European Council on the implementation of the work programme (‘Education & Training 2010’) on the objectives of education and training systems (i.e. in 2006, 2008 and 2010). In this context, member states will provide the Commission with the necessary information on actions taken and progress made at national level towards the common objectives” Ibid., p. 104/12.

⁷²⁴ See M. Lawn & S. Grek, p. 92.

⁷²⁵ European Commission, Secretariat-General, *Facing the challenge: the Lisbon strategy for growth and employment: report from the High Level Group chaired by Wim Kok*, Publications Office, 2004: “Should the 2010 deadline be lifted? Again no. The 2010 deadline is important for signalling and reinforcing the urgent need for action. Setting a new, later deadline would imply that the situation is now less urgent and thus would be wrong”, p. 12. The fact that the point had

that the nature of the challenges being faced made any postponements impermissible. Specifically, ever more pressing global competition, Europe's aging population, and the enlargement of the EU, called for immediate and effective responses: "Lisbon is about achieving Europe's vision of what it wants to be and what it wants to keep in the light of increasing global competition, an ageing population and the enlargement. It has the broad ambition of solidarity with the needy, now and in the future. To realise this ambition, Europe needs more growth and more people in work"⁷²⁶. It is clear that what had been done thus far, listing a series of recommended actions and agreeing on targets to be achieved at the European level, had not made it possible to adequately engage the member states that have, as previously mentioned, the largest part of the responsibility. A change of pace, and therefore attitude, was needed. "Member States must take their responsibility and take ownership of the process. The European Commission must be prepared to 'name and shame' those that fail as well as to 'fame' those that succeed"⁷²⁷. As it has been seen happening with the PISA tests, the most effective tool for spurring governments to reform their education systems is to implement a kind of 'transparency strategy', so that those who fall furthest behind the targets they have set themselves feel not only a push to act that comes from having signed agreements at the European level, but also a much stronger and more effective spur from disappointed and dissatisfied public opinion⁷²⁸.

This acknowledgement in the report – moderately disputed due to the lack, according to some, of concrete suggestions about what action to take in order to increase the chances of meeting the 2010 deadline ⁷²⁹ - is, in part, the origin of the decision taken in 2005 to produce the *Integrated Guidelines for Growth and Jobs 2005-2008*, conceived in July 2005 as the basis for National Reform Programmes (NRPs) in line with the European Strategy, which the individual States would have to produce by the autumn of 2005, indicating the concrete actions they intended to take in the period 2005-2008⁷³⁰. In added to these programmes there was the *Community Lisbon Programme*, also

been reached where there was hypothesizing about moving the deadline, even while stating that this should be avoided, was symptomatic of the situation that the group was reporting on.

⁷²⁶ *Facing the challenge: the Lisbon strategy for growth and employment: report from the High Level Group chaired by Wim Kok*, p. 12.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷²⁸ See G. Fischman et al., p. 14.

⁷²⁹ See in particular the views of UNICE, the union of the industrial and employers' confederations of Europe, which agreed with the analysis in the reports, but complained about the absence of practical suggestions.

⁷³⁰ See INTEGRATED GUIDELINES FOR GROWTH AND JOBS (2005-2008), Communication from the President, in agreement with vice-President Verheugen and Commissioners Almunia and Spidla, Brussels, 12.4.2005 COM(2005) 141 final 2005/0057 (CNS): "The Integrated Guidelines [...] provide the Community and the Member States with a stable

approved in July 2005 by the Commission and proposed in the form of a Communication to the Council and Parliament⁷³¹, with indications about what action to take at the Community level, as a counterpart to the national programmes. The Community programmes would be financed by the Structural Fund and Cohesion Fund, in addition to contributions from the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Investment Fund. As well as a list of new programmes and funding plans put in place at the European level, this is also a Commission document that finally contains a clear target for investments in knowledge and innovation, a number missing from the framework defined by previous documents: the target was 3% of GDP and responsibility for meeting it would essentially rest with the member states.

The fact that a complementarity of national and European measures is conceived, going beyond the form of a list of objectives, even though supported by indicators and numerical targets, is, for the purposes of this research, one of the most interesting aspects of the process of the Europeanization of education. In fact, here, for the first time, member states were asked not simply to sign a list of shared objectives, but to clarify how they intended to contribute to actually achieving them as part of a full-on reform plan. If one were to interpret to the provisions of the Treaties strictly, one would say that this request has no binding value, bearing in mind, once again, that European institutions cannot perform the role of imposing regulatory changes in the field of education, notwithstanding formally signed agreements in the Conclusions of the Council. However, the approach chosen when asking member states to put a national reform plan down in black and white actually went well beyond the coordination tasks and pushing of improvements to quality provided for by the Treaties. And it is here that, in effect, the Lisbon Strategy became something more ‘solid’, to once again quote Novoa and deJong-Lambert, that is to say, when the pressure of the rankings and the pressure of respecting the agreements signed met pressures that led to the definition of actions with deadlines that have to produce objectively measurable results. Indeed, “the NRPs set out a comprehensive three-year strategy to implement the Integrated Guidelines at the national level. They present key country-specific challenges and an outline of policy initiatives and concrete measures in response to the

and coherent framework which makes it possible to implement priority measures approved by the European Council. They will serve as a basis for drawing up the national reform programmes which the Member States are asked to present”, p. 7.

⁷³¹ See Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament – *Common Actions for Growth and Employment: The Community Lisbon Programme* [SEC(2005) 981] /* COM/2005/0330 final*/.

challenges identified at the EU level. As part of the existing multilateral surveillance arrangements, the ECOFIN Council, assisted by the Economic Policy Committee of the EU, undertook a preliminary review of the NRPs. In addition, the Commission will present its own assessment of the NRPs in the form of a first annual progress report on the Lisbon strategy in late January 2006⁷³².

Consequently, in November 2005, the Economic Policy Committee collected all of the information from the NRPs⁷³³ in a report that listed the key challenges identified by the States, among which the utilization of labour and R&D and innovation stood out, indicated by 22 countries as crucial challenges, whereas competition was viewed as such by only ten countries, and social cohesion by only five, including Italy. Furthermore, it collected the reform proposals of individual countries that went from the pension reform in Finland, aimed at setting the retirement age at 62 in order to respond to the challenge of an ageing population, through to the tax credits for R&D proposed by various countries, including Italy⁷³⁴. In addition, Annex B of the report reiterates the investment targets in education envisaged for each country in order to bring the overall investment at the EU level up to 3% of GDP: Italy undertook to raise investment from 1.16% to 3% of its GDP, Finland from 3.48% to 4%, and Germany from 2.52% to 3%⁷³⁵.

It is in the light of these important steps that one should read the *Recommendation of the Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning*, wherein eight key competencies are listed as, “those which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment”, together with a definition for each one and a list of the related essential knowledge, skills and attitudes. The eight competencies identified are: 1) Communication in the mother tongue; 2) Communication in foreign languages; 3) Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; 4) Digital competence; 5) Learning to learn; 6) Social and civic competences; 7) Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; and 8) Cultural awareness and expression⁷³⁶. These competencies are very different from those have been seen

⁷³² See European Central Bank, Monthly Bulletin, January 2006, p. 38.

⁷³³ Germany only contributed a provisional document, given the post-electoral negotiations in progress (the elections were held on 18th September 2005) and would send its complete document later.

⁷³⁴ See Economic Policy Committee, REPORT ON THE LISBON NATIONAL REFORM PROGRAMMES 2005, Brussels, 22 November 2005 ECFIN/EPC(2005)REP/55392 final, p. 5.

⁷³⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

⁷³⁶ See RECOMMENDATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning (2006/962/EC), L394/13.

emerge from the DeSeCo Project and, as Caputo says, “placed under the umbrella term ‘key competencies’ are some competencies that in our eyes are more disciplinary and others that are typically transversal” and this complicates understanding of the relationship between “disciplinary competencies and key competencies”⁷³⁷. However, Europe was making an effort to build its own framework of reference for the question of competencies; taking account of what other organizations produced, but without depending exclusively on their work. The implementation of the first Adult Education Survey (AES) should also be viewed in the same sense; the survey was carried out by Eurostat as a pilot project in 29 countries (26 member states - that is to say, all of them except Ireland and Luxembourg - plus Norway, Switzerland and Turkey) and surveyed 183,000 individuals between 2005 and 2008 in order to measure the participation of adults aged 24-65 in education and training (formal, non-formal and informal learning). This statistical effort would be repeated, on the basis of a clear institutional mandate, in 2011⁷³⁸ and 2016 (in 35 countries and surveying 240,000 people), whilst starting from 2022, due to an update in the regulations⁷³⁹, it would cover the 18-69 age band⁷⁴⁰. In short, Europe was starting to collect data on its own and to make efforts to measure results that were not dependent on parameters defined elsewhere; however, this has not prevented many official documents⁷⁴¹ from continuing to cite the results of the PISA tests as a reference, nor the UOE (UNESCO/OECD/Eurostat) agreement remaining in force for data collection on education

⁷³⁷ A. Caputo, p. 46.

⁷³⁸ See Commission Regulation (EU) No 823/2010 of 17 September 2010 implementing Regulation (EC) No 452/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning the production and development of statistics on education and lifelong learning, as regards statistics on the participation of adults in lifelong learning Text with EEA relevance.

⁷³⁹ See Commission Regulation (EU) No 1175/2014 of 30 October 2014 implementing Regulation (EC) No 452/2008 of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning the production and development of statistics on education and lifelong learning, as regards statistics on the participation of adults in lifelong learning and repealing Commission Regulation (EU) No 823/2010 Text with EEA relevance.

⁷⁴⁰ See Adult Education Survey (AES) methodology on Eurostat’s website.

⁷⁴¹ In the first edition of the Eurydice background report to the education and training monitor, issued by the Commission in 2015, the PISA tests are mentioned 21 times and the tables are almost all constructed starting from the results obtained in those tests: see European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice, *Structural indicators for monitoring education and training systems in Europe - 2015 : Eurydice background report to the education and training monitor 2015*, European Commission, 2015. This would be the case for all subsequent editions (in the 2022 Education and Training Monitor’s comparative report the number of citations reached 35: see European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *Education and training monitor 2022: comparative report*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022.

statistics⁷⁴², which is, moreover, used as the basis of Eurydice's work on *Key Data on Education in Europe*⁷⁴³ and on *Structural Indicators for Monitoring Education and Training Systems in Europe*⁷⁴⁴.

Continuing along the timeline of European initiatives in the educational field, in April 2008 one finds another fundamental step in the Recommendation of the Parliament and the Council *on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning*⁷⁴⁵. After clarifying that “this Recommendation does not replace or define national qualifications systems and/or qualifications”⁷⁴⁶, since, as it has been repeatedly reaffirmed, the provisions of the Treaties would not allow such action, definitions of knowledge⁷⁴⁷, skills⁷⁴⁸ and competence⁷⁴⁹ are given and eight levels are defined for each of them in terms of learning outcomes (the focus is definitively on the outputs of education and not on disciplinary inputs, exactly as occurred at the OECD level). For example: Level 8 for ‘Knowledge’ is given as “knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields”; Level 4 for ‘Skills’ involves “a range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study”; and Level 1 for ‘Competence’ is “work or study under direct supervision in a structured context”⁷⁵⁰. member states would have to use the EQF “as a reference tool to compare the qualification levels of the different qualifications systems and to promote both lifelong learning and equal opportunities in

⁷⁴² See UNESCO-OECD-Eurostat (UOE) joint data collection – methodology on Eurostat’s website.

⁷⁴³ See for example, Eurostat-Eurydice, *Key data on Education in Europe 2012*, p. 9.

⁷⁴⁴ From 2015 on, Eurydice would publish its reports in this new format, which would, however, continue to use the PISA test results as a point of reference. Take, for example, this statement from the 2015 report: “low achievement, defined as performing below Level 2 in the PISA test, continues to be a serious challenge across Europe. The latest PISA results from 2012 show that 22.1 % of European students had low achievement in mathematics, 17.8 % in reading, and 16.6 % in science” European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice, *Structural indicators for monitoring education and training systems in Europe - 2015: Eurydice background report to the education and training monitor 2015*, European Commission, 2015, p. 23.

⁷⁴⁵ See Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (Text with EEA relevance) (OJ C, C/111, 06.05.2008).

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid., (14).

⁷⁴⁷ “‘knowledge’ means the outcome of the assimilation of information through learning. Knowledge is the body of facts, principles, theories and practices that is related to a field of work or study. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, knowledge is described as theoretical and/or factual” Ibid., Annex I, (g).

⁷⁴⁸ “‘skills’ means the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) or practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments)” Ibid., Annex I, (h).

⁷⁴⁹ “‘competence’ means the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, competence is described in terms of responsibility and autonomy” Ibid., Annex I, (i).

⁷⁵⁰ Ibid., Annex II.

the knowledge-based society, as well as the further integration of the European labour market, while respecting the rich diversity of national education systems”; in short, these levels did not replace national certifications and qualifications but the States would have to take them into account and establish and make a correlation between their national qualifications framework and the EQF levels transparent and public by 2010, ensuring that by 2012 all certifications and diplomas contained clear references “by way of national qualifications systems, to the appropriate European Qualifications Framework level”⁷⁵¹.

2.4 Beyond Lisbon: Understanding a Failure, Renewing the Commitment

2010 was, as said above, the year by which the objectives set by the Lisbon Strategy should have been achieved. To understand to what extent Europe met these goals, it is helpful to consult the report produced by the European Parliament *The Lisbon Strategy 2000-2010. An analysis and evaluation of the methods used and results achieved*⁷⁵². First of all, when analysing the data presented in the report, one must bear in mind that the financial crisis that began in 2007-2008 produced an unexpected period of recession in Europe accompanied by a debt crisis that affected many countries, as well as having an impact, at the EU level, on the success of some of the projects conceived before that date⁷⁵³. The same report talks about the recession as a ‘conditioning factor’⁷⁵⁴ that limited the possibilities for spending and was also very worrying from the perspective of the risk it entailed for social cohesion⁷⁵⁵. However, even the results that had been achieved before this shock could not be described as satisfactory. In fact the tables presented in the overview show the trend of some indicators related to employment and social policy between 2001 and 2007, and reveal disappointing results. In particular,

⁷⁵¹ Ibid., p. 3.

⁷⁵² See European Parliament, Employment and Social Affairs, *The Lisbon Strategy 2000-2010, An analysis and evaluation of the methods used and the results achieved*, 2010.

⁷⁵³ This was despite the fact that the European Economic Recovery Plan of 2008 - the European response plan to the crisis - reiterated the topicality of the Lisbon challenges and the need to continue pursuing those objectives, and in fact proposed supporting medium- to long-term anti-cyclical reform measures and investment in the key challenges identified in the Lisbon Agenda. See COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, *A European Economic Recovery Plan*, Brussels, 26.11.2008 COM(2008) 800 final, p. 4 and p. 6.

⁷⁵⁴ European Parliament, *The Lisbon Strategy 2000-2010, An analysis and evaluation of the methods used and the results achieved*, p. 19.

⁷⁵⁵ After stating that “the latest figures from the Commission show a drop in employment of -1.3% in the EU during the first quarter of 2009, compared to the same quarter one year earlier” the report lists a series of spheres at risk because of the economic crisis, Ibid., p. 102.

the employment rate had increased, but did not reach the target of 70%, settling at 66% with significant differences within the EU, especially between the countries of the north - which often exceeded 70% - and those of the south with the new entrants, which were below 65% or even 60%; this differentiation was also found in the female employment rate, which reached 70% in the Scandinavian countries and was below 50% in Italy, Greece and Malta⁷⁵⁶. In addition, the percentage of early school leavers, which should have reached 10% in the EU, decreased from 19% in 2001 to 17% in 2007, but continued to be very high in several countries including Italy (even though there had been a very significant reduction which brought the total leaving rate down from 30% in 1997 to under 20%)⁷⁵⁷. The percentage of young people aged 20-24 who had completed at least upper secondary education should have reached 85% but was at only 78% by 2007, and here too there were significant differences, with the countries in southern Europe (particularly Spain, Portugal and Malta) emerging as the worst performers⁷⁵⁸. The percentage of the population aged 25-64 involved in lifelong learning courses, which should have reached 12.5%, was at 10%, with the new EU members among the worst performers, together with, once again, the southern European countries⁷⁵⁹. Lastly, R&D expenditure, which was supposed to be brought up to 3% of GDP, stopped at 1.91%, far below that of the United States and Japan (2.65% and 3.32% respectively), taken as point of reference⁷⁶⁰. Notwithstanding a generally positive trend in all of the indicators established as fundamental, the European Union had not, in short, succeeded in achieving the objectives it had set itself for 2010; but to this assessment one must add the need to focus on other issues such as environmental challenges, demographic evolution (already partially examined by the Lisbon Strategy, but ever more challenging) and the growth of inequalities, as well as the effects of the economic crisis mentioned above⁷⁶¹.

Reading this data, one can see why the Centre for European Reform's study, *The Lisbon Scorecard X*⁷⁶², published in March 2010, explicitly mentions the failure of the Strategy. This paper also gives a 'league table' of the EU countries aimed at showing the differences, some very large, in the

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

⁷⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 68.

⁷⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 69.

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 70.

⁷⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 71.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 113-115.

⁷⁶² See S. Tilford & P. Whyte, Centre for European Reform, *THE LISBON SCORECARD X The road to 2020*, March 2010.

achievement of the objectives, distinguishing both ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’. “Every EU member-state could do better. But Europe's economic prospects largely depend on the performance of five big countries: France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK. Together these five account for almost three-quarters of EU GDP. Germany is now the strongest performer among these bigger member-states, ranked 6th, having overtaken the UK, which has slipped to 8th. France has risen one place to 9th. These three countries perform strongly compared with the remaining two big economies, Spain and Italy. Spain remains in 19th place, while Italy has slid two places to 24th. These last two countries are classified as laggards”⁷⁶³. The judgment on Italy - which is found among the ‘villains’ in practically all of the summary boxes, from that on ICT, to that on GDP growth, through to modernizing social protection - is particularly negative: “Italy provides a graphic warning of what can happen to an economy that habitually postpones economic reforms”⁷⁶⁴. If Lisbon has failed, the paper says, it is primarily due to the limited ability of some countries to hold fast to their reform programmes; the objectives that were set should not, however, be abandoned: “developments since 2000 call for modifications to the Lisbon agenda, but they do not justify a root-and-branch overhaul of it”⁷⁶⁵. This was even truer after the economic crisis. However, what was no longer considered enough, was an overly generic approach that claimed to hold too many things together without having a scale of priorities and precise targets and, above all, soft governance based on the Open Method of Co-ordination, which, according to the authors of the paper, is essentially a simple “peer group review system”. They maintain that what is needed are mechanisms capable of ensuring that countries take their commitments seriously⁷⁶⁶. However, the paper argues that for the new strategy to work, there is no need to change the Treaties; and here comes the most interesting part of the paper from my perspective: the model to take a cue from, the paper says, is that of the OECD-PISA tests. In fact, it says, “the OECD's PISA tests [...] have arguably had a greater influence on countries' education policies than the EU's Stability and Growth Pact has had on their fiscal policies [...] One reason the OECD's PISA tests had such a galvanising effect was that their results were published, shocking many governments into action”. The paper says that each country's results and the related ‘rankings’ must be made transparent, and if the Commission is not able to ‘name and blame’, then a group of experts

⁷⁶³ Ibid., p. 7.

⁷⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

⁷⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 92.

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 94.

can do it, as long as what happens is visible and transparency can be used as an enforcement tool⁷⁶⁷. After all, as underlined by Wyplosz, the Commission had begun to produce precise progress reports, but was very soon “invited to be more diplomatic”, and the governments of member states, notwithstanding that the pressure of comparison could be felt within the European context, particularly that of the meetings between Heads of State, knowing how much resistance some reforms involve, preferred not to pursue them, not forgetting that “they are accountable to domestic voters”⁷⁶⁸, not to other governments or to European institutions.

While a very heated debate was developing about the failure of Lisbon, especially among the experts⁷⁶⁹, in its Conclusions, the European Council of May 2009 relaunched its active efforts by listing four objectives within the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (‘ET 2020’), that is to say: making lifelong learning and mobility a reality; improving the quality and efficiency of education and training; promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship; and enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training⁷⁷⁰.

And thus come the structuring of a new plan, proposed by President of the European Commission Barroso in 2010, and named, *Europe 2020 - A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive*

⁷⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 93.

⁷⁶⁸ See C. Wyplosz, *The failure of the Lisbon strategy*, Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR), 12 January 2010

⁷⁶⁹ The book *The EU's Lisbon Strategy: Evaluating Success and Understanding Failure* covers much of this debate. See P. Copeland & D. Papadimitriou (edited by), *The EU's Lisbon Strategy: Evaluating Success, Understanding Failure*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1a ed. 2012. In addition, according to Tausch (see A. Tausch, *The European Union's failed “Lisbon strategy”*, ‘Society and Economy’, Vol 32/1) the problem lies in the underlying theory that has resulted in the definition of indicators that often contradict each other. Whilst for Krcek (see J. Krcek, *Assessing the EU's 'Lisbon Strategy': Failures & Successes*, ‘Inquiries Journal/Student Pulse’ 5.09 (2013)) it is the output-oriented strategy, devoid, however, of truly effective tools to apply with the Member States apart from the peer pressure that is never really exercised by any state on another in order to avoid making enemies. Krcek also identifies the turning point of 2005 as problematic, as the moment when “the Strategy changed its aim from one in which economic growth was to be balanced with social cohesion to one in which economic growth was to create social cohesion. This radical shift from centre-left to centre-right ideology became the source of much ambiguity, undermining the consistency of the Strategy’s long-term holistic perspective”. Lastly, for Collignon, “the failure of the Lisbon Strategy is due to a collective action problem, whereby countries find it in their national interest not to pursue policies that would support the overall collective European good as long as everyone else played by the rules. But because the incentives are the same for all, none will make the efforts necessary for achieving the common interest”, S. Collignon, *The Lisbon strategy, macroeconomic stability and the dilemma of governance with governments; or why Europe is not becoming the world's most dynamic economy*, ‘International Journal of Public Policy’, Inderscience Enterprises Ltd, vol. 3(1/2), pages 72-99, 2008.

⁷⁷⁰ See Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (‘ET 2020’) (2009/C 119/02).

*growth*⁷⁷¹ which set some new (or renewed, as in the case of investment in R&D or the percentage of early school leavers) targets to be achieved within ten years⁷⁷²: 1) “75% of the population aged 20-64 should be employed”; 2) “3% of the EU's GDP should be invested in R&D”; 3) “the ‘20/20/20’ climate/energy targets should be met (including an increase to 30% of emissions reduction if the conditions are right)”; 4) “the share of early school leavers should be under 10% and at least 40% of the younger generation should have a tertiary degree”; 5) “20 million less people should be at risk of poverty”⁷⁷³. Changing course after the decisive shock from the economic crisis was very important and in order to do so it was necessary that each new European initiative (for the digital agenda as for the environment, and so on) was accompanied by complementary actions by the member states, aiming to progressively strengthen the single market being seen as a fundamental tool for enhancing the resilience of the European economy, vital for growth and employment. Alongside this, it would be essential to rationalize the funding programmes aimed at R&D, which were still too fragmented; this acknowledgment would lead to the creation of, for example, the Horizon 2020 programme, a European Commission instrument for supporting scientific research and innovation, endowed for the period 2014-2020 with a budget of €80 billion.

So, the objectives partially changed, but the method did not. In fact, even though the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) had been identified by various stakeholders as one of the main weaknesses of the Lisbon Strategy, “the key attributes of the OMC remain untouched: the Council is still in charge of monitoring progress within the individual policy areas, while other EU institutions and non-governmental actors stay very much on the margins. Furthermore, there is no intention for the publishing of league tables that would enhance the role of peer review”⁷⁷⁴. No visibility for rankings, and no regulatory enforcement. The efforts made in this second phase, although the fragilities highlighted when analysing the failure of Lisbon remained, would nevertheless yield better results.

⁷⁷¹ *EUROPE2020: A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth*, Brussels: European Commission, 2010.

⁷⁷² Three other numerical targets should be added to these, included in Annex I of the Conclusions of the Council of May 2009: 15% of adults should be participate in lifelong learning; the share of low-achieving 15-years olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15% [it mentions the results being measured by PISA tests]; at least 95% of children between 4 years old and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education. See Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (‘ET 2020’) (2009/C 119/02).

⁷⁷³ *EUROPE2020: A European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth*, p.3.

⁷⁷⁴ J. Krcek, *Assessing the EU's 'Lisbon Strategy': Failures & Successes*.

To give some significant examples, in 2020 the goal for the number of university graduates would finally be achieved, reaching 40.3%, while the target regarding early school leavers would be close (10.2%)⁷⁷⁵, as would the participation rate in early childhood education (94.8% compared to 95% target set)⁷⁷⁶. However, the differences between countries would continue to be very large; taking, as a reference, the three countries that will be analysed in the next chapter: Italy's percentage of early school leavers in 2020 would continue to be over 13%, and its graduates under 30%⁷⁷⁷, while in Finland the percentages would be 7.3% and 47.3% respectively⁷⁷⁸, and in Germany 10.3% and 35.5%⁷⁷⁹. Furthermore, the percentage of underachievement in PISA tests at the EU level would remain above 22% in Mathematics, Reading and Science, that is to say, several points above the desired 15%⁷⁸⁰.

In conclusion, separate from the results achieved, one can say that if the Lisbon Agenda had an impact, it was to Europeanize the approach to policy problems (albeit with varying degrees of success depending on the context), through soft governance consisting of "negotiation, persuasion and 'voluntary' agreed performance"⁷⁸¹, or in other words, I would say harmonizing without regulating. In the next chapter the effects that this approach has had on a 'latecomer' country like Italy, as well as on Finland and Germany, will be analysed, whilst in the conclusions of this paper I will address in greater detail the question of the legitimacy underlying all of the work of the European Union's institutions in this area, given the repeatedly referred to provisions of the Treaties.

⁷⁷⁵ See Eurostat newsrelease, 66/2020, 22 April 2020.

⁷⁷⁶ See COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS on achieving the European Education Area by 2025, Brussels, 30.9.2020 COM(2020) 625 final p. 2.

⁷⁷⁷ See European Commission, Education and Training Monitor 2020, Italy.

⁷⁷⁸ See European Commission, Education and Training Monitor 2020, Finland.

⁷⁷⁹ See European Commission, Education and Training Monitor 2020, Germany.

⁷⁸⁰ COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS on achieving the European Education Area by 2025, p. 2.

⁷⁸¹ M. Lawn & S. Grek, p. 78.

CHAPTER 3: The Influence of International Actors on Education Systems: Comparing Finland, Germany and Italy

Aiming to identify elements that reveal the actual influence that international stakeholders and tests have had or can have on educational systems, this chapter will conduct a comparative analysis using, as points of reference alongside Italy, two other European countries that differ greatly from each other in terms of their history, population size and culture, namely: Finland and Germany. Naturally this is not an arbitrary decision, but one based on the specularity that characterizes the experiences of the education systems of these two countries since 2001, that is to say, as seen in the previous chapter, since the year the first PISA test results were published.

Finland had, at that time, just gone through a particularly bitter debate about its *peruskoulu*, its comprehensive basic school, which, as it will be seen, is the most important and distinctive element of the country's education system. As some national surveys conducted by the National Board of Education (since 1991 the Finnish National Agency for Education, today *Opetushallitus*)⁷⁸² and others entrusted to supranational bodies such as the IEA⁷⁸³, had brought to light the less than exciting performance of Finnish students, public opinion, stakeholders and politicians wondered whether the time had not come to overhaul the comprehensive school system, responsible for producing a levelling mechanism, and therefore, for neglecting the talents of individual students. The publication of the first PISA results burst forcefully into the middle of this debate: Finnish students were in fact among the top performers in Reading (first)⁷⁸⁴, Mathematics (fourth)⁷⁸⁵ and Science (third)⁷⁸⁶. Thus, the comprehensive school system was 'released from the dock' and became, on the contrary, a model to be studied and exported⁷⁸⁷.

⁷⁸² See Finnish National Agency for Education website.

⁷⁸³ See M. O. Martin et al., TIMSS 1999 International Science Report, IEA, p. 32 and I.V.S. Mullis et al., TIMSS 1999 International Mathematics Report, IEA, p. 32.

⁷⁸⁴ OECD, *Knowledge and Skills for Life. FIRST RESULTS FROM PISA 2000*, p. 8.

⁷⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

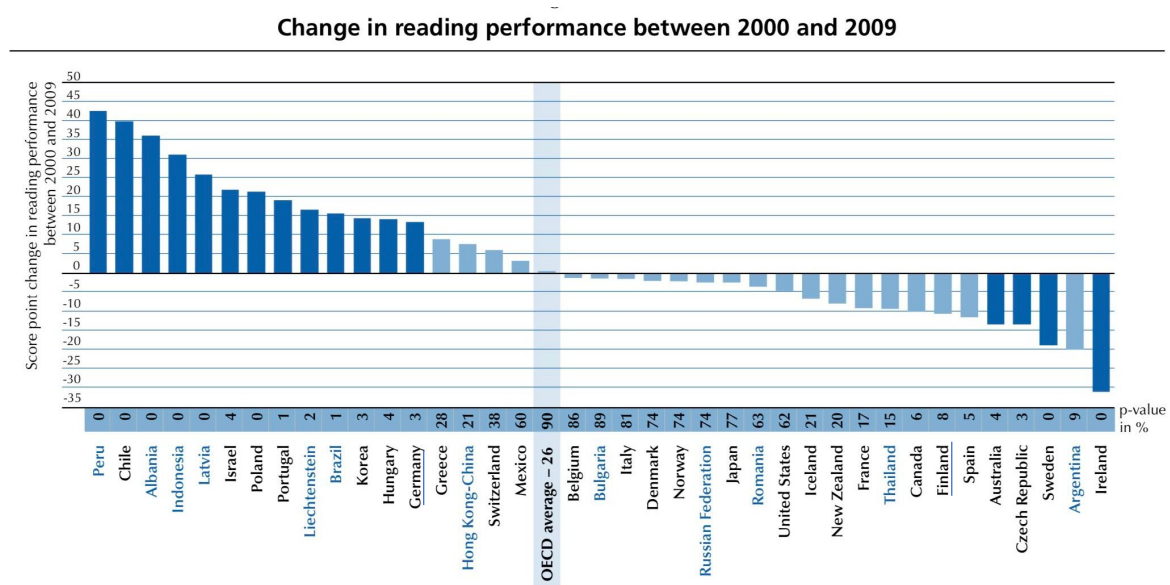
⁷⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

⁷⁸⁷ See A.K. Ahonen., *Finland: Success Through Equity: The Trajectories in PISA Performance*. In N. Crato (Edited by), *Improving a Country's Education: PISA 2018 Results in 10 Countries*, (pp. 121-136). Springer, 2021, p. 132.

In contrast, in Germany, where the national educational model tended to be viewed as one of the most solid elements of the country, the poor results that emerged in 2001 caused what many observers defined as an out-and-out shock, which opened a discussion - in part, according to some, already in the making⁷⁸⁸ - on the need to reform the system. According to the OECD, this shock, by acting as a wake-up call, marked the origin of the reforms that were subsequently implemented and of the consequent improvements in student performances⁷⁸⁹.

What is even more interesting about the analysis of these two cases, from the perspective of this research, is what happens in the OECD surveys between 2000 and 2009, when Germany's rise in the league tables and average results begins to strengthen, while the concurrent decrease in Finland (which nevertheless remained very high in the overall rankings), heralded, as it will be seen, extensive debate⁷⁹⁰. Figure 5 shows, by way of example, the changes in PISA test performance in Reading during that period.

Fig.5⁷⁹¹



⁷⁸⁸ See for example M. Rautalin, *PISA and the criticism of Finnish education: justifications used in the national media debate*, 'Studies in Higher Education', 2018, pp. 4-5.

⁷⁸⁹ See OECD-PISA website about the "Germany's PISA shock".

⁷⁹⁰ See OECD, *PISA 2009 Results: What Students Know and Can Do – Student Performance in Reading, Mathematics and Science* (Volume I), 2010, p. 155.

⁷⁹¹ OECD, *PISA 2009 Results: Learning Trends: Changes in Student Performance Since 2000* (Volume V), 2010, p. 39.

The comparative analysis proposed in the following sections deals with the events linked to each country separately, not wishing to inappropriately juxtapose elements that do not particularly lend themselves – this is my opinion - to direct comparison. As Simola et al. maintain, in fact, when comparing there is a risk of making a list of similarities and differences that has no theoretical meaning, whereas the aim here is rather to demonstrate how supranational agents are capable, even in cases that are very different from each other, of influencing a key element of national identity like a country's education system. In fact, a comparison made without a solid theoretical basis facilitate rankings but “blur the processes and contexts”⁷⁹². As such, the approach employed here is based on an analysis of the context within which the effects of the international factors examined, and of the PISA tests in particular, unfold (bearing in mind the importance that, as it has been seen, the European Union attaches to indicators and the results of these tests), and the comparison will therefore result in an evaluation of this effect on the different educational systems. Aware that “nothing happens overnight”⁷⁹³, an attempt will be made to examine, through not only the analyses of scholars, but also the political and media debate, the characteristics of the educational systems under review, whilst clarifying from the start my view that it is not possible, unless one wants to take an ahistorical approach, to identify the cause of certain changes or results as one single factor.

Section 1: Finnish Miracle or Finnish Lessons?

1.1 The Finnish Education System

As it has been already said, an education system does not originate or develop in a vacuum⁷⁹⁴, having very close ties to the context it is in, on which it depends and on which it has a direct influence. This is particularly true for Finland, both because of its geographical location – so important that Simola argues that “due to its geographical and geopolitical location, Finland has always been a border

⁷⁹² H. Simola et al., *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*, London: Routledge, 2017, p. 16. According to these authors, in the case of PISA tests as well, there is a risk of making comparisons that are fine for making league tables but do not take adequate account of the context and therefore end up confusing things instead of shedding light on the causes of the success or lack of success in the tests of students from individual countries, Ibid., pp. 6-7.

⁷⁹³ G. H. Sahlgren, *Real Finnish Lessons. The true story of an education superpower*, Centre for Policies Studies, Surrey: 4Print, 2015, p. 11.

⁷⁹⁴ See G.H. Sahlgren, p. 2.

country between the west and the east”⁷⁹⁵ - and because of the particularly tumultuous historical events that affected it between the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s⁷⁹⁶.

Furthermore, “Finland has historically been poorer and less educated than its Scandinavian neighbours”⁷⁹⁷ and one can say that the second half of the 20th century in the country was dedicated to closing this gap as quickly as possible. The element of greatest interest for the purposes of this research is the fact that “this trajectory [...] ensured a different societal and educational culture, which is often ignored in the international debate”⁷⁹⁸, given that the Finnish educational system itself is a consequence of its historical roots and a product of post-war reconstruction⁷⁹⁹. The laborious construction of a national identity and its defence, in which education would play a very important role, is actually a fundamental element in the recent history of this country.

Post-war Finland was an underdeveloped and poor nation, 70% of whose population lived in rural areas and 60% worked in agriculture and forestry (in the same period in Sweden and Denmark, for example, 30% of the population was employed in these sectors)⁸⁰⁰. Therefore, the industrial and post-

⁷⁹⁵ H. Simola, *The Finnish miracle of PISA: historical and sociological remarks on teaching and teacher education*, ‘Comparative Education’, 41:4, 2005, 455-470, p. 457.

⁷⁹⁶ Finland was part of Sweden until 1809 when, following the Swedish defeat in the Finnish War against Russia, it was ceded – in the Treaty of Hamina/Fredrikshamn - to the Tsar's empire while remaining relatively autonomous as the Grand Duchy of Finland; in 1906 Finland was able to form its own national parliament, the elections for which were based on universal suffrage, guaranteeing women full rights to vote and stand as candidates (see E. Aho et al., *Policy Development and Reform Principles of Basic and Secondary Education in Finland since 1968*, Washington, DC: World Bank, 2006, p. 17) – one of the first countries in the world to do so. Then, in 1917, taking advantage of the chaos generated by the October Revolution, Finland declared its independence, which was recognized the following year by the now Bolshevik Russia. However, the country was immediately swept into a very bloody civil war that caused the deaths of more than 30,000 people of a total population of about three million. The war was fought between the so-called ‘Reds’, pro-Russian communists and social democrats, who had managed to take power in Helsinki and in the south, and the conservative ‘Whites’, supported by German troops. Three quarters of the dead belonged to the ranks of the former, who were defeated, and the vast majority of these were not killed in battle, but were executed or died of diseases, famine, and violence in prison camps. These events had an enormous psychological impact throughout Finland, so much so that they can be viewed as a fully-fledged “collective trauma” (H. Simola, *The Finnish miracle of PISA*, p. 457). Then, between 1939 and 1945, Finland faced three more wars. The first – the Winter War - saw the country fighting alone against the Soviet Union, which had just signed a non-aggression pact with Germany, and resulted in the loss of a total of almost 25,000 Finnish lives in just three months and of various territories claimed by Stalin. Then, the Finns in 1941 participated, in order to recover the previously lost territories, in what is nationally called the Continuation War, that is to say, in the attack against the Soviet Union, which failed, however. Concerned on other fronts, the Soviets did not take up the Finnish question until 1944, when with the armistice, in addition to various reparation clauses, they forced Finland to declare war on the Germans, who still had several outposts in the country, and to thus enter a new conflict (the Lapland war) which ended in April 1945, with a death toll of another 3,000 people.

⁷⁹⁷ G.H. Sahlgren, p. V.

⁷⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

⁷⁹⁹ See H. Simola et al., *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*, p. 25.

⁸⁰⁰ See G.H. Sahlgren, p. 30.

industrial transition arrived very late but was, because of this delay, extraordinarily rapid. “While it took Norway and Sweden about 80 and 50 years respectively to reduce the shares of their agrarian labour forces from 50 per cent to 15 per cent, it took Finland only 20”⁸⁰¹. The rapidity of these changes would make Finland a very atypical country, one where different systems coexisted in the same historical moment in a very particular manner: “the Finnish welfare state [also created later than in the other Nordic states, but developed much more rapidly] could be seen as a product of this historical turbulence: on the one hand industrial and individualist, and on another agrarian and collectivist”⁸⁰². This second aspect, being more collectivist, was also dependent on the Russian influence⁸⁰³, considering first the long stay in the empire and then the existence of important relationships⁸⁰⁴. This story of “occupation, war, and poverty had [...] given rise to a unique word for [Finnish peculiar] attitudes: *sisu*. The word does not properly translate into other languages, but it roughly means ‘determination’, ‘inner strength’, ‘resoluteness’, or ‘perseverance’ during times of adversity”⁸⁰⁵. Whilst the post-war period was therefore laborious from the reconstruction perspective and characterized by great economic transformations, thanks to this very particular kind of ‘determination’, it also gave life and room to new ideas and new social policies including, in particular, as it will be seen more fully later, “the idea of equal educational opportunities”⁸⁰⁶.

⁸⁰¹ Ibid., p. 30.

⁸⁰² H. Simola et al., *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*, p. 27.

⁸⁰³ During the Cold War, Finland remained tied to Soviet power (the Finnish-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance was signed in 1948), so much so that the term ‘Finlandization’ would be used in a part of the international arena to indicate a great power’s ability to influence the policies of a small country (see G.H. Sahlgren, p. 23) However, Finland's claim to neutrality would always be very strong, even in moments of heightened political pressure from its giant neighbour (See I. Suominen, *Finland, the European Union and Russia*, ‘The World Today’, Vol. 50, No. 1, 1994, pp. 12-14, p. 12) and the Finns “rejected the inference that Finland was in any way a satellite country or included in the Soviet sphere of influence. Whatever Finland did, they responded, was done by choice and because it was the wisest policy for a small country living next to a super-power to pursue and not as the result of coercion” (R. Rinehart, *Finland's European Vocation*, ‘Scandinavian Studies’, Vol. 74, No. 3, The Scandinavian Way to Europe, 2002, pp. 427-440, p. 429).

⁸⁰⁴ H. Simola et al. in *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*, p.27, even say: “It is no exaggeration to say that Eastern elements are in evidence throughout Finland, from its administrative traditions to its genetic heredity. The fact that Finnish Social Democracy retains an Eastern authoritarian, or even totalitarian, flavour, compared with the versions in other Nordic countries, is just one indication. At least heuristically, there is nothing strange in finding Finland aligned with nations such as Korea and Japan in some international comparisons”.

⁸⁰⁵ G.H. Sahlgren, p. 32.

⁸⁰⁶ P. Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons: what can the world learn from educational change in Finland?*, New York: Teachers College Press, 2011, p. 14.

In the period of the so-called Second Republic, which ran from the close of the Second World War to the end of the 1980s, the country underwent very rapid industrial expansion, which was in part sustained also by its privileged relations with the Soviet Union, as these brought particular advantages in the sphere of foreign trade⁸⁰⁷. Then, with the collapse of the USSR, Finland immediately started negotiations to join the European Union⁸⁰⁸ (a free-trade agreement has already been signed with the EEC in 1973) and therefore a new phase opened, commonly defined as the Third Republic. However, this phase of openness coincided with a very deep recession that involved all of Europe and was, in Finland, compounded by the difficulties of opening up a small country to globalization and, above all, by the loss of the advantages of bilateral relations with Russia, together with a huge banking crisis, that could only be compared to that of the Great Depression of the 1930s⁸⁰⁹. However, Finland's recovery in the second half of the '90s, in part driven by the expansion of the colossus Nokia, "surfing the first wave of digitalisation"⁸¹⁰, was, to the say the least, surprising: "annual productivity in enterprises grew by 4 per cent, and total productivity by 5 per cent in the years 1993–1997"⁸¹¹. Politics, meanwhile, did not stand by: 1st January 1995 saw the country's formal accession to the European Union, after the signing of the Accession Treaty in June 1994⁸¹², and, a few years later, in 2002, came the adoption of the single European currency, the Euro. Fully integrating into the European Union was seen as the only way for a small country like Finland to avoid marginalisation after the collapse of the USSR⁸¹³.

The very rapid economic recovery Finland experienced has led some to argue that even the heavy crisis of the early 1990s actually had a positive effect on the country as "the depression created a general 'consciousness of crisis' that made even the most radical cuts and savings acceptable and easy to realise without any political resistance. In other words, the depression could be seen as

⁸⁰⁷ H. Simola et al. *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*, p. 30.

⁸⁰⁸ Until then viewed as "out of the question". See I. Suominen, p.12.

⁸⁰⁹ "In the period 1990–1993, GNP went down 7 per cent, the unemployment rate increased from 3 to 16 per cent, and unemployment among 15- to 24-year-olds increased from zero to 34 per cent" H. Simola et al, *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*, p. 31.

⁸¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁸¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁸¹² In 1973 Finland signed a free trade agreement with the European Economic Community, but since then relations had remained purely economic in nature.

⁸¹³ "The historical record might suggest that Finland's quick transition from a non-aligned Nordic neutral to an "Ultra-European" core member state is another example of its ability to recognize the realities of a situation and adapt to them" R. Rinheart, p. 430.

Heaven's gift to those aiming to reconstruct the Finnish welfare state and to make it a model for the new globalised market economy driven by international actors such as the OECD, the EU and the World Bank”⁸¹⁴. In short, Finland, having brilliantly overcome this latest crisis as well, was becoming a model and soon its education system would be viewed throughout the world as the most important element of that model, one to take as an example.

Moving on to analyse the Finnish education system, as showed in Figure 6, it consists of several levels. The first is early childhood education and care (*varhaiskasvatus*), which goes from 0 to 6 years old, is recognized as a universal right but is not free, and is provided partly by municipalities and partly by the private sector, although there is a National Core Curriculum which sets the guidelines and essential elements, in accordance with the directions from the Finnish National Agency for Education⁸¹⁵. In the last year of attendance, it is combined, for about half of the school time (minimum 700 hours a year, about 4 hours a day), with pre-primary education (*esiopetus*), which, in contrast, is compulsory, free and run by the municipalities, who are responsible for it. Comprehensive school education (the already mentioned *peruskoulu*) then begins, taking students from age 7 to 16, for a total of 9 years. In this phase, education is compulsory and free, and some essential services, such as meals, transport, learning materials, and health and welfare services, are also provided for students free of charge. There is a National Core Curriculum which contains the essential references regarding the competencies that students need to acquire and the basic areas that need to be taught, but leaves schools and teachers considerable autonomy regarding methods, the overall organization of work, and learning materials, for example, regarding the use of technologies. Upper secondary education, for 17- to 19-year-olds, takes place in general or vocational upper secondary institutions, and is also free, as are almost all study materials. In 2021 the age for compulsory education was raised to 18 or to the end of the secondary education path⁸¹⁶.

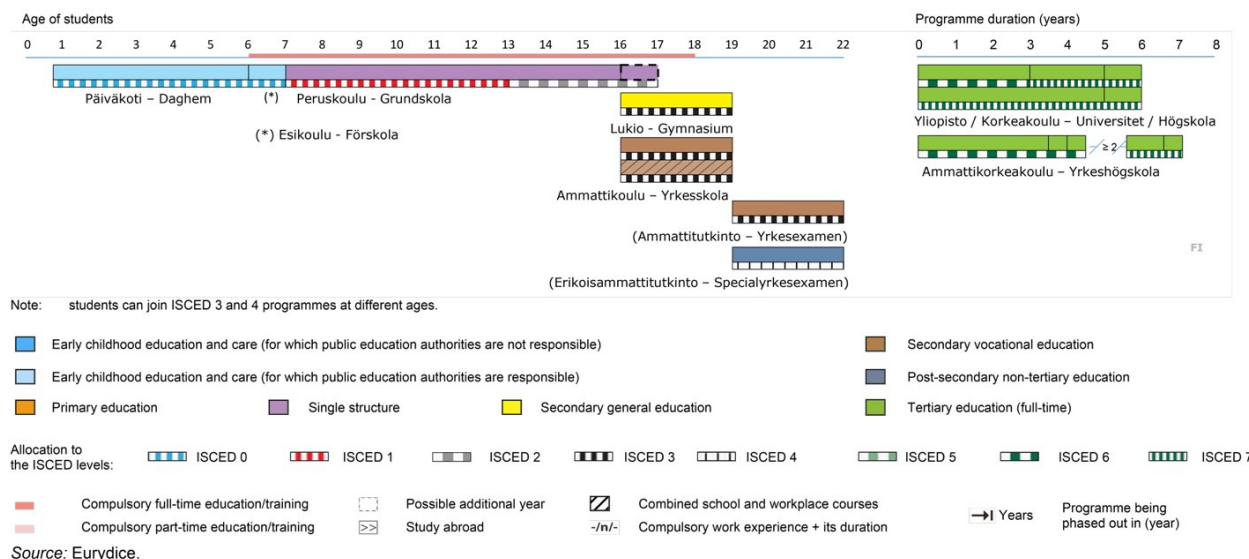
⁸¹⁴ H. Simola et al. *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*, p. 32.

⁸¹⁵ See Finnish National Agency for Education, National core curriculum for early childhood education and care.

⁸¹⁶ These information have been taken from the factsheet prepared for the European Commission by Eurydice on the Finnish education system, updated in June 2023. See Eurydice, Finland, Overview.

Fig.6⁸¹⁷

Finland – 2022/2023



Finland introduced compulsory education very late, only in 1921, and at that time set it at a total of six years, whilst Denmark, Sweden and Norway had already taken this step in the course of the 19th century. Furthermore “primary schooling expanded slowly even after the law came into force, and compulsory education was not fully functional and did not cater to all children across the whole country and among all social groups until just before the Second World War”⁸¹⁸. Even by 1950, only 27% of Finnish eleven-year-olds, after the compulsory years, enrolled in the ‘grammar schools’, which consisted of five years of middle school plus three years of high school, with an alternative being the ‘civic schools’, which lasted two or three years, offered by most Finnish municipalities, only the largest of which also provided technical and vocational education institutions⁸¹⁹. The system of comprehensive schools, intended to unify these diverse paths, was, as it will be seen, only developed in the 1970s, but the Finns’ distinctively very rapid acceleration – as rapid as the industrial and post-industrial transition had been – towards mass schooling would create an enormous gap in the basic education between the country’s generations, in fact, one of the largest in Europe; in 2017 Simola et al. sought to exemplify this fact when they wrote that “whereas almost 70 percent of the

⁸¹⁷ European Commission, Eurydice website, Finland Overview.

⁸¹⁸ H. Simola et al., *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*, p. 34.

⁸¹⁹ P. Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons*, p. 15.

younger generation nowadays aspire to a higher-education degree, in their grandparents' generation about the same proportion obtained the full elementary-school certificate”⁸²⁰. It is precisely this apparently hand in hand relationship between economic growth, social development and mass schooling that would lead Finns to develop an enormous trust in education⁸²¹, or rather, a trust in education’s ability to generate opportunities and wealth: “this rare conjunction created a strong collective experience of causality between progress in formal education and simultaneous social advancement”⁸²² and made Finns believe that education has a direct impact on well-being and economic growth⁸²³.

Another key element to take into consideration, following some scholars’ analysis, linked to the context that have been briefly described above, is the Russian influence on the Finnish education system. An influence that took various forms. Firstly, it was a question - at least in the initial phase of post-World War II period - of a form of control over learning materials that was difficult to escape⁸²⁴. Alongside this, such an influence can also be sensed in the overall school structure, which was essentially hierarchical and very much based on recognition of authority and on obedience⁸²⁵. Lastly, in a different sense, but somehow connected to a resistance to the attempted Russification of education and to the need to defend Finnish national identity, there is also the role of teachers, and the respect that they have as the pillar of the protection of national culture - Sahlgren goes so far as to say that “in a historical perspective [...] teachers have been the Finnish nation's backbone and protector”⁸²⁶ – which is linked to the relationship with first the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union. It was in fact the relationship with this giant that led Finns to feel the need to defend their distinctiveness, and education has always been seen as an essential tool in this cultural battle.

The development of the Finnish education system after the Second World War can be viewed as three phases that coincide with those of economic development, as Pasi Sahlberg argues in his *Finnish Lessons*, a text re-presented in several editions (*Finnish Lessons 2.0* and *Finnish Lessons 3.0*) in order

⁸²⁰ H. Simola et al., *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*, p. 34.

⁸²¹ Ibid., p. 47.

⁸²² Ibid., p. 36.

⁸²³ See E. Aho et al., p. 10.

⁸²⁴ “Finland went as far as to allow the USSR veto power over the learning material in schools and teacher training institutions” G.H. Sahlgren p. 23.

⁸²⁵ See G.H. Sahlgren p. 40. Simola recognises this aspect too, talking about an “authoritarian, obedient and collectivist mentality” H. Simola, *The Finnish miracle of PISA*, p. 457.

⁸²⁶ G.H. Sahlgren p. 23.

to give an account of what the world can learn in the field of education from the success of a country like Finland. The first phase ran from 1945 to 1970, when the transition to an industrial society started and the problem of how to ensure higher and better-quality education for everyone began to be posed. As such, from 1945, the Primary School Curriculum Committee started to shift attention from syllabuses, as per the German model, to the description of educational goals, processes and evaluation. The following year, a second committee, the Education System Committee, established the need to connect the different levels of education in a more organic manner, proposing increasing the length of compulsory education to eight years, but maintaining the clear separation between school and vocational training. Whilst, as it has been seen, two years of civic school were added to primary education as an alternative to grammar schools, which were accessed through strict selection, the debate continued in the 1950s without any other legislative changes. In 1956 a third committee was created, the School Program Committee, which in its recommendations, published in 1959, anticipated all of the elements of the reforms of the 1970s, proposing the unification of the various basic schools into a single compulsory comprehensive school lasting nine years. However, it was not then possible to build a real political consensus around this proposal and the creation of the comprehensive school had to wait a few more years. The proposal, reworked by the National Board of General Education - the Finnish education agency, subordinate to the Ministry of Education - reached parliament in November 1963, obtaining 123 votes in favour and 68 against following a rather bitter debate⁸²⁷. Thus began the first experiments, which served to dispel various doubts⁸²⁸, and in 1968 the actual legislation was passed as the School System Act. In 1970, the National Board of General Education approved the Curriculum Committee's proposal as the basis of the national curriculum divided into two parts, principles and syllabus, whilst each municipality was called upon to clarify its methods for implementing the reform in its area of responsibility⁸²⁹. Then in 1972, the Ministry of Education ordered the gradual application of the new comprehensive school curriculum to all schools in the country⁸³⁰. Thus was the *peruskoulu* born - thanks also to the precious support of the teachers' unions (FPSTA), which had long been in favour of the reform - that is to say, the Finnish comprehensive school which would, in the space of thirty years, become a case study across the

⁸²⁷ See P. Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons*, pp. 17-20.

⁸²⁸ See E. Aho et al., p. 37.

⁸²⁹ See *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁸³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

world. This also marked the end of the system based on two parallel tracks, according to which, at the age of 11 or 12, students were divided into two very different tracks (grammar schools and civic schools), a division which in effect determined students' academic and professional future from their childhood; in reality, even within this new unified school, divisions into ability groups would remain (which were, effectively, divisions into social class groups), and this would only be overhauled in the 1980s⁸³¹. The central position of the comprehensive school, which will be discussed again when analysing the Finnish success in the PISA tests, is due to the fact that it is “not only a system [...] It is also a matter of pedagogical philosophy and practice. An intrinsic part of this philosophy is the principle of equity, on which Finnish education policy has been largely premised. Efforts have accordingly been made to provide all population groups and regions of the country with equal educational opportunities”⁸³².

Completing the implementation of the reform would actually take some time, as its gradual application, from 1972 to 1978, started from the northern areas of the country, where the educational structures were less developed⁸³³, and consequently reform was “evolutionary rather than revolutionary”⁸³⁴. This process, which lasted several years, is called the Comprehensive School Reform⁸³⁵ and is commonly associated with the aforementioned School System Act of 1968, which is therefore seen as the key law of the Finnish education system.

The second phase, which partially overlaps with the first, ran from 1965 to 1990 and was characterized by the implementation of three major reforms: the one that has just been seen (that is to say, the School System Act), the Teacher Education Reform (1973-1979), and the General Syllabus and Degree Reform in Higher Education (1977-1980)⁸³⁶. In order for the new comprehensive school to operate at its best, teacher training needed to be reviewed, in part because there were different levels of training between primary school teachers, grammar school teachers and civic school teachers, which, at this point, made harmonization indispensable⁸³⁷. Specifically, primary school

⁸³¹ Ibid., p. 43.

⁸³² J. Välijärvi et al., *The Finnish success in Pisa and the reasons behind it: PISA 2003*, 2nd edition, Jyväskylä: Koulutuksen tutkimuslaitos, 2007, p. 38. On the same lines from E. Aho et al. when they say: “Good school for all, not for some, is the core value that drives education in Finland”, p. 2.

⁸³³ See E. Aho et al., p. 45.

⁸³⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

⁸³⁵ See H. Simola, *The Finnish miracle of PISA*, p. 461.

⁸³⁶ Ibid.

⁸³⁷ See P. Sahlberg *Finnish Lessons* p. 23.

teachers up to that time had been trained in so-called teacher training colleges; from then on, however, university-level training would be required for all teachers⁸³⁸. The intersection of this reform with the one for universities, the third of those listed above, would make Finland the first country in the world where, starting from 1979 - and having abolished the Bachelor's degree (which would only return with the Bologna process) - all teachers, including primary school teachers, would be required to hold a Master's degree⁸³⁹. Another innovation concerning teachers, starting in 1972, was the introduction in their national contract of a few days of compulsory training each year⁸⁴⁰, which would support the continuous training of teachers and thereby further raise the level of their competencies. This reform had the merit of making the teaching profession, already seen as very important, even more attractive, and of further increasing the social respect given to teachers and, therefore, their authority, as well as their job satisfaction and commitment to work⁸⁴¹.

In the educational sphere, the 1980s were a period for Finland “that challenged conventional beliefs, searched for innovation and increased trust in schools and their abilities to find the best ways to raise the quality of student learning”⁸⁴². One of the elements that generated the most discussion in this period was the advent of new technologies and therefore the impact that ICT would or should have on education, which led teachers themselves to diversify their teaching methods, an area where they enjoyed full autonomy. As mentioned above, in the first version of *peruskoulu*, classes streamed by ability still existed; such was the political consensus regarding the need to promote equality through schools that, when it was decided in 1982 to definitively remove the distinctions that resulted in the exclusion of a great number of children from better quality education, only six MPs cast an opposing vote⁸⁴³. These years also saw a decision to address the reform of the upper secondary school as well, with a particular desire to make vocational education more competitive and attractive; there were various reasons for doing so, starting from industry’s need for better trained workers, through to the desire to further reduce inequalities, given that the difference in status of general upper secondary education and vocational education produced differentiations between students that were even greater than had previously been the case with the differentiation at the lower level before the comprehensive

⁸³⁸ H. Simola et al., *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*, p. 36

⁸³⁹ See A.K. Ahonen, p. 132.

⁸⁴⁰ See E. Aho et al., p. 49.

⁸⁴¹ See H. Simola, *The Finnish miracle of PISA*, p. 463.

⁸⁴² P. Sahlberg, *Finnish Lessons*, p. 35.

⁸⁴³ See H. Simola et al., *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*, p. 36.

schools. As far as general upper education was concerned, therefore, the new reform set out to give schools greater autonomy and flexibility⁸⁴⁴. In any case, both pathways had to ensure equal access to university⁸⁴⁵.

The third and final phase of the list proposed by Sahlberg also overlaps with the previous one and runs from 1985 to the present day (or, better, to 2011, the year the first edition of *Finnish Lessons* was published). The 1990s were, in particular, a period of “improvement through Networking and Self-Regulation” and the period that saw the implementation of what was, according to the author, the most important reform after the Comprehensive School Reform, that is to say, the National Curriculum Reform of 1994, which encouraged schools to collaborate with each other, giving the municipalities an ever more active role; this networking work then culminated in the Aquarium Project, which lasted until 1999, whose goal was to transform schools into active learning communities capable of exchanging experiences and improving themselves through this exchange, combining traditional methods with a completely new form of social networking⁸⁴⁶.

Simola et al. argue that “among the major changes that were brought about on the primary and secondary levels during the 1990s, the following four stand out: the introduction of free school choice, the build-up of the extensive evaluation system, the imposition of budget cuts and the moving of the decision-making power to the organizer of schooling, i.e., the municipalities”⁸⁴⁷. To better understand the nature of the changes of this historical period, one must once again refer to the context they took place in. In 1987 – just few years before the collapse of the USSR - the conservatives of the National Coalition Party won the position of Prime Minister for the first time since the Second World and - after 20 years of the centre-left parties’ unchallenged dominion over of the Ministry of Education (generally entrusted to the centre) and the National Board of Education (guided by the Social Democrats) - the right would dictate the political line in this area for the next ten years⁸⁴⁸. The importance of this change emerged particularly when “Prime Minister Holkeri gave an historic address in which he redefined the central concept of Finnish education policy thus far: people were

⁸⁴⁴ See E.Aho et al., p. 48.

⁸⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 80.

⁸⁴⁶ See P. Sahlberg, *Finnish lessons*, pp. 35-36.

⁸⁴⁷ H. Simola et al., *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*, p. 45.

⁸⁴⁸ See H. Simola et al., *Quality assurance and evaluation (QAE) in Finnish compulsory schooling: a national model or just unintended effects of radical decentralisation?*, ‘Journal of Education Policy’, 24:2, 163-178, 2009, p. 167.

different in terms of capacity, and equality meant the right of every pupil to receive education that corresponded to his/her prerequisites and expectations rather than the delivery of universal *Bildung* for everybody regardless of socio-cultural background. It is clear that this definition refers to equity rather than equality”⁸⁴⁹. It was a real paradigm shift: equity, and no longer equality, which was evidently interpreted as a synonym for levelling. A belief that everyone's talents should be developed by considering the individual in their own right and not as a function of society. This paradigm shift corresponded to the vigorous introduction of elements new to the educational sphere, “such as ‘decentralised and consumer-based accountability’, ‘results-based public funding’ and ‘self-responsible individual learning’”⁸⁵⁰. The influence of New Public Management (NPM)⁸⁵¹ was clear, as was that of the school of thought which holds that the efficiency of public administration has to be implemented in accordance with business practices, introducing new and more exigent evaluation mechanisms, capable of measuring and therefore improving performance⁸⁵². This new model also brought with it a change in the governance of the school system, that is to say, the decision to decentralize further, to favour greater flexibility and choice: “in the end, the Act on Central Government Transfers to Local Government (Law 707/1992) and the Local Government Act (Law 365/1995) radically increased local autonomy and strengthened the judicial position of the municipalities”⁸⁵³. One element to keep in mind in order to understand the distinctive nature of what happened in Finland in the 1990s, is the coming together of several factors at the same time; the emergence of a decidedly more liberal ideological approach than in the past, which followed the collapse of the USSR, actually coincided with a very deep economic depression that, as it has been seen, hit Finland right at the beginning of the decade. The business-minded approach and decentralization were particularly beneficial because they facilitated the implementation of the savings and cuts necessitated by the heavy economic crisis. However, with regard to evaluating performance, a key element of the NPM approach, Finland continued to be a very distinct case in the educational field. In fact, the choice did not fall on centralized and standardized evaluation systems

⁸⁴⁹ H. Simola et al., *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*, p. 40.

⁸⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 44.

⁸⁵¹ See V. Yliaska, *New Public Management as a Response to the Crisis of the 1970s: The Case of Finland, 1970–1990*. ‘Contemporary European History’, 24(3), 435–459, 2015.

⁸⁵² It will be seen that, in reality, as far as schools were concerned, evaluation would be structured in a very particular way and without standardized tests or performance rankings.

⁸⁵³ H. Simola et al., *Quality assurance and evaluation (QAE) in Finnish compulsory schooling*, p. 168.

such as national tests⁸⁵⁴, but rather on so-called Quality Assurance and Evaluation (QAE)⁸⁵⁵, in favour of which all the other forms of monitoring the work of teachers were effectively eliminated, such as, for example, the “class diaries in which the teacher recorded what was taught in each lesson. The only remaining control mechanism was the minimum number of lessons to be taught in each subject in each school, and the national curriculum framework”⁸⁵⁶. There was therefore a move from planning to ex post evaluation, and this evaluation took place through self-assessments and with a central role being played by the municipalities (at least until 2009, when there would be a return to centralization), which were in turn subjected to the evaluation of the National Board of Education. This system would be formalized in the New Basic Education Act of 1999, which in Section 21 devotes ample room to the evaluation of education; Paragraph 4⁸⁵⁷ makes provision for the results of evaluations being made public, but for Finland this has never meant the production of rankings for schools, teachers or students⁸⁵⁸ because, as already stated, the purpose of evaluation it is not to check or to sanction, but to develop the education system and improve the conditions for learning⁸⁵⁹. As such, evaluation is, first and foremost, used by those in charge of education to understand which elements should be leveraged in order to improve, and not by parents or students to choose their school. This is all the more true because the New Basic Education Act, whilst opening up to a minimum of flexibility regarding the right to choose a comprehensive school other than the one closest to one's place of residence, also greatly limits this possibility by giving the municipalities the right to prioritize the enrolment of students who live in that area (bearing in mind that the municipalities must also pay the costs of transport, this being free for students, one can understand how diffuse exercising this right would be, and therefore, how limited the real possibility of choice)⁸⁶⁰. In this climate of decentralization, some clashes also developed between ALFRA (Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities) and central institutions such as the National Board of Education, which was increasingly the object of heavy criticism⁸⁶¹; the upshot of these

⁸⁵⁴ See P. Sahlberg, *PISA in Finland : an education miracle or an obstacle to change?*, ‘CEPS journal [online]’ 2011 Vol. 1, no. 3, p. 119–140, 2011, p. 132.

⁸⁵⁵ See H. Simola et al, *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case* p. 67.

⁸⁵⁶ H. Simola, *The Finnish miracle of PISA*, p. 465.

⁸⁵⁷ See Basic Education Act, L.628/1998.

⁸⁵⁸ Rankings were opposed by practically the entire political class and supported only by the industrial associations, see H. Simola et al, *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*, p. 62.

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 60.

⁸⁶⁰ See Finnish Basic Education Act, Sections 4, 6, 28.

⁸⁶¹ See H. Simola et al., *Quality assurance and evaluation (QAE) in Finnish compulsory schooling*, pp. 169-170.

disputes would be the creation of the FEEC (Finnish Education Evaluation Council)⁸⁶², an independent body of experts, which would, over the years, end up centralizing all evaluation activities again, including those previously entrusted to the municipalities⁸⁶³. It can therefore be said that Finland, whilst following the trend of New Public Management, did not adopt the Anglo-Saxon model of accountability based entirely on the assessment of learning outcomes, to be attributed to teachers⁸⁶⁴, but a flexible one, based on mutual trust: “the only standardized high-stake assessment is the Matriculation Examination at the end of upper-secondary school before students enroll in tertiary education. Prior to this Matriculation Examination, no external national tests or exams are required. This has helped both students and teachers to focus on learning in a fear-free environment”⁸⁶⁵. This important point will be analysed again later, examining the strengths of the Finnish system, as they emerged after the publication of the first PISA test results.

In this period of great changes, including political ones, many positions were taken against *peruskoulu* in the public debate, and people even began to speak of it as a catastrophe⁸⁶⁶ for the education of Finns; it reached the point where a survey on the state of comprehensive schools, financed by some Finnish business leaders, produced results which were reported by the media with the conclusion that this model was responsible for levelling down⁸⁶⁷ and that comprehensive schools killed talent, preventing the most capable from emerging because they focused exclusively on social equality⁸⁶⁸. The association of Finnish industrialists therefore began to vigorously demand a reform, including giving more room to private schools, left on the margins of the Finnish education system⁸⁶⁹; however, just as this outlook seemed to be asserting itself and marking the end of the comprehensive school as it had been conceived since the 1970s, a cold shower for the critics of its model, and a surprise for everyone, arrived with the results of the first OECD-PISA tests.

⁸⁶² Known since 2014 as FINEEC, the Finnish National Education Evaluation Centre.

⁸⁶³ It is actually FINEEC that implements the three-year plan for the evaluation of the education system.

⁸⁶⁴ See H. Simola et al., *Quality assurance and evaluation (QAE) in Finnish compulsory schooling*, p. 13.

⁸⁶⁵ E. Aho et al., p. 12.

⁸⁶⁶ See H. Simola et al., *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*, p. 40.

⁸⁶⁷ See A.K. Ahonen, p. 132.

⁸⁶⁸ See P. Sahlberg *Finnish Lessons*, pp. 121-122.

⁸⁶⁹ See H. Simola et al, *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*, pp. 40-41.

1.2 PISA Miracle and Decline

The results of the surveys conducted by the IEA⁸⁷⁰ that Finland had taken part in, had shown that the Finnish education system was, all in all, of a good standard, but far from excellent, exactly the same level perceived by public opinion. No one had foreseen the success that would come with the publication of the results of the first OECD-PISA tests⁸⁷¹; virtually no one outside the country's borders was, until then, interested in the Finnish school system⁸⁷². According to the rankings just announced, Finland was first among all 32 countries tested by the OECD in reading literacy (which, as it has been seen in the previous chapter, was the main focus of that year's surveys), fourth after Japan, South Korea and New Zealand in Mathematics, and third after South Korea and Japan in Science⁸⁷³. These results radically changed not only the attention the world paid to this small country, but also how the Finns themselves viewed the work they had done in this area up to that point; in fact until then it was very common to think that they should import, from abroad, whatever was needed to improve the local education system, but now it was discovered that the best model was, according to the OECD rankings, their own⁸⁷⁴. "It was a 'PISA miracle'. Finland's school system was catapulted to stardom. And for the next decade it was the rock star of education worldwide"⁸⁷⁵. Visitors come from all over the world, out-and-out 'educational pilgrims', to try to investigate the secret of Finnish success, of this small country hitherto viewed as average, with a not particularly high per capita expenditure per student, which had become top of the class. Even the number of annual visitors to the country doubled⁸⁷⁶. Initially, the government showed itself to be rather cautious when evaluating these results, probably precisely because of the strong dissonance between these results and those of the other tests, including the national surveys conducted by the NBE (National Board of Education)⁸⁷⁷. However, with the passing of the years and the consolidation of Finnish leadership at the helm of the OECD-PISA rankings, even this caution waned and government reports began to express great satisfaction with the international performance of their students, which was seen as

⁸⁷⁰ See, for example, the results of the 1999 TIMSS in Mathematics, very different from those published only two years later by the OECD: Mullis Ina V.S. et al., *TIMSS 1999 International Mathematics Report*, IEA.

⁸⁷¹ See H. Simola et al., *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*, p. 38.

⁸⁷² See G.H. Sahlgren, p. 1.

⁸⁷³ See OECD, *Knowledge and Skills for Life. FIRST RESULTS FROM PISA 2000*.

⁸⁷⁴ See J. Välijärvi et al., p. 3.

⁸⁷⁵ G.H. Sahlgren, p. 2.

⁸⁷⁶ See E. Aho et al., p. 1.

⁸⁷⁷ See M. Rautalin, p. 9.

directly linked to the structure of the national education system as it was. This was the case with the document drawn up some years later, in 2009, by Kupiainen et al. where one reads, for example, “we are pleased to conclude that current empirical evidence, combined with the moral argument for educational equality [...] speak strongly for a comprehensive school with high national standards and well-functioning student support”⁸⁷⁸. In fact, in 2003 Finland had climbed further up the rankings, confirming first place in Reading and conquering the same position in Science and second place in Mathematics (in addition to second place in the additional area of problem solving)⁸⁷⁹. Similarly, in 2006 the average scores had increased in all areas and, in particular, in Science where a peak of 563 points was reached, confirming first place among all of the participants, a total of 57 countries⁸⁸⁰.

So, what are the keys to Finnish success in the PISA tests? The answer to this question is rather complex and one can certainly say that it involves a mix of very diverse factors, but all closely connected to the socio-cultural context that have been described above, and therefore difficult to replicate. Jouni Välijärvi has tried, together with six other scholars, to explain some of the reasons for these extraordinary results. First of all, in Finnish comprehensive schools, no one can be excluded, the school has to adapt to the needs of each individual student and therefore the teachers' approach is totally directed towards equality (not simply equity, to refer back to the discussion above). In order to perform this delicate role as effectively as possible, teachers must be, and are, trained to a high level and are true experts in the pedagogical field. To enable teachers to do their work in the best possible way, and recognizing this exceptional professionalism, the Finnish system ensures that teachers have full autonomy and flexibility when it comes to managing the curriculum, and views their judgment as the only possible evaluation of students' performance⁸⁸¹; as it has been seen, with the exception of the Matriculation Examination, there is no form of standardized survey for external evaluation. To these reasons one can add the ability of Finnish schools to network with each other, with the students' families and with the social and cultural context around them, as well as the system of the right to study, which guarantees everyone a free hot meal, free transport and school health services. In addition to this, Finnish educational institutions, with a view to inclusion, make provision

⁸⁷⁸ S. Kupiainen et al., *The Finnish education system and PISA*, Finnish Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 61.

⁸⁷⁹ See Finnish Ministry of Education website, The Results of PISA 2003.

⁸⁸⁰ See Finnish Ministry of Education website, The Results of PISA 2006.

⁸⁸¹ See J. Välijärvi et al., pp. 47-51.

for all students with special needs through dedicated educational and psychological support⁸⁸². Equality, excellent teachers, sustainable leadership, flexible accountability and a culture of trust are also the key elements of the Finnish system according to the paper written by Erkki Aho, Kari Pitkänen and Pasi Sahlberg for the Education Unit of the World Bank⁸⁸³. For that matter, this seems to be the most widespread interpretation; one finds a substantially identical version in the text by Lawn and Grek on the Europeanization of education⁸⁸⁴, as well as in the one by Arto K. Ahonen devoted to the trajectory of Finnish performance in the PISA tests⁸⁸⁵. Pasi Sahlberg adds a further element regarding teachers, who seem to be the real key to the Finnish system: teaching in Finland is a ‘top job’ and this is due to the autonomy one enjoys in work, as it has been said, but also to the respect on a social level, in part due also to the challenging training path that one must undertake to join the profession; moreover, the salary of Finnish teachers lies substantially around the average for OECD countries, but progressively increases with the years of service much more than elsewhere, and this progression is not based on any external evaluation of ‘merit’⁸⁸⁶.

However, there are also those who have questioned this type of reconstruction, seeing it as overly simplistic. In particular, Gabriel H. Sahlgren in his *Real Finnish Lessons* (a clearly provocative title if one considers the one Pasi Sahlberg chose for his essays, *Finnish Lessons*), devoted to the ‘true story’ of the Finnish educational superpower, questions the idea that the Finnish success is due to the comprehensive school itself or to the ability to resist the trends set by the market regarding competition and the implementation of accountability based entirely on standardized tests. In fact, this is essentially Sahlberg’s idea, as he has repeatedly argued that it is precisely not being part of what he himself has defined as the GERM - Global Educational Reform Movement⁸⁸⁷ - that has allowed Finland to obtain excellent results in this area; in contrast, countries that have followed the precepts of this approach have performed very poorly⁸⁸⁸. According to Sahlgren, however, there is

⁸⁸² Ibid., pp. 52-53.

⁸⁸³ See E. Aho et al., pp 11-12.

⁸⁸⁴ See M. Lawn & S. Grek, pp. 124-125.

⁸⁸⁵ See A.K. Ahonen pp.132-133.

⁸⁸⁶ See P. Sahlberg *Finish Lessons*, pp. 73-83.

⁸⁸⁷ “Curriculum development, student assessment, teacher development, technology-assisted teaching and learning, and proficiency in basic competencies have become common proprieties in education reforms around the world. I call this the *Global Educational Reform Movement*, or simply, GERM” P. Sahlberg, *The Fourth Way of Finland*, ‘J Educ Change’ 12, 173–185, 2011, p. 176.

⁸⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 181.

no evidence that the rankings have a negative impact on student performances, and indeed the existence of league tables is, according to him, one of the reasons why England has better results in the PISA tests than Wales, which abolished them in 2001⁸⁸⁹. He further holds that the Finnish success cannot be explained by either the equality that constitutes its heart, or by the reforms concerning the training of teachers and the governance of schools. It is rather the result of a sort of ‘wealth effect’, by virtue of which economic growth has brought out latent potential that is essentially the result of historical factors with very distant roots and, in particular, of the highly traditional structure of Finnish schools and of the role teachers have played in defending Finnish identity⁸⁹⁰. The cause of Finland's extraordinary performance in the tests would therefore seem to lie in its anti-constructivist and traditionalist approach to education⁸⁹¹. Hannu Simola seems to be of the same opinion too, albeit with a less conservative approach to the question, when he stated in 2005 that “to put it simply, it is still possible to teach in the traditional way in Finland because teachers believe in their traditional role and pupils accept their traditional position. Teachers' beliefs are supported by social trust and their professional academic status, while pupils' approval is supported by the authoritarian culture and mentality of obedience”⁸⁹². Soon after, however, in the same paper he seemed to see this as only one of the crucial elements that becomes the cause of success exclusively in combination with other more modern tendencies and, above all, with comprehensive school reform: “the Finnish 'secret' of top-ranking may therefore be seen as the curious contingency of traditional and post-traditional tendencies in the context of the modern welfare state and its comprehensive schooling”⁸⁹³. Indeed, Simola's approach seems to be completely reversed in the 2017 text written together with other scholars where they state that: “Two internationally well-known success stories have been written into the recent history of Finland: Nokia and *Peruskoulu*. In both cases the success seems to have essentially stemmed from demolishing hierarchies, cutting down on control and thus promoting creativity and pride in one's work on the shop-floor level, in a word, encouraging a culture of trust”⁸⁹⁴.

In conclusion, it is curious to note how sometimes international public opinion tends to view the elements that are seen as less traditional as more important, that is to say, lower number of total hours

⁸⁸⁹ See G.H. Sahlgren, p. 10.

⁸⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

⁸⁹¹ Ibid., p. 46.

⁸⁹² H. Simola *The Finnish miracle of PISA*, pp. 465-466.

⁸⁹³ Ibid., p. 466.

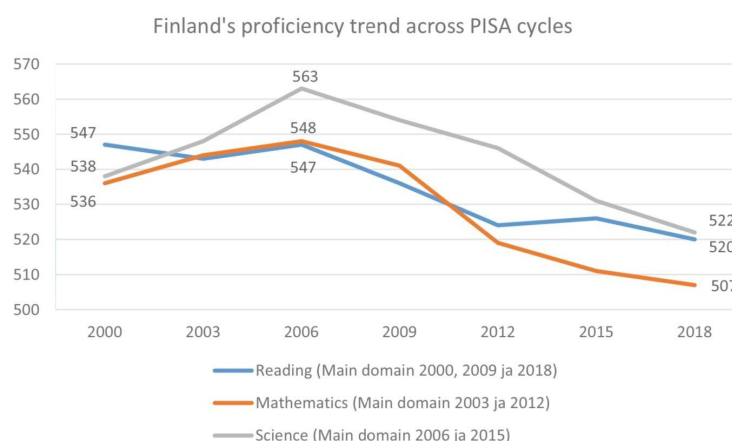
⁸⁹⁴ H. Simola et al., *Dynamics in Education Politics Understanding and explaining the Finnish case*, p. 116.

dedicated to school, the presence of games, greater curricular flexibility compared to other systems, whilst it seems to agree with Finnish scholars on the importance of the absence of standardized tests, rankings and internal competition between schools⁸⁹⁵.

This brief and certainly incomplete reconstruction allows one to understand how complex it is to identify the causes of the surprising success obtained by the Finnish system in the PISA tests, confirmed in three successive surveys. In his introduction to Sahlgren's text, Julian Le Grand makes a statement in this regard that I believe can be broadly accepted: analysis of the Finnish system frequently serves more to confirm one's own opinions in the educational field than to understand the reasons behind the performances that one is trying explain⁸⁹⁶.

However, starting from 2009, after years of growth that seemed unstoppable, all of these attempts at an enthusiastic interpretation of the extraordinary functioning of the Finnish education system collide with the beginning of a decline in student performance in PISA tests, a decline that became even more evident in the 2012 surveys. “Between 2006 and 2012, Finland's performance declined by 18 points in scientific literacy, 23 points in reading literacy, and 29 points in mathematical literacy. On average, this was the largest fall of all Nordic countries in this period”⁸⁹⁷. One can see in Figure 7 which has been the trajectory of Finland's proficiency between 2000 and 2018.

Fig.7⁸⁹⁸



⁸⁹⁵ See for example The Guardian, *No grammar schools, lots of play: the secrets of Europe's top education system*, 20th September 2016.

⁸⁹⁶ See J. Le Grand in G.H. Sahlgren, pp. V-VI.

⁸⁹⁷ G.H. Sahlgren, p. 5.

⁸⁹⁸ A.K. Ahonen, p. 125.

In December 2013, *The Economist* ironically headlined: *Finn-ished*⁸⁹⁹, to underline the end of Finnish dominance in the PISA tests, while the economist Rogers and the educationalist Dopart in their blog on the World Bank's website reached the point of wondering whether or not it was actually a mistake to take the Finnish system as a model⁹⁰⁰. It is difficult to explain the reasons for this decline, even more difficult than listing the reasons for the previous success. In the earlier period any criticism was essentially silenced due to the excellent results obtained in international surveys. Marjaana Rautalin has shown, by analysing 136 articles from three national (Finnish) quality media outlets, how in the period December 2001-April 2009 it was, in effect, impossible to raise doubts about the quality of Finnish education even for those who claimed there was ample room for improvement⁹⁰¹. The doubts of those who saw the success of the PISA tests more as an obstacle to reforms than as just recognition of excellence, emerged only in a very partial way, for example, regarding the growth of problems related to students' mental health and the low levels of their satisfaction with school and the lack of awareness of their abilities, as well as the ever-increasing risk of teachers' burnout. Another critical element of the Finnish system that was never really questioned is the gender gap, given, for example, giving that the difference in performance between girls and boys in reading literacy in Finland was the widest of the OECD area countries⁹⁰². And again, few tried to highlight that if the comprehensive school could be considered a good model, the same could not be said of early childhood education and higher education, as shown by the rankings in other studies⁹⁰³.

Some have argued that the growing presence of immigrants, whose performance is worse on average, is a significant factor in the drop in performance in Finland, but reading the data carefully, this cannot be viewed as a primary reason, given that the drop also affected native-born Finnish students⁹⁰⁴; however there is a very significant increase in the differences within the system: the average scores of students highly proficient at reading have substantially remained the same since 2000, while those of the least proficient have dropped significantly. This element also appears to be linked to the ever

⁸⁹⁹ The Economist, *Finn-ished*, 5th December 2013.

⁹⁰⁰ See H. Rogers & T. Dopart, *Is Finland Still an Education Superstar?*, 13th December 2013, World Bank blogs.

⁹⁰¹ See M. Rautalin, pp. 8-9.

⁹⁰² See A.K. Ahonen, p. 126.

⁹⁰³ See M. Rautalin, pp 9.-11.

⁹⁰⁴ See G.H. Sahlgren pp. 49-50.

more important role of economic and social background, which was previously much less influential⁹⁰⁵. Establishing a causal link between certain factors and the trend of test performance is, as it has been said, very complex, because the evidence is still very limited and because any attempt at inference of this type would risk being only partial⁹⁰⁶. However, it may be useful to add to the elements that have been summarized above, ones that were already present, albeit very much in the shadows, in the debate during the golden years of Finland's PISA test results, those that came to light immediately after the snapshot of the decline and were particularly given rein, starting from December 2013, by the silence of politicians unable to furnish answers or provide solutions to reverse the downward course⁹⁰⁷. From this point on, for example, one finds the strong voice of the teachers' unions complaining about the lack of sufficient investment in education and, in particular, in teachers' professional skills, and above all contesting the cuts carried out by the municipalities over the years, something which was practically undiscussed during the years of success⁹⁰⁸, even though, as it has been seen, this process had begun much earlier.

Whilst identifying a single cause of this trend is essentially impossible, there are those like Sahlgren who have argued that it is the result of two elements: on the one hand, the exhaustion of the 'wealth effect' for which, once the peak is reached, there is a sort of trend reversal, and on the other, a progressive detachment of the Finnish system from its own tradition in order to embrace elements with constructivist roots that were foreign to it⁹⁰⁹. "Indeed, progressive methods are being more strongly emphasized in the new national curriculum that takes effect in 2016, for example by stipulating that pupils should have more influence over teaching"⁹¹⁰. In my opinion, this is a very partial view and cannot explain the reasons for what happened in the Finnish system in terms of test results, bearing in mind, however, that despite a trend of decreasing scores, Finland continues to be one of the top performers in the PISA surveys, well above the average of the OECD countries⁹¹¹.

What is interesting for the purposes of this research, is the influence that these surveys seem to have had on Finland's education system: although Salhberg in his *PISA in Finland: An Education Miracle*

⁹⁰⁵ See A.K. Ahonen, p. 127.

⁹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 134.

⁹⁰⁷ See M. Rautalin, p. 14.

⁹⁰⁸ Ibid., pp. 12-13.

⁹⁰⁹ See G.H. Sahlgren, pp. 49-56.

⁹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 57-58.

⁹¹¹ See Finnish Ministry of Education website, The Results of PISA 2018.

or an Obstacle to Change? believes that “PISA has not affected Finnish education policies or structures as it has done in Germany [...] quite the opposite”⁹¹², following Rautalin's analysis of the public debate⁹¹³ and the conclusions of this same article by Sahlberg - when he says that occupying higher positions encourages inaction⁹¹⁴ - one can argue that the main effect of the international surveys on the Finnish system was precisely this, that is to say, a total lack of public discussion about possible education reform and, therefore, the stabilization of the *status quo* as vindicated by the test results. After all, Finnish teachers have never been particularly enthusiastic about PISA tests, not even in the period of the great collective exaltation, in part due to the, strongly desired, absence of standardized assessment systems at the national level⁹¹⁵, which has nevertheless ended up being erased by the predominance of international test results in the public debate.

However, if these are the negative consequences, it must also be said that thanks to the international prominence that the PISA tests have managed to give to the Finnish model and, overall, to the role that Finland has begun to play within the European Union⁹¹⁶, the mobility of its individuals has grown tremendously and so has its ability to engage in exchange with the rest of the developed world.

⁹¹² P. Sahlberg, *PISA in Finland : an education miracle or an obstacle to change*, p. 135.

⁹¹³ “The [...] image of Finnish education as internationally excellent deprived of their credibility all those accounts containing claims about problems in Finnish education” M. Rautalin, p. 9.

⁹¹⁴ See P. Sahlberg, *PISA in Finland : an education miracle or an obstacle to change?* pp. 136-137.

⁹¹⁵ See P. Sahlberg *Finnish Lessons* p. 65.

⁹¹⁶ See R. Rinehart pp. 436-439.

Section 2: The German System, from Shock to Reform

2.1 The German Education System

It should first of all be clarified that when one talk about the German education system, is operating within the context of a federal republic⁹¹⁷, within which the primary points of reference for education policies are its 16 federal constituent states, known collectively as the Länder: Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Berlin, Brandenburg, Bremen, Hamburg, Hesse, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saarland, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Schleswig-Holstein and Thuringia. The *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law) of 1949, later extended to all of Germany after reunification⁹¹⁸, is the fundamental law that establishes, among other things, the powers and responsibilities of the Länder and the central state, “one core element [of the Basic Law] is the so-called cultural sovereignty (*Kulturhoheit*), i.e. the predominant responsibility of the Länder for education, science and culture [...] On the other hand, the constituent states of the federal state bear joint responsibility for the entire state. This overall responsibility both entitles and obliges them to cooperate with one another and to work together with the Federal Government”⁹¹⁹. It will be seen soon how this cooperation is structured and takes form.

The very limited responsibilities of the central state – the Federation – in the sphere of education, are as follows: “in-company vocational training and vocational further education; admission to higher education institutions and higher education degrees (here the Länder may enact laws at variance with the legislation of the Federation); financial assistance for pupils and students; promotion of scientific and academic research and technological development; child and youth welfare (in particular early childhood education and care in day-care centres and child-minding services); legal protection of participants of correspondence courses; regulations on entry to the legal profession; regulations on

⁹¹⁷ “One of the fundamental elements of the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*), besides the principles of democracy and the rule of law, is the principle of federalism (Art. 20, Paragraph 1)” [...] “The Federal order is an unassailable constitutional principle which is subject to the so-called ‘Eternity Clause’ of the Basic Law (Art. 79, Paragraph 3) and is therefore exempt from constitutional amendment.” KMK, *The Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany 2018/2019*, Bonn: 2021, p. 15.

⁹¹⁸ “In order to bring about German unity in the areas of culture, education and science, the Unification Treaty (*Einigungsvertrag* – R2) concluded between the Federal Republic of Germany and the GDR on 31 August 1990 contains fundamental provisions which aim to establish a common and comparable basic structure in education – particularly in the school system – and a common, though differentiated, higher education and research landscape in the Federal Republic of Germany” Ibid., p. 12.

⁹¹⁹ Ibid., p.15. See also p.23: “the school sector, the higher education sector, adult education and continuing education. Administration of the education system in these areas is almost exclusively a matter for the Länder”.

entry to medical and paramedical professions; employment promotion measures as well as occupational and labour market research. Furthermore, the Federation has legislative authority over the status-related rights and duties of civil servants, as well as the legislative authority over foreign affairs”⁹²⁰. These central level responsibilities primarily lie with the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (*Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung* - BMBF), which started life, in 1955, as the Federal Ministry for Nuclear Affairs, was renamed the Federal Ministry of Education and Science (BMBW) in 1969 - with the assignment of new coordination and planning responsibilities in the education⁹²¹ and research sphere - and finally merged, in 1994, with the Federal Ministry for Research and Technology (BMFT), which was itself founded in 1972⁹²².

The Basic Law also contains three other important elements concerning education and its governance: the fundamental principles that are listed in it, and which naturally apply to all of the Länder as an essential reference, guarantee “the freedom of art and scholarship, research and teaching (Art. 5, Paragraph 3), the freedom of faith and creed (Art. 4), free choice of profession and of the place of training (Art. 12, Paragraph 1), equality before the law (Art. 3, Paragraph 1), and the rights of parents (Art. 6, Paragraph 2)”⁹²³; the list of the concurrent responsibilities of the Federation and the Länder (Art. 74)⁹²⁴; and the scope of the cooperation envisaged on *Gemeinschaftsaufgaben* (joint tasks), indicated, in particular, in Article 91b⁹²⁵.

⁹²⁰ Eurydice, Germany, Organization and Governance.

⁹²¹ See C. Führ, *The German Education System since 1945: Outlines and Problems*, Inter Nationes, 1997, p.39 where he highlights the important role played in this by the social-liberal coalition and the Brandt/Scheel cabinet, which led to an amendment to the Federal Law from which the new responsibilities assigned to the central state derive.

⁹²² See KMK, *The Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany 2018/2019*, p. 39.

⁹²³ Ibid. , p. 24.

⁹²⁴ Specifically the concurrent legislation concerning school education includes: “Non-school vocational training and further training (Basic Law, art. 74, nos. 11 & 12); Regulation of educational grants for school pupils, apprentices, and students (Basic Law, art. 74, no. 13); Assistance for scholarly research (Basic Law, art. 74, no. 13)” C. Führ, p. 39.

⁹²⁵ Article 91b of the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*): “The Federation and the Länder may cooperate on the basis of agreements in cases of supraregional importance in the promotion of sciences, research and teaching. Agreements primarily affecting institutions of higher education shall require the consent of all the Länder. This provision shall not apply to agreements regarding the construction of research facilities, including large scientific installations. (2) The Federation and the Länder may mutually agree to cooperate for the assessment of the performance of education systems in international comparison and in drafting relevant reports and recommendations. (3) The apportionment of costs shall be regulated in the pertinent agreement”. And Article 91c: “The Federation and the Länder may cooperate in planning, constructing and operating information technology systems needed to discharge their responsibilities”. In addition, pursuant to an amendment to the Basic Law of 2019 in Article 104c, it is stipulated that “the Federation may grant the Länder financial assistance for investments of significance to the nation as a whole, and for special limited-term expenditures on the part of the Länder and municipalities (associations of municipalities) directly connected with such investments to improve the efficiency of municipal education infrastructure”.

As far as compulsory schooling is concerned, it is essentially uniform across the country - thanks to an agreement reached between the Länder - and is fixed at 9 or 10 years of full-schooling, while with regard to part-time education, the obligation goes up to 18 years of age in 11 Länder and to 19 in the remaining five, namely Berlin, Brandenburg, Bremen, North Rhine-Westphalia and Thuringia⁹²⁶. In Germany, as in Italy and Finland, obligatory education is linked to free education: “attendance at state schools is free in all of the Laender. Learning aids are also basically free, but there are differences in the range of materials involved. Most Laender provide textbooks without charge”⁹²⁷.

Given the central role of the Länder in education and the explicit reference to the need for coordination and cooperation, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder (KMK – *Kultusministerkonferenz*) plays a fundamentally important part in the governance of the system; this body is “a consortium of the ministers or senators of the federal states responsible for education and schooling, institutes of higher education and research and cultural affairs”⁹²⁸. It was founded in 1948⁹²⁹ and from then on continuously brought together the representatives of the states of West Germany; at the 252nd plenary held in February 1991, in the same venue as its first historical meeting - Stuttgart-Hohenheim - it expanded to include the new Länder of former East Germany and produced the Hohenheim Memorandum “on education, science, and cultural issues in a unified Germany”⁹³⁰ which was a very important step for real reunification.

The KMK’s resolutions, depending on their content, can require unanimity or approval by a qualified or simple majority, and are produced in the form of recommendations, with the Länder representatives committing to translating them into law passed through their relative legislative assemblies⁹³¹. The KMK is made up of several bodies, the main ones being: the Plenum, chaired by a President who represents the Conference externally - in which each Land can cast one vote, regardless of its size; the Presidium, elected every year within the framework of the Plenum, and composed of the President, two vice-presidents and a maximum of two other members, which prepares the important

⁹²⁶ Eurydice, *Compulsory education in Europe 2022/2023*, October 2022, pp. 2-3.

⁹²⁷ C. Führ p. 83.

⁹²⁸ See KMK website.

⁹²⁹ “The first (and for 42 years only) all-German gathering of Ministers of Education took place in February 1948 in the Hohenheim district of Stuttgart” C. Führ, pp. 4-5.

⁹³⁰ C. Führ, p.38. See also p. 1: unification in this area would actually be quite complex and would intersect with the new challenges generated by progressive European integration.

⁹³¹ See KMK, *The Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany 2018/2019*, p. 41.

plenary issues and, in cases of particular urgency that do not explicitly require the vote of the Plenum, can also unanimously pass resolutions on the KMK's behalf; the committees and commissions that prepare the Plenum's work and also perform an important function in terms of exchange and networking; and the Secretariat, headed by a secretary-general⁹³², which carries out the everyday work and monitors the implementation of the decisions made⁹³³. In the hundreds of plenaries held by the KMK, naturally a great many resolutions have been passed; here it has been chosen to mention only two of the most significant ones. The first is known as the Hamburg Agreement of 1964⁹³⁴, which established some fundamental elements that still form the basis of the structure of the German school system⁹³⁵ today and which acted as the starting point for further agreements and resolutions; it concerns the beginning and duration of compulsory schooling, the beginning and end of the school year, "as well as the designation of the various educational institutions and their organisation (types of school etc.), the recognition of examinations and leaving certificates, and the designation of grade scales for school reports"⁹³⁶. The second very significant decision - which will be discussed at length in the section dealing with the country's reactions to the failure reported in the ILSAs - is the introduction, between 2002 and 2004, of the *Bildungsstandards* (National Educational Standards) which would be seen as mandatory for all the Länder⁹³⁷. These are two decisions that helped to standardize educational policies in Germany whilst still maintaining federal choice and the prevailing responsibility of the individual Länder for educational policies, which they would always be very protective of. Although the decisions made within the context of the KMK have had very concrete and significant effects, over the years there has been no lack of criticism concerning its inability to make choices, including difficult ones, regarding some particularly important issues⁹³⁸, due to a lack of concurrence as occurred, for example, with the structure of lower secondary education and the early-tracking that it entails, which will be discussed at length.

⁹³² A certain continuity in the work of the KMK was ensured by the fact that between 1948 and 1997 there were only two secretary-generals at the helm of the Secretariat, see C. Führ, p. 34.

⁹³³ See KMK website.

⁹³⁴ This agreement replaced the Düsseldorf Agreement of 1955, which was much more rigid, but ensured the freedom needed to experiment, which was fundamentally important for the system's subsequent steps forward.

⁹³⁵ "The Agreement almost assumes the status of what in centralized states would be a national law regulating school organization" C. Führ, p. 36.

⁹³⁶ KMK, *The Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany 2018/2019*, p. 41.

⁹³⁷ Ibid., p. 42.

⁹³⁸ "Over the decades there has also been much criticism of the Conference's activities. Some resolutions and recommendations were viewed as empty compromises and masterpieces of verbal evasion" C. Führ, p. 38.

Alongside the KMK there are other institutions and bodies that play an important role in the field of education. Until 2008 these included the Bund-Länder Commission for Educational Planning and Research Promotion (BLK, *Bund-Länder-Kommission für Bildungsplanung und Forschungsförderung*), founded in 1970 by virtue of an Administrative Agreement between the Federation and the Länder, based on the amendment to the Basic Law of 1969 (which came into force on 1st January 1970), which - in Article 91b - assigned new tasks to the central state regarding education planning; “The BLK [was] the permanent forum for the discussion of all questions of education and research promotion which are of common interest to the Federal and Länder governments (BLK Agreement, Article 1). It ma[de] recommendations to the Heads of the Federal and Länder governments on educational planning and research promotion”⁹³⁹. In the 1970s, the BLK produced a fully-fledged Comprehensive Education Plan - never fully implemented due to the political divisions within the KMK, but important because it established some criteria, such as the one regarding the student-teacher ratio - and it played a decisive role in supporting and supervising various pilot projects, about which it published some reports that acted as a means of exchange and helped promote good practices⁹⁴⁰. On 1st January 2008 the BLK ceased its activities and was replaced by the Joint Science Conference (GWK - *Gemeinsame Wissenschaftskonferenz*)⁹⁴¹, which absorbed its functions. Lastly, the Institute for Educational Quality Improvement (IQB - *Institut zur Qualitätsentwicklung im Bildungswesen*) deserves a mention; it was founded in 2004 “to review and further develop the educational standards in cooperation with the Länder”⁹⁴² and to support the implementation of the national performance evaluation system, which, as it will be seen, would lead to a real paradigm shift in education, from an input-oriented system to an output-oriented one.

⁹³⁹ BLK (BUND-LÄNDER-KOMMISSION), *Information on the Bund-Länder-Commission for Educational Planning and Research Promotion*, Translation: Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2005, p. 8.

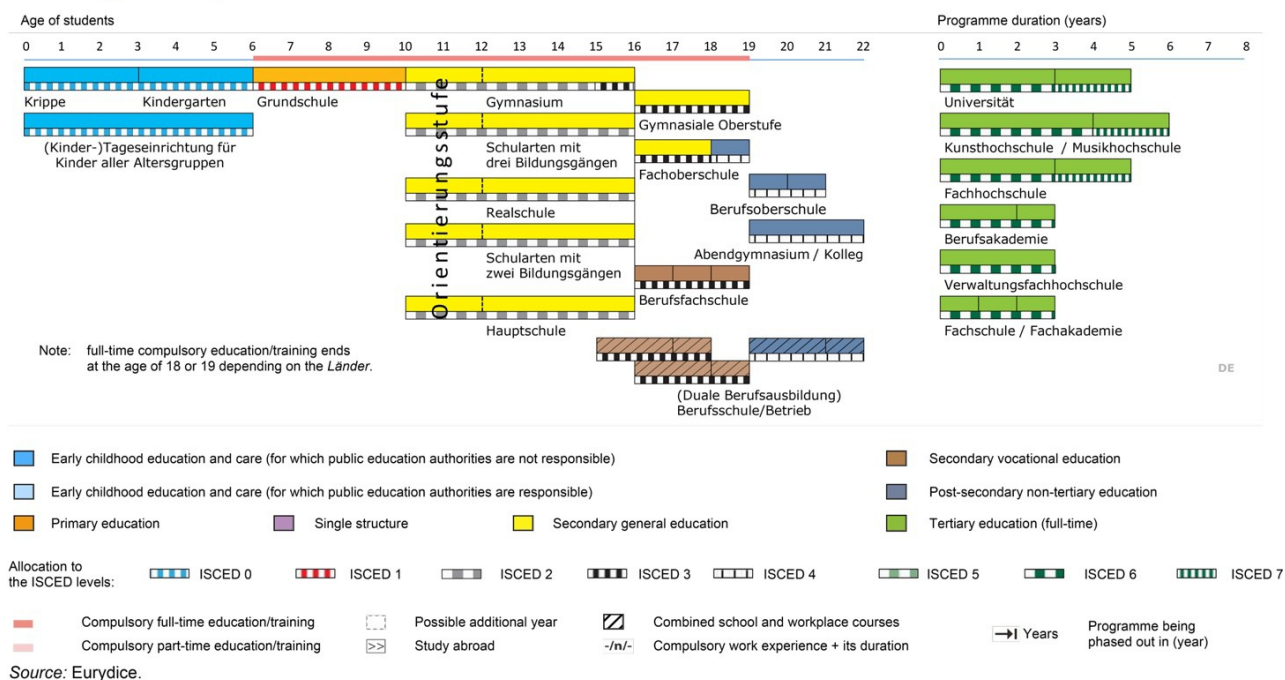
⁹⁴⁰ See C. Führ, p. 43.

⁹⁴¹ See German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, Notification of the Administrative Agreement between the Federal and Länder Governments on the Establishment of a Joint Science Conference (GWK Agreement) of 19 September 2007, Published in Bundesanzeiger (Federal Gazette) Nr. 195 of 18 October 2007, Art. 10.

⁹⁴² KMK, *The Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany 2018/2019*, p. 42.

Fig.8⁹⁴³

Germany – 2022/2023



The first stage in the German education system is, as can be seen in Figure 8, early childhood education and care, which, although not the subject of this research, deserves a mention because of the conditioning effect it has on subsequent stages. The services associated with the ECEC (*Kinderkrippen, Kindergärten, Horte or Kindertagespflege*) in Germany are, according to the Basic Law, subject to responsibilities shared between the Federation and the Länder and do not refer, at the federal level, to the Ministry of Education and Research but, being part of public welfare, to the Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (*Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend – BMFSFJ*). In the individual Länder they also involve responsibility shared between the regional authority and the municipalities. Since 1996, children's right to have access to day care services from the age of three through to entry into formal education has been recognized by law, and since 2013, this right has been extended to children aged one to three⁹⁴⁴.

⁹⁴³ European Commission, Eurydice website, Germany, Overview.

⁹⁴⁴ See KMK, *The Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany 2018/2019*, pp. 103-104.

Primary school (*Grundschule*) is for children from 6 to 10 years of age in 14 Länder, whilst in Berlin and Brandenburg it goes up to 12⁹⁴⁵. Many of the principles underlying the functioning of primary schools are contained in the Basic Law, such as compulsory schooling, parental rights, religious instruction, the recognition of private schools and so on. In addition to these principles there is then the legislation of each Land: “the legal basis for the *Grundschule* as the first compulsory school for all children is to be found in the Education Acts and the Compulsory Schooling Acts of the Länder as well as in the *Schulordnungen* (school regulations) for the primary school enacted by the Ministries of Education and Cultural Affairs in the Länder”⁹⁴⁶. Primary schools went through a reform process first in the 1970s and then in the mid-1990s⁹⁴⁷, but the most significant change came after the first results of international evaluations, which led, as it will be seen, to the adoption of an approach entirely aimed at measuring output. As one can read in the official KMK document on the structure and functioning of education at the primary school, already at this level the model was directed at the development of basic competencies and this necessitated the provision of some form of student performance assessments. In the first two years of school this measurement takes the form of a report that outlines a child's path, clarifying their strengths and weaknesses, and showing whether or not their progress are in line with expectations regarding the acquisition of the desired competencies. Generally, it is at the end of the second year that this report - which in addition to measuring disciplinary competencies can also contain the results of assessments of their ability to work in a group or their conduct more generally - is given to the students, with an indication of the individual grades, and the results of each one are put into a broader framework that brings together those of the whole class, thereby making comparative evaluations possible. Then, starting from the third year, students begin to take actual written tests to measure basic competencies, particularly in German, mathematics and science (*Sachunterricht*); in most Länder the third year is also when the teaching of a foreign language becomes compulsory. At the end of primary school there is no final exam or, with

⁹⁴⁵ This model of a primary school lasting six years instead of four was introduced in Berlin, as well as other Länder, at the wishes of the representatives of the SPD (Social Democratic Party). To give an example of how much the role of the individual parties has been decisive in decisions about the structure of educational stages, this model was also in force in Hamburg but when, in 1953, the socialists lost the elections and were excluded from the governing coalition of this Land, one of the effects was the replacement of primary school lasting six years with the four-year model; this issue had in fact enormously influenced the electoral debate and results. See C. Führ, p. 95.

⁹⁴⁶ KMK, *The Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany 2018/2019*, p. 111.

⁹⁴⁷ See C. Führ, p. 76.

the exception of Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate, a certificate or diploma, but just the production and delivery of a report about the last year of attendance (fourth or sixth)⁹⁴⁸.

These reports, together with the overall grade, which are both under the responsibility of the teachers, have a very important function in the transition from primary school to lower secondary school, which takes place following a choice that is critical in terms of students' subsequent path, not only their scholastic path, but their professional one too. In fact, in Germany, at the age of ten or twelve depending on the Land, one is required to choose a type of school between three very different models (which will be shortly discussed), with the exception of those who choose to attend a comprehensive school. It is the primary school itself that indicates which type of lower secondary school is most suitable for the student in question, although this generally takes place following in-depth consultation with the parents; in fact, "generally, the decision about school track is taken by both parents and the local educational authorities [...] but children's measured ability remains the most important factor determining the selection process. This takes the form of a primary school recommendation for a secondary school track, generally based on a pupil's marks in the core subjects of German and Mathematics. Additionally, teachers are advised to take into account children's learning and working behaviour, their level of motivation, and general development"⁹⁴⁹. The ways of entering lower secondary school can vary from full-on entrance examinations through to trial periods of six months or just some trial lessons, and "the final decision is taken either by the parents or by the school or school supervisory authority", depending on the Land⁹⁵⁰. Regarding this early-tracking, which is one of the distinctive elements of the German education system, Ralf Dahrendorf was already complaining in 1967 that a selection made at such a young age could only generate inequalities and fewer opportunities for those students with backgrounds or traits that put them at a disadvantage (in particular, he mentions among these: girls, Catholics, children who come from the countryside, and children from working class families), and thus they end up being inevitably conditioned, for their whole life, by their origins and initial characteristics, without any real chance

⁹⁴⁸ See KMK, *The Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany 2018/2019*, pp. 117-120.

⁹⁴⁹ S.V. Schnepf, *A Sorting Hat that Fails? The transition from primary to secondary school in Germany*, Papers inwopa02/22, 'Innocenti Working Papers', 2022, p. 7.

⁹⁵⁰ See KMK, *The Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany 2018/2019*, p. 129; depending on the Land, parents are more or less involved in indicating the best path for students. In most of them, however, parents have the freedom to choose a school other than the one recommended, notwithstanding the fact that consultations with the primary school of origin always have a great impact, as is natural, on the final decision – See V.S. Schnepf, p. 7.

of emancipation⁹⁵¹. This point will be discussed more widely shortly, while talking about secondary school.

Secondary school (*Sekundarschule*), taken as a whole, lasts from five to nine years, depending on the Land and the type of school. The first two years (with the exception of the two Länder where primary school lasts six years and not four) are seen as orientation, and in some cases can be carried out separately⁹⁵². The choice of the type of school is thus kept somewhat open until the sixth year (at 12 years of age). Then there are the lower and the upper secondary schools. The fundamental principles that govern the functioning of secondary schools remain those contained in the Basic Law, already mentioned above, whilst for the more detailed aspects the regulatory provisions are found in the Education Acts and Compulsory Schooling Acts of the Länder, and the “ordinances for schools providing general and vocational education in particular contain detailed regulations covering the content of the courses as well as the leaving certificates and entitlements obtainable on completion of lower and upper secondary education”⁹⁵³. As mentioned above, there are different types of secondary school, and the names for them can vary depending on the Land, but they can in any case be traced back to the three-type framework (or four, if one includes comprehensive schools) presented here⁹⁵⁴.

The first type, known as *Hauptschule*, provides “basic general education”⁹⁵⁵ and lasts from four to six years, depending on the Land (that is to say, on the already mentioned duration of primary school in the various Länder). Its main purpose is the professional path, so much so that the qualification it issues is primarily used to gain access to in-company training and therefore to work, whilst still allowing the holder, if suitable levels of competence have been achieved, to attend another course in order to obtain a higher diploma. That said, “the value generally attributed to the *Hauptschule* [...] and the professional opportunities offered by the *Hauptschule* qualification are limited in comparison to the leaving certificates of the two other traditional school tracks”⁹⁵⁶. It is precisely this type of school that, over the years, has been the subject of great criticism because it is seen as the depot or,

⁹⁵¹ See R. Dahrendorf, *The Crisis in German Education*, ‘Journal of Contemporary History’, 2(3), 139–147, 1967, pp. 141–143.

⁹⁵² “Orientation levels independent of the kind of school involved exist in Bremen, Lower Saxony, and parts of Hesse, but in other Laender they are integrated in a specific form of secondary level I school” C. Führ, pp. 106–107.

⁹⁵³ KMK, *The Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany 2018/2019*, p. 125.

⁹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁹⁵⁶ S.V. Schnepf, p. 5.

worse, the dumping ground for ‘leftovers’, that is to say, for all those children who remain excluded from other schools⁹⁵⁷. In addition, *Hauptschulen* do not have a particularly good reputation when it comes to problems related to discipline and even to violence⁹⁵⁸.

The second type of secondary school is the *Realschule*, a term introduced as a result of the Hamburg Agreement of 1964 and previously known as *Mittelschule*. The wide diffusion of this type of school was an achievement of the post-war period, in particular the 1950s⁹⁵⁹. It “provides its pupils with a more extensive general education”⁹⁶⁰. This type of school also lasts from four to six years depending on the Land, and at the end issues a qualification (the *Mittlerer Schulabschluss*) which allows its holder either to enroll in a higher technical institute, start in-company training, or continue studying at an upper secondary school through to the high school diploma. In short, it is a type of school that opens up various opportunities to its students; “the *Realschule* is not biased towards either preparing pupils for university studies or vocational training, and thus offers a dual perspective. On the one hand, pupils are prepared for practical functions, especially professional, economic, and social responsibilities (related to middle-level jobs). On the other, they can move on to more advanced vocational or general schooling, such as upper level at *Gymnasium*”⁹⁶¹.

The third type of secondary school is the *Gymnasium*, which lasts longer, varying from seven to nine years depending on the Land, as this is the only secondary school that includes both lower and upper levels (first and second level)⁹⁶². It provides an “intensified general education”⁹⁶³ and ends with a final matriculation exam where successful candidates obtain the *Abitur*⁹⁶⁴. In the great intellectual debate on education that took place in the 1960s, which will be touched on shortly, the traditionalist structure of this type of school was questioned, as was its essentially being the product of a vision of a class-based school; in fact, in the end, the desire to preserve this model, appreciated by a large part

⁹⁵⁷ See C. Führ, p.111.

⁹⁵⁸ See S.V. Schnepf, p.5.

⁹⁵⁹ See C. Führ, p.116.

⁹⁶⁰ KMK, *The Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany 2018/2019*, p. 127.

⁹⁶¹ C. Führ p. 116.

⁹⁶² Ibid., p. 80.

⁹⁶³ KMK, *The Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany 2018/2019*, p. 128.

⁹⁶⁴ “The terms ‘*Gymnasium*’ and ‘*Abitur*’ are almost synonymous in Germany” C. Führ, p. 119.

of the population, prevailed because it was in some way viewed as the embodiment of the German humanist tradition⁹⁶⁵.

The fourth type is the *Gesamtschule*, the comprehensive school, which has various names depending on the Land (in Berlin, for example, it is called *Integrierte Sekundarschule*). It “forms a pedagogical and organisational unit covering the three educational programmes of lower secondary level, irrespective of the number of levels of proficiency when differentiating between the performance in specific subjects. Schools offering several courses of education combine two or three courses of education under one roof. In the meantime [it has] led to the abolition of the *Hauptschule* and *Realschule* in most Länder”⁹⁶⁶. This model owes its existence to the battle waged by the SPD-led Länder, which in the 1960s promoted a series of trials and led the KMK to establish that the decision on whether or not to introduce this form of integration between different levels of school on a structural level would be made on the basis of the outcome of the trials. In 1973 this idea of a comprehensive school became part of the Education Plan proposed by the BLK which has been mentioned above, but the opposition of the CDU/CSU⁹⁶⁷ - led Länder prevented this part of the plan from being implemented. In 1982, an agreement was reached in the KMK for the mutual recognition of the comprehensive schools that had been established in various Länder over the years but which, up to that time, still retained the status of experiments⁹⁶⁸. Whilst it is true, therefore, that this model is the result of a full-on political battle, it is equally true that the battle has been abandoned by the SPD itself, as it no longer considers the implementation of comprehensive schools a priority⁹⁶⁹. And so, far from replacing the long-criticized tripartite model, in various Länder there is now a quadripartite model which has certainly not led to the once desired unification of the paths⁹⁷⁰. In addition, in some Länder, alongside these three/four types, there are still some ‘special schools’

⁹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 124.

⁹⁶⁶ KMK, *The Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany 2018/2019*, p. 126.

⁹⁶⁷ Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union.

⁹⁶⁸ See C. Führ, p.125.

⁹⁶⁹ See K.H. Gruber, *The German ‘PISA shock’* in H. Ertl (edited by), *Cross-national Attraction in Education: accounts from England and Germany*, Oxford: Symposium Books Ltd., 2006, p. 201.

⁹⁷⁰ See C. Führ, p. 101.

(*Förderschulen*) for students with special educational needs⁹⁷¹ and extra classes in their native language for students who have recently immigrated or have a mother tongue other than German⁹⁷².

In closing, one must also mention an element of the German education system that is particularly successful and the object of great attention abroad as well, namely vocational education, particularly the dual-system model. At the end of the *Hauptschule*, *Realschule* or the corresponding level of the *Gymnasium* (the ninth or tenth year of education) students can start vocational training: “Vocational training can occur in two ways. Either through the dual system of cooperation between firm and part-time vocational school (*Berufsschule*), or through full-time vocational school (*Berufsfachschule*) which mediates knowledge about a broader range of possibilities [...] before starting work. Both ways can lead on to vocational extension school, technical secondary school, or sixth-form college, which provide the qualification for entrance to polytechnics or other institutions of higher education”⁹⁷³. It is therefore possible for all students, from the ninth or tenth year of school, to switch to a mixed system of vocational training whereby two or three days a week are spent at school and the rest of the hours are instead worked in a company on an apprenticeship contract. Having to adapt to the needs of businesses and industry, the structure of vocational training is designed to be very flexible and has changed over the years; the roots of these paths are lie in the Vocational Training Act of 1969, the result of a compromise in the Grand Coalition of the SPD-CDU/CSU government⁹⁷⁴, and, even earlier, in the Handicrafts Act of 1953, that contain the obligations and rights of trainers and, in particular, the responsibilities of companies towards young people, also contained in the Protection of Young Persons at Work Act⁹⁷⁵.

2.2 The shock of the ILSAs and the Reforms

For a long time, Germany had seen itself as a model and a point of reference in the field of education; it was believed that its traditional humanistic culture and the structure of its school system were, with

⁹⁷¹ They “serve the upbringing and education of children and young people with physical, mental, psychological, or other disabilities preventing them attending, or receiving adequate assistance at, general or vocational schools” C. Führ, p. 164.

⁹⁷² See KMK, *The Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany 2018/2019*, p. 18.

⁹⁷³ C. Führ, p. 80.

⁹⁷⁴ See C.Führ, p. 166.

⁹⁷⁵ See KMK, *The Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany 2018/2019*, p. 125.

the changes introduced in the 1960s and 1970s, examples of excellence⁹⁷⁶. Which is, above all, why the results of the first international tests burst upon German public opinion generating what has been defined by many as a veritable shock. Among the newspapers that for months discussed the country's humiliating results, especially those of the PISA tests announced in 2001, the headline chosen by *Die Welt* to comment on this apparent disaster stands out: 'Slap in the Face for Germany's Schools', with a strapline that refers to calls for comprehensive reform⁹⁷⁷. And, as it will be seen, the reforms would come, even rather quickly, to modify some of the fundamental elements of an education system which until then had seemed difficult to question, given the high opinion it enjoyed in the country. In essence, therefore, Davoli and Entorf seem to be right when they argue that "PISA acted as a spur to the German education system"⁹⁷⁸. It will be seen shortly how decisive this spur was in determining the changes to some fundamental paradigms.

Whilst the PISA tests generated a whirlwind of media, academic and political reactions, it must first of all be said that German schools had already received a warning, in 1995, about the less than excellent performance, to put it euphemistically, of its students⁹⁷⁹, and about some structural problems in the system⁹⁸⁰, through its participation in the TIMSS carried out by the IEA. The publication of these first results - which were also totally unexpected and produced an initial shock (albeit less severe than the second) which formed the basis for German participation in the PISA tests⁹⁸¹ - had the

⁹⁷⁶ "Until PISA most Germans believed that the German education system was one of the best in the world" K.H. Gruber, p. 201.

⁹⁷⁷ WELT, *Ohrfeige für Deutschlands Schulen*, 2nd December 2001. A review of headlines similar to this one, appearing in the same period, can be found in T. Raidt, *Bildungsreformen nach PISA. Paradigmenwechsel und Wertewandel*, Hamburg : tradition, 293 S. - (Zugl.: Düsseldorf, Univ., Diss., 2009 u.d.T.: PISA: Katalysator im bildungspolitischen Paradigmenwechsel. Dimensionen des Wertewandels im Bildungswesen) 2010, p. 77.

⁹⁷⁸ M. Davoli & H. Entorf, *The PISA Shock, Socioeconomic Inequality, and School Reforms in Germany*, 'IZA Policy Papers' 140, Institute of Labor Economics (IZA), p. 13.

⁹⁷⁹ See K. Neumann et al., *From PISA to educational standards. The impact of large-scale assessments on science education in Germany*, 'International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education' 8 (2010): 545-563, p. 549

⁹⁸⁰ Among these elements, already in the IEA surveys, the difference in results between students who attended different types of school stands out: "The data give the distribution of pupils' educational achievement within school tracks in mathematics at the end of the 7th grade. Indeed, *Gymnasium* pupils report on average higher test scores than children in *Realschule*, and children in *Realschule* again perform better than those in *Hauptschule*". S.V. Schnepf, p. 20.

⁹⁸¹ See M. Prenzel et al., *The Impact of PISA on Mathematics Teaching and Learning in Germany*, in Kaye Stacey & Ross Turner (edited by) *Assessing Mathematical Literacy*. Springer, Cham, 2015, p.240: "This experience [...] was very salutary, with one immediate consequence. The educational policy authorities of all 16 federal states in Germany agreed to participate henceforth in international comparisons and in particular in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)". On the same topic, see also T. Raidt, p. 78.

benefit of making the German public aware of the existence of the international tests⁹⁸², which Germany had hitherto intended not to participate in. In fact, although ILSAs, as it has been seen in the previous chapter, had already achieved a significant level of diffusion and a certain success, there was little awareness of them in the country until then; “this participation in such studies seemed to be superfluous, because almost everybody [...] was convinced of the high quality of [...] teaching and learning in German schools”⁹⁸³. So what happened in Germany, expanding on Sloane and Dilger’s example, was what happens in football when one steps from national competitions to international competitions and discovers that a team that appeared to be very strong in the local league is actually much less competitive in a larger context, and the league that seemed so solid from the inside can actually prove to be much weaker in comparison with other leagues⁹⁸⁴.

To understand the reasons for the shock that the publication of the PISA test results provoked in Germany in 2001, it is probably enough to look at the tables and rankings⁹⁸⁵. In fact, the country placed a not very reputable 21st position in Reading, well below the OECD average, and did little better in Mathematics and Science, where it came 20th; moreover, 10% of German students did not reach Level 1, the basic one, in reading literacy, while the number of high performers was extremely low. In addition to these results, already alarming in themselves, there were also those of the survey conducted to examine the situation in the individual Länder, the so-called PISA-E (PISA-*Erweiterung*)⁹⁸⁶, “a national add-on study conducted to compare students’ [...] achievement across the 16 federal states”⁹⁸⁷. The results exposed inequalities, some even very large, between the federal

⁹⁸² See F. Waldow, *What PISA Did and Did Not Do: Germany after the ‘PISA-shock’*, ‘European Educational Research Journal’ 8 (2009): 476 – 483, p. 476.

⁹⁸³ M. Prenzel et al., p. 239.

⁹⁸⁴ See P.F.E. Sloane & B. Dilger, *The Competence Clash – Dilemmata bei der Übertragung des ‘Konzepts der nationalen Bildungsstandards’ auf die berufliche Bildung*, Berufs- und Wirtschaftspädagogik online, 2005.

⁹⁸⁵ See OECD & UNESCO Institute for Statistics, *Literacy Skills for the World of Tomorrow Further Results from PISA 2000*.

⁹⁸⁶ “PISA-E was commissioned by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (Kultusministerkonferenz). The study was conducted by a national consortium led by the Max Planck Institute for Educational Research (MPIB) in Berlin [...] The responsibility for organizing the PISA survey in the Länder lay with the Länder themselves. In each Land, a PISA representative and a PISA coordinator were appointed. Planning and implementation of the study were then carried out in close collaboration with the IEA Data Processing Center in Hamburg and the German PISA consortium” J. Baumert et al., *PISA 2000 - Die Länder der Bundesrepublik Deutschland im Vergleich*, Deutsches PISA-Konsortium, Leske + Budrich, Opladen 2002, pp. 35-36.

⁹⁸⁷ K. Neumann et al., p. 552.

states⁹⁸⁸ and confirmed, within the individual Länder, the differences in performance between students who attended different types of schools. To give an example of the critical nature and variety of the situation PISA and PISA-E had entered, some data selected by the KMK and referring to 1998, reveals the enormous differences between the Länder in terms of the percentage of students who managed to obtain the *Abitur*; for instance, 33% in Hamburg, but only 20% in Bavaria⁹⁸⁹. Then the PISA tests revealed that the type of school attended was a determining factor in the inequality: “the *Gymnasium* pupils’ average score was 582 [OECD average reading score was 500], the pupils at the *Hauptschulen* achieved only an unsatisfactory 394”⁹⁹⁰. The problem seemed to lie almost entirely here: the majority of the students attended schools other than the *Gymnasien* and it was precisely this exclusion from the type of school considered to be the outstanding one, that meant that the overall results obtained by German students were far below expectations and, in any case, below the average of the countries that had participated in the PISA tests.

What the tests revealed was a fully-fledged ‘educational catastrophe’. The second one recognized as such in the German public debate⁹⁹¹. To outline the first, one needs to take a step back in time; for Germany, the Second World War had meant, among other devastating things, the destruction of schools and universities, and also the dispersion of those of exceptional intelligence who had fled abroad, in other words, an extreme cultural impoverishment⁹⁹². Not only were German cities in ruins, but the traditional education system, compromised by the toxic fervour of nationalism and Nazism, had also been dealt a near-fatal blow. The creation of the two separate entities that Germany found itself divided into would then result in a total bifurcation in terms of approaches to reconstruction that it was believed should be applied in the education sector⁹⁹³. Both sides would talk about the

⁹⁸⁸ See KMK, *PISA 2000 - Die Länder der Bundesrepublik Deutschland im Vergleich – Zusammenfassung zentraler Befunde* [summary of key findings], Berlin: Max-Planck-Institut für Bildungsforschung, 2002, particularly the table on p. 19.

⁹⁸⁹ See S.V. Schnepf, p. 27.

⁹⁹⁰ K.H. Gruber p. 202.

⁹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁹⁹² See C. Führ, pp. 23-25.

⁹⁹³ “two completely different and opposing German states and social systems came into existence. Schools and universities were drawn into intellectual and political disputes, becoming an arena of struggle. Only with dissolution of the blocs and the reunification of Germany in 1990, accompanied by intensified integration of educational policy within the European Community, did a new chapter begin in the history of German education”, *Ibid.*, p. 24.

‘democratization of education’⁹⁹⁴ and the need to definitively replace the elements of the education system that had played such an important role in the spread of the Nazi madness. However, the outcomes of this process were very different in the two contexts. In the East, school reform was already under way through the Law on Democratization of the German School of 1946, brought in by the central administration in Berlin and destined to be extended to the entire Soviet occupied zone and, therefore, to the German Democratic Republic (the DDR or GDR); “this ‘unified school law’ linked educational reform and old social democratic and communist objectives [...] Eight years of primary schooling for everyone were now followed by four years of upper school with specializations in modern languages, mathematics and natural sciences, and classics”⁹⁹⁵. Thus, a centralized governance of education was established in the East, with a Ministry of National Education directly responsible for its structure and content, acting as the guarantor of the ideology underlying the curricula together with the National Academy of Education. From 1959 the length of primary school went from eight to ten years and technical education was strongly emphasized, whilst with another two years it was possible to obtain the diploma that allowed enrolment in university, although these additional years of education were accessible for a very limited number of students, based on the universities’ capacity to accept them⁹⁹⁶. The specific characteristics of this system would be eradicated by the reunification, following which the new Länder would substantially adopt the structure of the educational system operating in West Germany. Here, where a federal system had been chosen, during the reconstruction of the early 1950s, it was decided first and foremost to salvage what had been good about the education model of the Weimar Republic⁹⁹⁷; this choice would give rise to major criticism from those who saw this attitude as a simple desire for restoration⁹⁹⁸, and, precisely for this reason, would drive a fervent debate in the 1960s on the need for new reforms. However, here the democratization of school was a given: the number of people who accessed

⁹⁹⁴ As Puaca states, talking about west Germany: “it is not easy to define what democratization, specifically ‘democratic education’ meant in the postwar German schools” Brian M. Puaca, *Learning Democracy – Education reform in West Germany, 1945-1965*, New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009, p. 2.

⁹⁹⁵ C. Führ, pp. 32-33.

⁹⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 33-34.

⁹⁹⁷ “Many postwar reformers envisioned the experimental schools of the empire and Weimar Republic as models for the postwar rebuilding of education” even if “the legacies of education during the empire and Weimar Republic were by no means clearly defined entities, as different segments of the teaching profession appropriated the past in accordance with their own convictions” B.M. Puaca, p. 14.

⁹⁹⁸ See C. Führ, p. 30.

education in the 1950s grew enormously, as did that of those who managed to enter university⁹⁹⁹. The debate heated up, however, because of a report published by the KMK which - taking the outcomes of an OECD conference held in Washington as a starting point - linked education and growth, showing the growing international tendency to view education as a general right, something which meant that greater attention had to be paid to the issue of inequalities¹⁰⁰⁰. It was the idea of education as a civil right that one finds, for example, in Ralf Dahrendorf's thought, one of the main protagonists in this debate. This was the context in which, in 1964, George Picht published a series of articles in the weekly *Christ und Welt* entitled 'The German Educational Catastrophe', arguing that the very low percentage of people in the country who had obtained the *Abitur* (6%) was the unequivocal sign of the need for a radical reform of the education system. These articles were the beginning of a broad debate that Dahrendorf himself joined, some time later, in 1967, writing about the education crisis in Germany and underlining, among the main points, how the high selectivity of the German school system was in fact generating inequalities¹⁰⁰¹. However - although this debate on education had been taken seriously by politicians, who responded with a reform programme approved by the KMK and a series of provisions promoted by the individual *Länder*¹⁰⁰² - the selection aspect was never really questioned and remained substantially unchanged even after the reforms, above all due to the political differences on this point between the SPD and the CSU/CDU, already mentioned above.

Hence the 'catastrophe' caused by the results of the PISA tests was not the first one recorded, but rather the second, and, in like manner but more so than that of the 1960s, it had a very significant impact on the reforms that were implemented shortly thereafter. However, it should be stressed that the outcome of the tests, however unexpected and shocking for public opinion, was not in itself the trigger for the reform process, which had already been in some way envisaged, but rather a catalyst

⁹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 35-36.

¹⁰⁰¹ When talking about the transition between primary and secondary school he writes: "This is the first point at which a selective process becomes effective, which is rather surprising in the context of the German educational system, since it is almost entirely public, state-controlled, state-supported, and there is no legal or constitutional right of selection on the basis of any kind of privilege - whether this is financial or family status or what have you. Nevertheless, selection at this age does in fact lead to tremendous inequalities of opportunity, and although this was not entirely unknown before, it had never been documented until a few years ago" R. Dahrendorf, p. 141.

¹⁰⁰² "All levels of the school system, from the primary school to the sixth form and vocational training, were 'reformed', and new types of school (such as technical secondary schools) and a new type of college (the degree-granting college of higher education) as well as correspondence courses were created" C. Führ, p. 37.

able to enormously accelerate its development¹⁰⁰³. In the 1990s, probably in part thanks to the diffusion of international theories about New Public Management, that have been already mentioned many times, discussions had already begun in Germany on the need to measure student performance and to establish some reference standards that could facilitate comparative measurements.

The main problems revealed by the tests of 2000 concerned the inequalities within the system, the same ones highlighted in the debate in the 1960s. In fact, Germany proved to be the country with the highest rate of social inequality¹⁰⁰⁴ among all of the OECD members participants, the one where the correlation between students' social class and their achievements was highest¹⁰⁰⁵; "All together the PISA picture of Germany showed pronounced disparities in performance by region, social background, migration and gender"¹⁰⁰⁶. The most important issue here was the fact that social selection ended up being much more significant than selection based on students' abilities; their path was not really determined by the talents they possessed, but rather by where they came from and their background, which was even truer for those with a migration background¹⁰⁰⁷. "Using PISA and TIMSS data we studied", says Schnepf, "the kind of pupil characteristics that accompany unequal tracking in the transition process. Both surveys indicate that boys from low socioeconomic backgrounds and living in rural areas have the lowest chance of being tracked to most prestigious schools even if their school performance is equal to that of their counterparts"¹⁰⁰⁸. The tracking system, the one that obliges students, as early as ten or twelve years old, to make a choice that actually determines their entire subsequent path, seems to have a 'segregating effect'¹⁰⁰⁹, and therefore constitutes a very significant part of the problem of the German system recorded by the international tests, as underlined on several occasions by Andreas Schleicher himself¹⁰¹⁰ - the coordinator of the

¹⁰⁰³ "PISA cannot be seen as the only trigger for the reforms. On the contrary, PISA came at a time when reform-minded reflections and initial measures were already underway, in part influenced by the TIMSS results. However, PISA accelerated and amplified these reforms and measures, thus acting as a catalyst." T. Raidt, p. 45.

¹⁰⁰⁴ See K.H. Gruber, p. 203.

¹⁰⁰⁵ "[...] if one measures the difference between the reading competence of pupils from families belonging to the upper quarter of the social spectrum and pupils from families belonging to the lower quarter of social spectrum, Germany showed the biggest difference of all countries taking part in PISA 2000" H. Ertl, *Educational Standards and the Changing Discourse on Education: The Reception and Consequences of the PISA Study in Germany*, 'Oxford Review of Education', vol. 32, no. 5, 2006, pp. 619–34, p. 620.

¹⁰⁰⁶ M. Prenzel, p. 243.

¹⁰⁰⁷ See H. Ertl, *Educational Standards and the Changing Discourse on Education*, p. 620.

¹⁰⁰⁸ S.V. Schnepf, p. 47.

¹⁰⁰⁹ See M. Davoli e H. Entorf, p. 2.

¹⁰¹⁰ See for example his quote on The Atlantic's article *The Great German School Turnaround*, 3rd November 2015.

PISA programme for the OECD – who is actually German. As difficult as it may be to comprehend given the analyses cited and data examined above, not even this time, after this second ‘catastrophe’, would the early selection of the German education system be truly called into question.

To show the impact that the PISA test results had in Germany, now the political, media and academic reactions to this catastrophe will be examined. In general, for everyone, it was undoubtedly a ‘wake-up call’¹⁰¹¹, not least because the knowledge of performing so badly in the field of education risked the country's economic solidity being questioned as well: “PISA results were a mobilizing force in Germany because they were put in direct analogy to economic developments, ongoing globalisation, and international competition”¹⁰¹².

As for the media reactions to the PISA test results, Raidt relates how some news on the rankings leaked to the German media before their official publication and even before the completed report was available to officials¹⁰¹³, which contributes to explain the climate of expectation that was created and the enormity of subsequent reactions. For months, as already stated above, newspapers and television discussed the deplorable results obtained and even reached the point where expressions such as ‘before-PISA’ and ‘after-PISA’ were being used, seeing the event as an unprecedented watershed¹⁰¹⁴. Then another important fact occurred, linked to the introduction of a new vocabulary concerning education: “terms that previously appeared marginal in the field of education, are now used more frequently. These include the terms competencies, qualifications, efficiency and human resources. With this new vocabulary came the introduction of concepts that represent a new way of thinking about education or in other words: a new understanding of education. This conception of education includes questions about the purpose of education, its content and the functions it should perform”¹⁰¹⁵. It is therefore clear that the way the news was reported, the scale of the public debate it generated, the pervasiveness of this new vocabulary, and the discussion’s ability to permeate all media, had an impact on political decisions too¹⁰¹⁶.

¹⁰¹¹ See M. Davoli & H. Entorf, p. 4.

¹⁰¹² D. Niemann et al., *PISA and its consequences: Shaping education policies through international comparisons*, ‘Eur J Educ.’ 2017; 52: 175–183, p. 178.

¹⁰¹³ See T. Raidt, p. 75.

¹⁰¹⁴ See K.H. Gruber, p. 195.

¹⁰¹⁵ T. Raidt, p. 11.

¹⁰¹⁶ Ibid., p. 77.

As regards the reaction of the pedagogical section of academia, the main consequence of the test results was an evident shift; whereas previously the absolute centrality of the theoretical side was in force, and this anticipated that educational aims were deduced from the philosophical discourse on human beings and communities, now the empirical side gradually emerged from the shadows, until it became the prevailing one, together with comparative analysis¹⁰¹⁷. There would be much discussion about competencies from this time on, often taking as a reference, as the *Klieme Report* does (which is the result, as it will be seen shortly, of the work of the main German experts in the pedagogical/didactic field), the definition that Weinert had proposed within the context of the DeSeCo Project¹⁰¹⁸, it too being born of a more pragmatic than theoretical approach. “The ‘basic competencies’” reads the report “can also be defined in very concrete terms: they refer to the ability to self-determinedly participate in society, in the various dimensions of action - moral, cognitive, social and individual”¹⁰¹⁹.

On the political front, as mentioned above, the foundations for a new phase of reforming the education system had already been laid in the 1990s¹⁰²⁰, but the acceleration prompted by the PISA test results was so strong that already on the day the results were published (4th December 2001)¹⁰²¹ the KMK, ardently insisting on the importance of the transition from an education of a still too theoretical nature to a more practical one aimed at the development of students’ competencies, agreed to make public a list of some of the priority areas for intervention: a) support for students with greater learning difficulties, particularly in lower secondary and schools for students with special educational needs; b) quality assurance, that is also based on the indication of minimum standards and ambitious but achievable learning objectives; c) timely identification of weaker students in reading, including through targeted teacher training; d) a review of general school regulations aimed at making the most of learning time, including the issue of school entry, transition and support for the more gifted

¹⁰¹⁷ See H. Ertl, *Educational Standards and the Changing Discourse on Education*, p. 627.

¹⁰¹⁸ See F.E. Weinert in D.S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik (edited by), *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*, p. 45.

¹⁰¹⁹ E. Klieme et al., *Zur Entwicklung nationaler Bildungsstandards. Eine Expertise* [Klieme report], Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung: Bonn, Berlin: BMBF 2003, 224 S., p. 66.

¹⁰²⁰ Raidt on p. 91 cites, for example, the report published in 1992 by the North Rhine-Westphalia which takes into consideration various requests for reform from the world of work and, therefore, the need to adapt schools to the challenges of the future.

¹⁰²¹ Naturally, this was the moment when the results were shared with the public. Officials and governments were aware of them well before this diffusion took place and this explains how the KMK were able to provide such an immediate response, which had evidently been prepared beforehand.

students; e) better use of learning time, with additional educational programmes to support the development of language skills from early childhood and in primary school; f) development of teachers' professional skills through both initial training and continuing training, with particular attention paid to the issue of responsibility and leadership¹⁰²². These areas of action would be the point of reference for the measures adopted by the Länder in response to the crisis and would be embraced by the 2003 educational report presented by the KMK: 1) measures for the improvement of language skills in the pre-school period; 2) measures for better integration between preschool and primary school stages; 3) measures to improve primary education and, in particular, reading skills and the understanding of mathematical and scientific concepts; 4) measures to support disadvantaged students, especially those with a migrant background; 5) measures to ensure the quality of teaching and schools based on mandatory standards and on a standard-oriented evaluation; 6) measures to improve the professional skills of teachers, particularly in relation to methodological competencies and the ability to identify students with difficulties; 7) measures to expand school programmes to all-day, including extra-curricular courses¹⁰²³. Simultaneously with these practical reform efforts, which were fully legitimised by the results of the tests¹⁰²⁴, the German political class began to look around in order to learn from the countries that had surprisingly placed themselves at the top of the international rankings and, in particular, at Finland. There were veritable 'mass pilgrimages' in which "hundreds of German MPs [and] officials from the Länder ministries of education [...] travelled to [...] the PISA 'champion' country. [...] References to a recent visit to Finland were supposed to give any kind of PISA-related comment extra credibility"¹⁰²⁵.

What occurred in these political reactions was a general acknowledgment of the need for a paradigm shift in education¹⁰²⁶ (which have been anticipated above, when examining the reactions of the academic world), that is to say, a shift away from the non-quantifiable *Bildung*¹⁰²⁷ focused on input

¹⁰²² See KMK Archiv der Pressemitteilungen, *Schulisches Lernen muss stärker anwendungsorientiert sein*, 4th December 2001 on KMK website.

¹⁰²³ See H. Avenarius et al., *Bildungsbericht für Deutschland - Erste Befunde*, KMK, Leske + Budrich, Opladen 2003, pp. 258-259.

¹⁰²⁴ See J. Ringarp, *PISA lends legitimacy: A study of education policy changes in Germany and Sweden after 2000*, 'European Educational Research Journal', 15(4), 447-461, 2016, p. 451.

¹⁰²⁵ K.H. Gruber, p. 203.

¹⁰²⁶ Raidt on p. 19 speaks of precisely this (*Paradigmenwechsel*).

¹⁰²⁷ "Although the traditional German term *Bildung* is often translated as *education*, the notion of *Bildung* differs substantially from the Anglo-American notion of education. It is particularly influenced by the vision of *Humanistische Bildung*, which focuses on the development of the individual; that is, the perfection of the personality of an individual

and on the theoretical basis of education, towards a form of output control¹⁰²⁸, paying much more attention to the truly practical side and closer to the Anglo-American notion of literacy, “where educational standards and assessment of students’ achievements are central”¹⁰²⁹. One can talk of an openness to the empirical perspective, spurred by the results of the tests, and in policy making “the empirical turn became synonymous with introductions of output-oriented governance methods”, that is, methods focused on data collection and accountability mechanisms¹⁰³⁰. Having chosen this model, it was now necessary to have both a basis for the constant measurement of data, which would make it possible to have a point of reference for the trend of performances, and reference standards based on which one could determine whether that trend was satisfactory or not. The political responses to the German educational ‘catastrophe’ therefore took the form of two very important innovations: the introduction of the National Education Standards¹⁰³¹, and the implementation of assessments of achievements at the national level. On 25th June 2002, the KMK already decided to work on what would become the heart of the post-PISA reforms¹⁰³², that is to say, the drawing up of minimum standards that could be considered mandatory¹⁰³³. Consequently, a group of experts coordinated by Prof. Eckhard Klieme was given a mandate to draw up a report *Zur Entwicklung nationaler Bildungsstandards*, that is to say, *For the Development of National Educational Standards*¹⁰³⁴. In the reports’ introduction, both Federal Minister of Education Edelgard Buhlman (of the SPD) and KMK

[...] the esthetic, ethical, and intellectual development of the human being was at the center of attention, whereas economic and social consideration were of no particular relevance” K. Neumann et al., p. 547-548

¹⁰²⁸ See K.H. Gruber, p. 203.

¹⁰²⁹ M. Davoli & H. Entorf, p. 4.

¹⁰³⁰ Standing out among these tools is the *Bildungsbericht*, published by the KMK every two years starting from 2003 (in fact the second came out in 2006 and *then* every two years), and other similar reports produced by the individual Länder. See D. Niemann et al., p. 178.

¹⁰³¹ It is very interesting to note that the report drawn up by the experts led by Klieme already clarifies how the standards should be seen as a historical product, not something that has descended from above (see E. Klieme et. al, p. 58). This approach is very different from what was analysed in the DeSeCo Project and, in particular, from the contribution of Delors and Draxler, where key competencies were linked to universal human rights in order to give them a form of universally recognized legitimacy that lay beyond any differences between contexts. In contrast, the approach here was very pragmatic and based on the need to build a historical consensus around the question of the objectives of education. See E. Klieme et al., pp 62-64.

¹⁰³² See K. Neumann et al., p. 553.

¹⁰³³ See E. Klieme et al., p. 14. In reality, this idea of being mandatory, outside what is written in the official documents, is very difficult to translate into practice, in part because teachers firmly opposed a system of sanctions or the publication of test results from individual schools for a ‘blame and shame’ perspective. See K.H. Gruber, p. 205

¹⁰³⁴ This report, already quoted above, was used as a basis for the implementation of the standards, seen by the political class as a panacea, even although the very experts who had drafted it had strongly insisted on the need to include the standards policy within a comprehensive overall project of structural reform - see E. Klieme et al., p.15; a recommendation that was essentially ignored - see K.H. Gruber, p. 204.

President Karin Wolff (of the CDU)¹⁰³⁵ argued for the need to set standards in order to ensure the quality of the German education system¹⁰³⁶. Briefly summarizing the content of the report, it says that the standards set for the basic disciplines and foreign languages must be simple, comprehensible and mandatory, and have two fundamental functions: 1) they serve to set minimum goals that everyone must achieve, which must guide the work of teachers (whose training must take account of this aspect), and must be included in the curricula of the individual Länder¹⁰³⁷; 2) they serve to facilitate the collection of data for the monitoring and evaluation of the system through standardized tests¹⁰³⁸ that must not, however, be used as a tool for individual student evaluation¹⁰³⁹.

Whilst it is true that the introduction of the standards and the related tests formed the core of the post-PISA reforms in Germany, it is also true that the foundations for this innovation had already been laid at the end of the 1990s¹⁰⁴⁰, as has already been pointed out. In 1997, after a long discussion, the 16 federal states had in fact agreed to introduce standardized measuring tools, and in 1999 the idea of centralized school-leaving exams had also reached such a broad consensus that they were even introduced in some states governed by the Social Democrats¹⁰⁴¹. However, as has also been said above, the new element produced by PISA was the massive legitimization of these movements that were already underway thanks to the empirical data produced by a supranational body and the consequent acceleration of the process. Therefore, July 2003 saw the arrival of the guidelines for the National Standards for German, mathematics and a foreign language (English or French)¹⁰⁴² to be compulsorily achieved after ten years of education, and at the end of the same year, after partial

¹⁰³⁵ The unity of the parties in this area was almost total, whilst the opposition to the introduction of the new standards, given the spur provided by the bad PISA test results, was rather limited. The GEW (Trade Union for Education) was part of it, and since February 2003 had noted that there was a need for structural reforms to correct the problem of early selection in the German education system, and that the standards - which are not suitable for "either individual assessment, certification or selection" - risked putting new pressures on students and teachers, especially if used to draw up a league table of schools. See E. Klieme et al., p. 203.

¹⁰³⁶ See E. Klieme et al., p. 5.

¹⁰³⁷ See F. Waldow, p. 478.

¹⁰³⁸ See H. Ertl, pp. 621-622.

¹⁰³⁹ Right from the start, the SPD group in the Bundestag opposed this possible distortion, and they also feared that the tests could provoke untoward competition between schools if used improperly. See E. Klieme et al., p. 199.

¹⁰⁴⁰ See H. Ertl p. 628.

¹⁰⁴¹ See F. Waldow, p. 478 and J. Ringarp, p. 450.

¹⁰⁴² This choice naturally derived from a desire to improve in the areas covered by the PISA tests, but it has not escaped commentators' notice that such a functionalist approach risks some fundamental elements such as, for example, the teaching of music, being left behind, and it is interesting to note the attempt that Raidt reports to link the effects such teaching has on intelligence to the competency framework; it is a way of finding room, in the new framework, even for things that lie outside the narrow measurement scope of the PISA tests. See T. Raidt, p. 160.

revision within the KMK, it was agreed that starting from the next school year they would be introduced in all of the Länder, meaning in all schools, in the curricula and as a basis for initial and continuing teacher training. It was also decided that from 2006 there would be standardized measurements to evaluate the achievement of these standards¹⁰⁴³. Precisely in order to develop these measuring tools, the *Institut zur Qualitätsentwicklung im Bildungswesen (IQB)*¹⁰⁴⁴ was founded in 2004; “this represents a precedent in educational policy in Germany since the 1950s because it is for the first time that the KMK [...] has agreed on a national body that is responsible for quality assurance in education beyond the level of the individual Länder”¹⁰⁴⁵.

Alongside these measures brought into play by the KMK and implemented by the individual Länder, the Federal Ministry of Education would structure its own ‘post-PISA agenda’ in which it would place great emphasis on the promotion of reading, mathematics and science competencies through dedicated projects¹⁰⁴⁶, on the attention given to disadvantaged students, particularly those with a migration background, and on increasing the number of all-day schools¹⁰⁴⁷.

The direct consequences of this reform policy - regional and national - on teaching were a move away from extremely detailed curricula - previously conceived of as a long list of inputs assigned to each discipline, and limiting for teachers - towards a simplified form of defining general objectives, based on the idea of output measurement, which therefore left individual schools¹⁰⁴⁸ with greater autonomy¹⁰⁴⁹.

In all of this it is important to underline that there is no trace of the structural reforms that could have corrected the distortions associated with the early-tracking and thereby tackle the inequalities connected to the very structure of the school system. This topic effectively remained a taboo¹⁰⁵⁰ as it

¹⁰⁴³ See H. Ertl, *Educational Standards and the Changing Discourse on Education*, p. 622.

¹⁰⁴⁴ The Institute is housed within the Humboldt University of Berlin and in the performance of its function continues to update national education standards, to measure their actual achievement, and to support their implementation. See T. Raidt, p. 93.

¹⁰⁴⁵ H. Ertl, *Educational Standards and the Changing Discourse on Education*, p. 622.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Among these, the SINUS programme on mathematical competencies was very important and already implemented in 1998 as a pilot project following the bad TIMSS results. See M. Prenzel et al., p. 242.

¹⁰⁴⁷ See H. Ertl, *Educational Standards and the Changing Discourse on Education*, p. 623.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 624-625.

¹⁰⁴⁹ School autonomy was already being discussed in the pre-PISA period, but the development of this concept up to that point remained essentially very limited compared to what had happened in other countries. See D. Niemann et al., p. 178.

¹⁰⁵⁰ See K.H. Gruber, p. 205.

has been already said and was completely ignored by both the KMK and the federal government¹⁰⁵¹, even though it was the most important of the issues raised by the test results themselves¹⁰⁵².

Differentiation in the lower secondary stage had indeed been the battleground of the political debate on education in Germany since the 1960s, with progressives calling for an ‘comprehensization’ of the lower secondary school, and conservatives defending the ‘three-tier model’; it was precisely the inability to find a political middle ground on the most important issue that meant that this topic was essentially ignored in the reform plan, and, it being impossible to find a compromise, it was decided to avoid the problem¹⁰⁵³. However, according to Davoli and Entorf, some Länder, even where early-tracking had not been eliminated, saw positive developments that reduced the segregation, introducing more homogeneity between the different schools as well¹⁰⁵⁴.

Yet it cannot be said that looking at the evolution of German performance in the PISA tests from 2000 to 2015 there has not been an upward trajectory in the results; Germany has reached and exceeded the OECD average in all three areas examined, reaching 9th position in Reading, 11th in Mathematics and 10th in Science among the OECD member countries participating in the tests. A notable ascent. It could be said that having implemented national tests at different levels that are very similar to the PISA surveys has ‘trained’ students and teachers, who have therefore been able to interpret the tests better. This is my own view, especially since some alarming aspects such as the poor performance of students with migrant backgrounds, have essentially remained unchanged, so that the gap between students from parents with a high level of education and those from less educated families has remained well above the OECD average¹⁰⁵⁵.

To conclude, Hartong seems to be right when arguing that the post-PISA education reforms in Germany - although the tests have primarily been used as legitimization¹⁰⁵⁶ - are an “isomorphic adjustment to a ruling model in the transnational field of education ruled to a great extent by

¹⁰⁵¹ See H. Ertl, *Educational Standards and the Changing Discourse on Education*, p. 621.

¹⁰⁵² Gruber says that this removal was strong enough to make Andreas Schleicher, who kept talking in the German media about the negative effects of the highly selective organization of the German system, the *bête noire* of politicians, who were intent on not addressing the subject at all. See K.H. Gruber, p. 205.

¹⁰⁵³ See F. Waldow, pp. 479-480.

¹⁰⁵⁴ See M. Davoli & H. Entorf, p. 5.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁰⁵⁶ See J. Ringarp, p. 451.

international organization programs and networks”¹⁰⁵⁷, a kind of colonization of the old methods with new forms of control, all aimed at “overruling pedagogical work by the rules of economic management”¹⁰⁵⁸.

Section 3: The Italian ‘Inertia’

3.1 From Berlinguer to Renzi: Continuity in Discontinuity

The structure of the Italian education system has already been analysed in the first chapter, highlighting its distinctive characteristics and development, particularly through an examination of the concepts of autonomy, obligation and cycles. An attempt was then made to retrace the evolution of school policies from the end of the 1990s up to the experience of the *Buona Scuola*, in other words, the period of interest for this research. This section aims to identify, including through comparison with the just examined Finnish and German experiences, what impact ILSAs and decisions taken at the European level (closely connected to the dynamics of the assessment of competencies that, as it has been seen, international tests, and in particular PISA, are based on), have had on the Italian education system.

Examples of attention to the international context, as has been already said, are not lacking, even in historical periods that far precede the one that is the focus of this analysis. Two of them that date back to the early 1900s have been already mentioned in the first chapter: one is the report by Credaro on the Orlando Bill in 1904¹⁰⁵⁹, in which choices made in other countries are reported at length to justify the need for education reform in Italy; the other, a case of direct influence of determinations made in international contexts on the national education system, is the decision, also already mentioned, to raise compulsory education to 14 years of age, taken by Gentile after the 1919 Washington conference¹⁰⁶⁰.

¹⁰⁵⁷ It is no coincidence that the official website of the OECD-PISA tests gives great attention to the German case and to the ability to change following the results of these international surveys.

¹⁰⁵⁸ S. Hartong, *Overcoming resistance to change: PISA, school reform in Germany and the example of Lower Saxony*, ‘Journal of Education Policy’, 27:6, 747-760, 2012, p. 749.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Report of the committee on the draft of the Orlando Law’s provisions for elementary schools and teachers, sitting 21st May 1904, pp. 5-11.

¹⁰⁶⁰ See G. Ricuperati, p. 123 and ILO, International Labour Conference, First Annual Meeting, Washington 1919.

Leaping forward several decades, during which time there was obviously no shortage of references to the international context in the discussion on education, and approaching the threshold of the period of interest here, the first National Conference on schools deserves a mention: strongly required by parliament and opened in January 1990 by the then Minister of Education Sergio Mattarella, it is important also because during it the question of the evaluation of the school system was analysed with reference to the experiences in this area of other European countries¹⁰⁶¹.

The period under consideration here, as has been said, coincides with the great diffusion and exponential growth of the public importance of international tests on students' competencies that were discussed in the second chapter; in Italy it covers twelve different governments: Prodi (1996-1998), D'Alema (1998-1999), D'Alema II (1999-2000), Amato II (2000-2001), Berlusconi II (2001-2005), Berlusconi III (2005-2006), Prodi II (2006-2008), Berlusconi IV (2008-2011), Monti (2011-2013), Letta (2013-2014), Renzi (2014-2016) and Gentiloni (2016-2017). In the same period - twenty years - there were nine Ministers of Education in all: Luigi Berlinguer, Tullio De Mauro, Letizia Moratti, Giuseppe Fioroni, Mariastella Gelmini, Francesco Profumo, Maria Chiara Carrozza, Stefania Giannini and Valeria Fedeli. This list reveals one of the most obvious problems of the Italian political system, namely its instability, which also has an impact on the chances of implementing long-term reforms in all areas, including of course education. And yet, in the educational sphere, it is striking that the general tendencies that one finds in the individual measures seem to follow a single path; from 1997 to 2016 it is as if a single process was developing, notwithstanding the different political orientations of the governments and the very different ideological approaches of the individual ministers who have followed one another at the helm of the Trastevere¹⁰⁶² ministry. In fact Bellatalla in 2016 even went so far as to argue, evidently with a very critical perspective, that "the school autonomy intended in a company-oriented sense [...], the United States model for didactics and assessment, the prejudices of local policies and the increasing curricular provincialism, the idea of students as clients [...], the continuous and always increasing cuts to school resources [...] all these elements applied to the Italian education system without any interruption since 1997"¹⁰⁶³. The origins

¹⁰⁶¹ See Ministero della pubblica istruzione, *ATTI DELLA CONFERENZA NAZIONALE SULLA SCUOLA. ROMA, 30 GENNAIO- 3 FEBBRAIO 1990. 1 SEDUTE PLENARIE DEL 30/1 E DEL 31/1. SEDUTE DELLA 1a E 2° COMMISSIONE*, Caltanissetta: Salvatore Sciascia Editore, 1992.

¹⁰⁶² The place in Rome where the Ministry of education is located nowadays.

¹⁰⁶³ L. Bellatalla, *School politics and innovative experiences in Italy (1861-2015)*, 'Acta Paedagogica Vilnensia', 370, pp. 114-124, 2016, pp. 120-121.

of this process that began at the end of the 1990s, can be found in those drives that have been seen taking place in the same period in Finland and Germany, but with very different outcomes, also due to the different results obtained in the first PISA surveys. The wave of New Public Management (NMP) theories therefore also swept Italy along and, in particular, Italian education¹⁰⁶⁴, and at the same time, the concept of ‘employability’ borrowed from the Anglo-Saxon world was gaining ground, although the model that would be identified as a reference in terms of the connection between school and work was the German dual system¹⁰⁶⁵. Thus, Italy too, albeit a ‘latecomer’ regarding evaluation policies¹⁰⁶⁶, at the end of the 20th century, adopted an education governance scheme combining decentralization and accountability in order to ensure greater quality and efficiency in the education system.

It has been seen how, from Berlinguer onwards, school autonomy became the mainstay of the Italian system (and this is obviously the aspect of decentralization), and it is no coincidence that it was Berlinguer himself who transformed the CEDE, the European Centre of Education, into INVALSI, that is to say, the institute in charge of evaluating the education system¹⁰⁶⁷. In fact, from the moment it was decided to adopt a model of diffused responsibility and subsidiarity was systematized, it became necessary to balance this loss of direct power by central bodies by assigning them the one of monitoring and checking the achievement of objectives through evaluation. It was thus possible to maintain a balance in the quality of the services provided, without everything having to be directly governed from the centre. This was exactly what Berlinguer had in mind when he drew up his reform and it is a conviction that none of his ministerial successors would significantly question. Talking of subsidiarity, this refers here to the relationship between the various institutional levels involved in school governance, or rather, to vertical subsidiarity, but it is important to note how, starting from

¹⁰⁶⁴ “As in other Southern European countries, this preoccupation with efficiency and quality seems closely linked to the willingness to adhere to international norms and discourses on educational governance” L. Mentini & A. Levatino, *A “three-legged model”: (De)constructing school autonomy, accountability, and innovation in the Italian National Evaluation System*, ‘European Educational Research Journal’, 1-26, 2023, p. 13.

¹⁰⁶⁵ See N. Giannelli & V. Sergi, *Employability as a policy goal of the dual training system school-work of internship in Italian high schools, with a look at the German model*, Working Papers 1702, University of Urbino Carlo Bo, Department of Economics, Society & Politics - Scientific Committee - L. Stefanini & G. Travaglini, revised 2017, particularly pp. 1-2 on the concept of ‘employability’.

¹⁰⁶⁶ See L. Mentini & A. Levatino, p. 3.

¹⁰⁶⁷ D.Lgs. 20th July 1999, No. 258. The inception of INVALSI was the consequence of another choice made in Article 137 of D.Lgs. 112/1998, which was discussed at length in the first chapter, namely that of leaving the state in charge of the evaluation of the education system, but entrusting it to an autonomous body, separate from the ministry. The institute would also ensure Italian participation in international projects (including PISA).

precisely this period, the role of some non-institutional stakeholders becomes increasingly important, as they, through research and providing the institutions with support, including some experiments, would try, sometimes successfully, to influence Italian school policies¹⁰⁶⁸. Among these, three that particularly stand out are the Fondazione per la Scuola founded in 2000 by the Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo¹⁰⁶⁹, the TreeLLLe Association (formed in 2001) that is directly supported by the same Fondazione per la Scuola¹⁰⁷⁰, and the Fondazione Agnelli¹⁰⁷¹.

It has been already seen in the first chapter how the school reform of the 1990s was part of a more comprehensive process of public administration reform of a neo-liberal nature¹⁰⁷², which as far as education was concerned, was certainly also the result of a European drive, deriving from a growing commitment by the Commission - particularly through Delors' white paper and then Cresson's, of 1993 and 1995 respectively - which, as it has been said, would give rise to the Lisbon Strategy of 2000. The Italian reformers' objective was, following this path, to overhaul a set up seen as 'ineffective' and 'overburdening' by means of a 'soft-type decentralization'¹⁰⁷³; however, the effect would be a sort of decentralized centralism that was no more efficient than the original model. This outcome had various causes that Berlinguer himself analysed in his 2014 book *Ri-creazione*: among these, the most significant were the widespread opposition from the world of schools, and the inability of politicians to fully explain the characteristics of this new model, and to thereby build a broad consensus on it, that is one involving teachers, managers, students, families and society as a whole¹⁰⁷⁴. On the one hand, there are those like Polesel who attribute the failure of the Italian system of autonomy to the very limited power vested in the regions¹⁰⁷⁵, on the other, scholars like Martini points out that decentralization, if interpreted incorrectly, can produce new inequalities and greater

¹⁰⁶⁸ L. Mentini & A. Levatino, p. 7.

¹⁰⁶⁹ See Fondazione per la Scuola website.

¹⁰⁷⁰ The name (phonetically expressing "three 'L's" in Italian) references the acronym of Lifelong Learning, which lies at the centre the of the associations' attention. The Cariplo Foundation and UniCredit also support TreeLLLe. See TreeLLLe Association website.

¹⁰⁷¹ Founded 1966, since 2008 it has primarily dealt with educational issues. See Fondazione Agnelli website.

¹⁰⁷² See P. Landri, *Governing by Standards: The Fabrication of Austerity in the Italian Education System*, 'Education Inquiry', 5:1, 2014, p. 27.

¹⁰⁷³ See E. Grimaldi & R. Serpieri, *The Reforming Trajectory of the Italian Educational System. Site-Based Management and Decentralisation as a Challenge for Democratic Discourse*, 'Journal of Educational Administration and History', v42 n1 p75-95 Feb 2010, pp. 81-82.

¹⁰⁷⁴ See L. Berlinguer con C. Guetti, *Ri-creazione - Una scuola di qualità per tutti e per ciascuno*, Napoli: Liguori, 2014, pp. 20-21.

¹⁰⁷⁵ See J. Polesel, *Educational outcomes, policy reform and cultural capital in Italian secondary schools*, 'Comparative Education', 46:2, 173-187, 2010, p. 178.

inefficiency¹⁰⁷⁶ and therefore argues that the cause of Italian problems should not be seen in this lack of transfer of sovereignty from the centre. However one views it, it is difficult to not see, in the system chosen for the governance of education in Italy, the institutional hypocrisy that Grimaldi and Serpieri speak of, namely, that despite the great rhetorical insistence on autonomy, the hierarchical structure and centralism of the Italian school system were far from erased¹⁰⁷⁷, notwithstanding the initial intentions. This point will be mentioned again shortly.

Alongside the influence of the European discussion¹⁰⁷⁸ on the so-called Berlinguer Reform, international surveys, and in particular those of the IEA, also played a role, which the minister himself refers to several times in his *La scuola nuova* both to justify the need for change, given the unsatisfactory results obtained by Italian students¹⁰⁷⁹, and when describing the new national evaluation system, structured based on the results of experimental projects, including ones carried out in collaboration with external players such as the IEA itself, but also the OECD and the European Union¹⁰⁸⁰. Berlinguer is therefore responsible for laying the first stone of the reform that would actually be defined over the course of almost twenty years, and which would have evaluation and autonomy as its fundamental elements with a view to the new centrality of competencies¹⁰⁸¹. Shortly afterwards, as it has been seen, Letizia Moratti decided to annul the reform of the cycles, but kept the focus on these aspects, making some steps forward; in fact, with D.Lgs 286 of 2004, the national evaluation service of the education and training system was established “with the aim of evaluating its efficiency and effectiveness, framing evaluation within the international context”¹⁰⁸²; INVALSI, schools and training institutions, together with regions, provinces and municipalities, to the extent to which they were responsible, had to cooperate to ensure the quality of the education system.

¹⁰⁷⁶ “To avoid deviations and the risk of the equal right of citizens to a high standard of education being compromised, it [decentralization] requires - in addition to a preliminary clarification of the objectives that one intends to pursue - the fulfilment of at least three conditions: a clear definition of the responsibilities assigned to the different levels of government in the educational system, the introduction of effective monitoring systems and tools at the centre, and the adoption of compensatory measures where necessary”. A. Martini, *Il rendimento scolastico italiano: valori nazionali e differenze regionali*, in ‘il Mulino, Rivista trimestrale di cultura e di politica’ 3/2005, pp. 473-483, p. 482.

¹⁰⁷⁷ See E. Grimaldi & R. Serpieri, p. 93.

¹⁰⁷⁸ A. E. Briguglio states that with the Berlinguer Reform “Italian schooling holds a dialogue with Europe”, p. 4

¹⁰⁷⁹ See L. Berlinguer, *La scuola nuova*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁰⁸¹ Berlinguer insists that disciplinary knowledge should be increasingly accompanied by key competencies, “which take the form of mental structures that are capable of transferring their value to different fields and of generating other knowledge and competencies” L. Berlinguer, *La scuola nuova*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁸² D.Lgs 286/2004, Art. 1, comma 1.

Continuity can also be seen in the fact that in her *La nostra scuola* minister Moratti makes explicit, just as Berlinguer had done a few years earlier, how the need for reform had been dictated to her precisely by the poor performance of Italian students in international surveys, in this case those of the OECD, that is to say, PISA¹⁰⁸³. Along the same line of reform that had led Berlinguer and De Mauro to shift their attention from programmes to the curriculum, one can lay Moratti's introduction of personalized study plans, an 'educational, cultural and professional profile' (acronym PECUP) and the so-called Competencies Portfolio¹⁰⁸⁴ consisting of "a unified tool that gathers the most significant documentation of the student's educational path, recording outcomes and methods of the learning process [...] from preschool to the conclusion of the 1st educational cycle, tracing the 'history', and offering continuous support for reasoned and shared analysis of the results achieved, benefiting teachers, students, and parents"¹⁰⁸⁵. However, these tools would not become fully effective, particularly because the figure of the teacher-tutor "who was supposed to coordinate the drafting of the pupil's personal competencies"¹⁰⁸⁶ was not activated in schools¹⁰⁸⁷. In confirmation of the thesis of continuity in the policies of the two ministers, it is no coincidence that Bertagna too, who, as it has been seen, played a decisive role in the years of the Moratti ministry, spoke of a single reforming leap between 1997 and 2003¹⁰⁸⁸.

In the next legislature, as it has been already said, some provisions envisaged by Moratti were superseded and modified, but the general direction, heavily influenced by the various supranational players, was confirmed¹⁰⁸⁹. This appears evident reading the 2007 *White Paper on Schools* drawn up by the Ministry of Economy and Finance and the Ministry of Education; the 2003 OECD-PISA surveys provide the data that underlies all the of reasoning concerning the need to reform Italian schools and the lines that this reform should follow, starting, once again, in line with the objectives of the Lisbon strategy, from strengthening the evaluation system and schools' autonomy¹⁰⁹⁰.

¹⁰⁸³ See L. Moratti con P. Ostellino, p. 61.

¹⁰⁸⁴ D.Lgs 19th February 2004 no. 59, Annexes A,B,C.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Italian Ministry of Education website.

¹⁰⁸⁶ A.E. Briguglio, p. 12.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Minister Valditara has recently announced his intention to promote 40,000 teachers to the role of tutors on a voluntary basis, exactly for the purpose of personalizing the learning platforms, see Orizzonte Scuola, *Docente tutor, Valditara: 'Saranno in 40mila e pagati bene. La partecipazione sarà volontaria'*, 6th April 2023.

¹⁰⁸⁸ See G.Bertagna, *Dietro una riforma*, pp. 7-8.

¹⁰⁸⁹ From here on, as explained in the first chapter, one can talk about new laws, but not about a full-on reform.

¹⁰⁹⁰ See MINISTERO DELL'ECONOMIA E DELLE FINANZE & MINISTERO DELLA PUBBLICA ISTRUZIONE, *Quaderno bianco sulla scuola*, 2007.

From 2008 on, the work of Mariastella Gelmini followed the same path, and her actions, particularly regarding technical and professional institutes, were aimed at satisfying the European recommendations¹⁰⁹¹; it is no coincidence that even in the law which would bring about a significant increase in the number of pupils per class in order to obtain substantial savings in resources – as it has been said - supposed European standards are invoked as a justification¹⁰⁹². The national guidelines for upper secondary schools (*licei*) are, however, at this stage, the only official document with a normative weight that explicitly mentions the international surveys alongside those of INVALSI¹⁰⁹³. With D.Lgs 225/2010, Gelmini and the government she was a part of were also responsible for the structuring of the new National Evaluation System, which will be discussed in greater detail shortly, consisting of INDIRE (the National Institute of Educational Documentation, Innovation and Research)¹⁰⁹⁴, INVALSI and a ministerial inspection body¹⁰⁹⁵, and the launch of the VSQ project - an experimental project for the external evaluation of schools, with total funding of 23 million euros¹⁰⁹⁶ and 77 schools involved on a voluntary basis. A letter sent by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi in October 2011 to the European Union also turned to the theme of evaluating the education system, and in it he undertook to improve the accountability of individual schools on the

¹⁰⁹¹ See A.E. Briguglio, pp. 13-20.

¹⁰⁹² L. 133/2008 6th Art. 64 comma 1 “interventions and measures aimed at gradually increasing the pupil/teacher ratio by one point, to be achieved in any case by the 2011/2012 school year, are adopted in order to bring this ratio closer to the relevant European standards”.

¹⁰⁹³ See Ministero dell’istruzione, dell’università e della ricerca, Schema di regolamento recante “Indicazioni nazionali riguardanti gli obiettivi specifici di apprendimento concernenti le attività e gli insegnamenti compresi nei piani degli studi previsti per i percorsi liceali di cui all’articolo 10, comma 3, del decreto del Presidente della Repubblica 15 marzo 2010, n. 89, in relazione all’articolo 2, commi 1 e 3, del medesimo regolamento”.

¹⁰⁹⁴ INDIRE in 2006 became the National Agency for the Development of School Autonomy (ANSAS) and was formally reinstated with its original name in 2012. In this law it is improperly mentioned with the wrong name.

¹⁰⁹⁵ See TESTO COORDINATO DEL DECRETO-LEGGE 29 dicembre 2010, n. 225 Testo del decreto-legge 29 dicembre 2010, n. 225 (in Gazzetta Ufficiale - serie generale - n. 303 del 29 dicembre 2010), coordinato con la legge di conversione 26 febbraio 2011, n. 10 (in questa stesso Supplemento ordinario alla pagina 1), recante: «Proroga di termini previsti da disposizioni legislative e di interventi urgenti in materia tributaria e di sostegno alle imprese e alle famiglie.». (11A02788) (GU Serie Generale n.47 del 26-02-2011 - Suppl. Ordinario n. 53), art. 2 comma 4-undevicies.

¹⁰⁹⁶ See MINISTERO DELL'ISTRUZIONE, DELL'UNIVERSITA' E DELLA RICERCA, DECRETO 29 marzo 2011 Modifica del decreto 10 giugno 2005, relativo ai progetti autonomi, già ammessi al finanziamento del Fondo per le agevolazioni alla ricerca. (Prot. n. 157/Ric.). (11A12778) (GU Serie Generale n.234 del 07-10-2011). The project consists of three phases: “measurement of learning outcomes and calculation of added value contextualized by INVALSI; evaluative analysis of the school context by commissions of external experts, coordinated by inspectors; and improvement process designed by the schools, supported by INDIRE”.

basis of INVALSI tests [...] “defining a restructuring programme for those with unsatisfactory results”¹⁰⁹⁷.

In 2012, with Profumo, the next minister, a new project was tested, named ValeS, which drew on VSQ whilst adding the element of self-evaluation, linked to that of external evaluation. Both of these experiments¹⁰⁹⁸ were fundamental to the structuring of the new National Evaluation System (SNV) which took shape with the enactment¹⁰⁹⁹ of D.P.R. 28th March 2013. The three-pronged structure was confirmed - INVALSI, INDIRE, and the inspection body - and the objective remained, as in Moratti's provisions, evaluation of the system's efficiency and effectiveness in order to improve the quality of the education provided¹¹⁰⁰; however, there was no longer any reference to the role of the regions or local authorities. A very important element of this regulation, drawn up during the Monti government and published in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* when the Letta government was already in power, lies in the fact that the results of school evaluations were to be sent to the Regional School Offices for the evaluation of school managers¹¹⁰¹, an evaluation which, despite having been the subject of various experiments, would not become effective until the new provisions envisaged by L. 107/2015 and by directive 36 of 18th August 2016, the result of the work of the Renzi government and the then Minister of Education Giannini. Their work too essentially represents a continuity with that of their predecessors, both as regards the centrality of school autonomy – for which the *Buona Scuola* sought ‘full implementation’¹¹⁰² - and as regards evaluation. In addition to the evaluation of school managers, who were entrusted with new responsibilities which therefore called for a more effective measurement of the results obtained, doing the INVALSI tests became a requirement for access to

¹⁰⁹⁷ See the Letter from Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi to Presidents of the European Council and the Commission, 26th October 2011. The content of this letter was discussed during the Euro Summit in Brussels and it is mentioned also in the final statement as “Italy's plans for growth enhancing structural reforms”.

¹⁰⁹⁸ It is interesting to note, as Bottani says, that during this period “In almost every proposal for laws or regulations concerning schools [...] in Italy there is talk of experimentation”. He nevertheless defines these experiments as ‘bogus’ because they did not follow any scientific criteria. See N. Bottani, *Il difficile rapporto tra politica e ricerca scientifica sui sistemi scolastici*, Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, PROGRAMMA EDUCATION FGA WORKING PAPER N. 17 (2/2009), p. 19.

¹⁰⁹⁹ This enactment was required, for implementing the provisions about the new national evaluation system, by the already mentioned D.Lgs 225/2010 art. 2 comma 4-undecies.

¹¹⁰⁰ DECRETO DEL PRESIDENTE DELLA REPUBBLICA 28 marzo 2013, n. 80 Regolamento sul sistema nazionale di valutazione in materia di istruzione e formazione. (13G00121) (GU Serie Generale n.155 del 04-07-2013).

¹¹⁰¹ Ibid., Art.2 comma 2.

¹¹⁰² L. 107/2015, Art. 1 comma 1.

the final state exam of the first and second cycles¹¹⁰³, and therefore mandatory, and for the first time an element of evaluation of teachers was also introduced - translated as ‘recognition of merit’¹¹⁰⁴ - which, as it has been seen in the first chapter, was the subject of great disputes.

It therefore appears clear that despite the diversity of approaches there was effectively a continuity in the practices of successive governments from the end of the 1990s to 2016, and that it was essentially the principles underlying New Public Management - particularly decentralization and accountability - that informed their actions.

Briguglio seems struck by this continuity of educational objectives - in particular, in her opinion, the idea of lifelong learning and the harmonization of European training systems - which prevails over fragmentation (given, as said, the short duration of each government) and the discontinuity of political inspirations and states that “the ideal continuum of [...] reforms [...] got knotted up in running after European Parliament and Council documents when in the definition of ‘competency’ they identified the ground for building a transnational school and university system [...] However, it seems that talking about competencies was like stepping onto ground that was still unstable, as if this ground were not concretely ‘the European education and training area’”¹¹⁰⁵. In short, the elements of continuity include not only the shared inspiration from the principles of the neo-liberal wave that reached Italy, along with other European countries, at the end of the 1990s, nor only the attention resulting from international surveys and European documents and commitments, but also a certain inability to translate all of these ongoing trends into concrete change. This is why, despite a long reform process, in fact almost twenty years of it, the Italian education system today is not so different from the one Luigi Berlinguer was faced with at the beginning of his mandate.

¹¹⁰³ This provision was actually the subject of one of the implementation decrees of L. 107/2015 (comma 181 letter i) issued by the Gentiloni government and Minister Fedeli in 2017, that is D.Lgs 62/2017 (art. 10 comma 6 e art. 13 comma 2, b).

¹¹⁰⁴ L. 107/2015, Art. 1 comma 126-130.

¹¹⁰⁵ A.E. Briguglio, p. 23.

3.2 PISA Test Results and the National Evaluation System: Greater Efficiency or Just More Bureaucracy?

Among the most interesting new elements of the period under analysis, the establishment of the National Evaluation System (SNV) stands out, which spans across, with changes of mind, modifications, clarifications and experiments, all of the governments mentioned above, and can be seen as the most concrete outcome of a reform process that has been recognized as being just one, despite the fragmentary nature of the governmental terms.

Before the PISA tests, Italy had already taken part in various international surveys, conducted, in particular, by the IEA, in part thanks to the support that these tools received from scholars and experts of great standing such as Aldo Visalberghi¹¹⁰⁶, among other things president of CEDE from 1979 to 1991; the first time being the occasion of the ‘Six Subjects Survey’ of 1970. However, the results of these surveys, which were not encouraging for the Italian system¹¹⁰⁷, remained confined to the attention of researchers experts and few politicians¹¹⁰⁸, and in no way gained that of Italian public opinion¹¹⁰⁹. Although the first PISA survey, that of 2000¹¹¹⁰, did not generate great reactions, the attitude towards the surveys seemed to gradually change, probably due to the fact that they were the product of a project conducted by an intergovernmental organization – namely the OECD - and because the results tended to link the development of students’ skills to economic growth¹¹¹¹. In the first round of the tests, Italy's positions were rather disappointing: 20th place in Reading, and 23rd in both Mathematics and Science; in 2003 the situation actually worsened, with 26th place in Mathematics, the core focus of the surveys that year, while the opening up of participation to sub-national contexts, in Italy Piedmont, Veneto, Lombardy and Tuscany as well as the provinces of

¹¹⁰⁶ See V. Damiani, *Large-Scale Assessments and Educational Policies in Italy*, ‘Research Papers in Education’, v31 n5 p529-541 2016, p. 530.

¹¹⁰⁷ See N. Bottani, *Il difficile rapporto tra politica e ricerca scientifica sui sistemi scolastici*, p. 21.

¹¹⁰⁸ The then “Minister Franco Maria Malfatti was very worried about these results [the ones of 1976] and stated that they were like and ‘electric shock’”, Ibid., p. 21.

¹¹⁰⁹ See B. Fiore & D. Poliandri, *The Programme for International Student Assessment and Google: An analysis of online news in Italy*. ‘Eur J Educ’, 2020; 55: 428–440, p. 430.

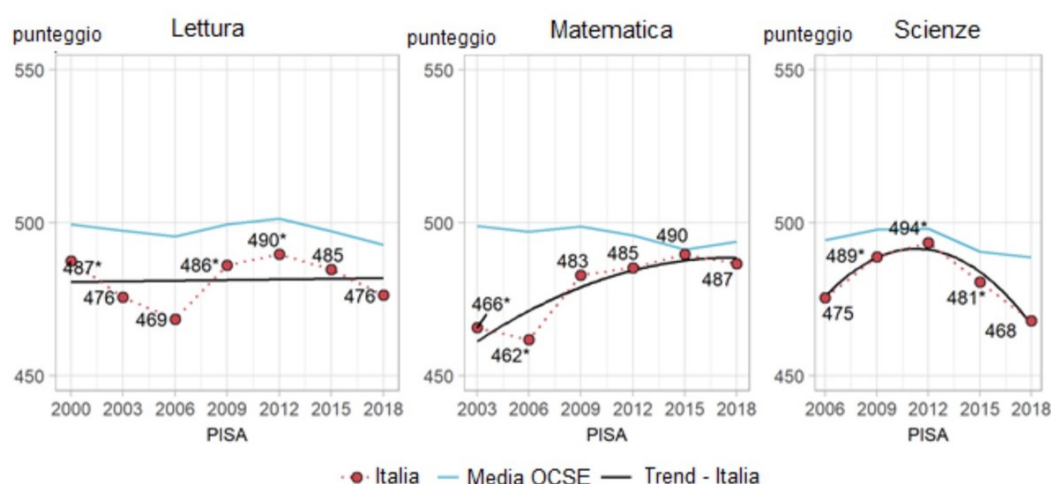
¹¹¹⁰ Gruber reports a comparison between the pages of articles dedicated to the PISA 2000 results in Germany, 774, and in Italy, only 16, despite the poor position in the rankings of both. See K.H. Gruber, p. 196.

¹¹¹¹ See V. Damiani, p. 532.

Trento and Bolzano, made the internal inequalities of the Italian education system visible, and in particular the enormous North-South¹¹¹² gap, which revealed a country effectively ‘split in two’¹¹¹³.

Although for some this already constituted an ‘alarm bell’¹¹¹⁴, the media nevertheless continued not to pay much attention to the results of the PISA surveys, mainly limiting themselves to reporting verbatim some excerpts from OECD documents without encouraging other analyses, interpretations or debate on the results themselves¹¹¹⁵. Damiani even reports attempts to explain the results of the surveys that were devoid of any scientific approach to the data, citing Italian students’ lack of familiarity with multiple-choice tests or problems with translation of some reading comprehension questions¹¹¹⁶. The first institutional document that seriously examined the data, attempting to analyse the weak points of the Italian school system and to identify some guidelines for improvement, was the *White Paper* of 2007¹¹¹⁷.

Fig.9¹¹¹⁸



Over the years, as one can see in Figure 9, some fluctuations aside, the performance of Italian students has remained essentially the same, just as one of the most obvious problems, namely the territorial

¹¹¹² See A. Martini, *Il rendimento scolastico italiano*, pp. 474-475.

¹¹¹³ See N. Bottani, *Il difficile rapporto tra politica e ricerca scientifica sui sistemi scolastici*, p. 22.

¹¹¹⁴ See F. Arzarello, *The Impact of PISA Studies on the Italian National Assessment System*, in K. Stacey & R. Turner (edited by) *Assessing Mathematical Literacy*. Springer, Cham., 2015, p. 249.

¹¹¹⁵ See B. Fiore & D. Poliandri, pp. 436-438.

¹¹¹⁶ See V. Damiani, p. 535.

¹¹¹⁷ See B. Fiore & D. Poliandri, p. 430.

¹¹¹⁸ OECD, *RESULTS FROM PISA 2018*, COUNTRY NOTE: Italy, p. 4.

disparities, has remained unchanged¹¹¹⁹. Weighing more heavily on the results of the south of the country are the persistently high rates of unemployment and the much more disadvantaged socio-economic context compared to that of the northern areas¹¹²⁰: “The marked gap in basic skills between adolescents living in the two areas of the country threatens to consolidate the factors at the root of some regions’ retarded development, creating a vicious circle in which context conditions contribute to the lack of skills and the lack of skills prevents the context from changing”¹¹²¹. As it has been seen, territorial differences were also a very evident problem in the German educational system, in contrast to Finland; however, in Italy this occurs in a context where educational policies are not delegated to the *Länder* and therefore diversified, but rather the result of decisions taken at the centre and, therefore, theoretically homogeneous¹¹²².

Another similarity with the German context is that in Italy too one can talk of a tracked system¹¹²³ starting here from the age of 13/14, that is say, when the choice of upper secondary school is made. There are three types of upper secondary schools, *licei*, technical institutes and vocational institutes as it has been said in the first chapter; whilst the students of the first school typology achieve results in the PISA tests that are above the OECD average, the medium level of the last ones’ is like that of developing countries, with a gap in Reading, for example, of over 100 points¹¹²⁴. Naturally, in Italy, as in Germany, the background of the students has an enormous impact on the choice of school¹¹²⁵, and in particular the education of their parents: “the higher the [...] educational level [of the parents] the more they choose to have their children study at *licei*”¹¹²⁶. In contrast to what happens in Germany, however, the role of the school in the choice of the student’s subsequent path is not decisive, and it is

¹¹¹⁹ “The mean performance scores of the two Italian Northern areas are significantly higher than the OECD average, at the same level as those of New Zealand, Ireland, Sweden and the Netherlands. The mean score of the Centre of Italy is slightly higher than the Italian national average and does not differ significantly from the OECD average, while the two Southern areas have a mean score that is similar to that of Turkey and is significantly higher than only of Thailand, Serbia, Brazil, Mexico, Indonesia and Tunisia” M.T. Siniscalco, *Italy: some results from PISA 2003*, Background paper for the Education for all global monitoring report 2006: literacy for life [116], UNESCO, 2005, p. 8.

¹¹²⁰ See J. Polesel, p. 180.

¹¹²¹ M. Foresti & A. Pennisi, *DEALING WITH SCHOOLS IN SOUTHERN ITALY. AN ANALYSIS OF THE SKILL GAP AMONG FIFTEENYEAR-OLDS IN ITALY*, Ministero dell’Economia e delle Finanze – Dipartimento per le Politiche di Sviluppo – Unità di Valutazione degli Investimenti Pubblici, 2007, p. 12.

¹¹²² See A. Martini, *Il rendimento scolastico italiano*, p. 475.

¹¹²³ See J. Polesel, p. 174.

¹¹²⁴ The gap actually increased between 2000 and 2009, reaching 124 points. See G. Asquini, *Dieci anni di PISA: primi bilanci e nuove prospettive*, ‘ITALIAN JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH’, (7), 71–83, 2014, p. 78.

¹¹²⁵ See M. Foresti & A. Pennisi, pp. 29-30.

¹¹²⁶ M. Dei, p. 130.

rather the students and families who decide (and often with no adequate guidance)¹¹²⁷; essentially a sort of self-selection¹¹²⁸ takes place that contributes to the maintenance of the current social stratification¹¹²⁹, “the good with the good, the rich with the rich”¹¹³⁰. However, in Italy even more than the personal background of each student, it is the social context that they live in that weighs on their results, in other words, not only the type of school they choose, but also the context that school is in; therefore, wanting to weigh up the two problems we are examining, the North-South gap has a greater impact than the differences in upper secondary school pathways: “for those living in the South, coming from a privileged background (the economically best off 25 per cent of students, for instance) and attending the schools that perform best (the high schools) are not sufficient to attain OECD average scores. On average, the skills of ‘privileged young people’ in the South are lower than those of the students attending technical schools and coming from the least advantaged strata of society (the most underprivileged 25 per cent) in central and northern Italy”¹¹³¹.

In addition to these critical elements there are the poor state of school infrastructure¹¹³², the dropout rate – that anyway has dropped from 25% in 2000 to 14.7% in 2015¹¹³³ - which is also much higher in the South and the most disadvantaged areas of the country, and the high number of NEETs, that is to say, young people aged 15-29 ‘not in education, employment or training’¹¹³⁴.

The only real structural reaction to this discouraging picture in the period under examination can be found in the establishment of the National Evaluation System (SNV)¹¹³⁵ which, as it has been seen, was created with the intention of combining external accountability with self-evaluation mechanisms, focusing on innovation and the improvement of schools¹¹³⁶. The goal, therefore, was to improve the

¹¹²⁷ The problem of students’ orientation is one of the most relevant in Italy, both for upper secondary school and tertiary education choices. See for example Il Sole 24 Ore, *Orientamento scolastico sbagliato: un problema strutturale*, 25th February 2022.

¹¹²⁸ See A. Martini, *Il rendimento scolastico italiano*, p. 480.

¹¹²⁹ See M. Dei, p. 130.

¹¹³⁰ M. Foresti & A. Pennisi, p. 31.

¹¹³¹ Ibid., p. 27.

¹¹³² See Fondazione Agnelli’s reports on school infrastructure.

¹¹³³ See OpenPolis report on early school leaving and educational poverty of September 2019 and A. Valente & M. Mayer, *Le competenze per la ricerca e l’innovazione nella scuola e nella società*, in D. Archibugi e F. Tuzi (edited by), *Relazione sulla ricerca e l’innovazione. Analisi e dati di politica della scienza e della tecnologia*, CNR Edizioni, 2018, p. 332. In May 2023 as reported in his audition in Parliament by Minister Valditara the dropout rate stood at 12.7%.

¹¹³⁴ See A. Valente & M. Mayer, p. 338.

¹¹³⁵ See F. Arzarello, p. 251.

¹¹³⁶ See L. Mentini & A. Levantino, p. 2.

efficiency of the educational system, and the SNV was closely linked to the need to be part of a discourse that was developing throughout Europe, and beyond, and which required the setting of standards and the implementation of mechanisms in order to evaluate the effective achievement of set objectives¹¹³⁷. The Italian set up is, as Mentini and Levantino describe it, a ‘three-legged model’, in other words a structure with three main elements (INVALSI, INDIRE and the ministry's inspection body), which together should serve to devise tests, administer them, evaluate the results, help schools with self-evaluation, and provide support for them with projects aimed at improving themselves. In reality, considering that the ministry's inspection body consists of a small number of personnel and has, over the years, undergone significant cuts, and that INDIRE has a very limited centrality, the real keystone of the SNV is INVALSI¹¹³⁸. In addition to being responsible for tests and their administration - both national ones and those related to Italy's participation in international surveys - within the SNV, the Institute has in fact, by statute, the following functions, it: “a) ensures the functional coordination of the SNV; b) proposes evaluation protocols and the programme of visits to schools and training institutions by the external evaluation teams¹¹³⁹; c) defines the efficiency and effectiveness indicators for identifying the schools and training institutions that need support and the priority cases for external evaluation; d) makes tools for carrying out self-assessment available to individual schools and training institutions; e) defines the indicators for the evaluation of school managers and offers scientific support for the procedure of evaluating school managers; f) attends to the selection, training and inclusion in a relevant list of the experts for the external evaluation teams, also attending to the training of the inspectors who participate in the aforementioned teams”¹¹⁴⁰.

In terms of the practical functioning of the SNV, it has three dimensions. The first concerns the evaluation of schools, which consists of four phases: 1) self-evaluation, that is, the drawing up by the internal evaluation team, set up in each school, of the RAV (the self-evaluation report), which takes account of the INVALSI tests’ results and is compiled following a national format¹¹⁴¹, with possible

¹¹³⁷ See P. Landri on p.27 where he argues that the underlying goal of this standardization was ‘performativity’, that is to say, one of the fundamental elements of the neo-liberal agenda for schools.

¹¹³⁸ See L. Mentini & A. Levantino, p. 21.

¹¹³⁹ Introduced with the regulation related to D.P.R. 28th March 2013 No. 80, they include “a technical manager from the inspection body, with a coordination role, and two experts selected by INVALSI, one from within the school and one external”.

¹¹⁴⁰ See INVALSI statute, art. 5 comma 2 on INVALSI website.

¹¹⁴¹ According to Barone and Argentin, the drafting of this document is very problematic for schools, which often do not have the competencies needed to analyse the associated statistical indicators and do not even have a real repository of

additions. The RAV is then published on the *Scuola in chiaro* portal; 2) external evaluation, carried out by the evaluation teams which, however, concerns a very small number of schools due to the scarcity of personnel and resources available¹¹⁴²; 3) improvement action: with the support of INDIRE¹¹⁴³ or other public and private entities, schools must draw up an improvement plan that the school manager is responsible for and take the consequent action; 4) social reporting: each school fills out the same form at the national level, wherein it enters the results achieved regarding the objectives set in the RAV and the projects reported in its PTOF¹¹⁴⁴ and can organize other informational initiatives.

The SNV's second dimension concerns the evaluation of school managers which, although it was already envisaged in 2001 and introduced in 2006, as it has been seen, only became effective after 15 years of experimentation, with L. 107/2015¹¹⁴⁵ and directive No. 36 of the following year. The evaluation of managers - aimed at their recognition and professional improvement – sees the involvement of the Regional School Offices, which are responsible for annually adopting a regional evaluation plan indicating the objectives that need to be achieved.

Lastly, the third dimension concerns the recognition of teachers' merit, in accordance with the provisions of L. 107/2015, namely the payment to teachers of a bonus on the basis of indicators set annually by the Committee for the Evaluation of Teachers and general criteria established at the national level. As it has been seen, this is one of the provisions of the *Buona Scuola* that aroused the most protests, particularly from the teachers' unions, and in part for this reason it has been subject to repeated revisions that have in no small measure complicated the current situation. For example, in 2021 the trade unions and the ministry - on the basis of the previous year's budget law, which had removed the constraint on the allocation of resources, without exceeding the regulatory provisions

good practices available to them. See G. Argentin & C. Barone, *School Reform Innovation and the Rhetoric of Change*, 'Italian Politics', Vol. 31 Issue 1, Berghahn Books, 2016). It is interesting, as Mentini and Levantino point out, that here too centralisation and decentralisation intersect, meaning that self-assessment is in fact guided and directed by the ministry and the tests are in fact conceived as tools for counterbalancing autonomy. See L. Mentini & A. Levantino, p. 10.

¹¹⁴² INVALSI reports that "From 2015 to 2019, the external evaluation teams visited 1,013 first and second cycle schools throughout the country: 375 in the 2015/2016 academic year; 217 in 2016/2017; 421 institutions in 2018/2019"; there were 8,160 such schools in Italy in 2019.

¹¹⁴³ In 2015, the year that the SNV began to demonstrate its effectiveness, INDIRE also made a model for drafting school improvement plans available. See INDIRE website.

¹¹⁴⁴ This last phase, although envisaged by the regulations of 2013, was only concretely seen from the 2018-2019 school year and is therefore a very recent innovation.

¹¹⁴⁵ Art. 1 comma 93.

concerning the recognition of teachers - reached an agreement on diverting the funds destined for the so-called ‘teachers’ bonus’ to the school’s funds and therefore placing them fully within the scope of the school’s supplementary employment contract bargaining¹¹⁴⁶.

The schools’ self-assessment report, as it has been said, also takes account of the results achieved in INVALSI’s standardized tests, the history of which is rather complex. The first pilots took place in 2001, on a voluntary basis, while in 2004-2005 there was the first round of mandatory tests for the first cycle of compulsory education, which was highly contested¹¹⁴⁷. As a result, a process of rethinking the role of INVALSI began, in part thanks to the white paper which said that the results of the tests had to act as points of reference for schools to direct their improvement path, particularly in the fight against inequalities and students leaving school early, on the basis of scientifically valid empirical data. Thus, the tests were not conceived simply as informational tools but also, in some way, as instructional ones¹¹⁴⁸. Starting in 2008-2009 the INVALSI tests were held in all schools in the second and fifth year of primary school and in the second year of upper secondary school, then they were extended to the first (2009-2010) and third year of lower secondary school (2010-2011)¹¹⁴⁹. Currently, the surveys take place at five grades: grade 2 and 5, that is, the second and fifth years of primary school, grade 8, the final year of the first cycle, where the tests are, as it has been seen, a requirement for admission to the state exam, and grades 10 and 13, so the second and fifth year of upper secondary (here too the tests are a requirement for admission to the final state exam). The INVALSI tests, as reported by Breakspear in his research, were in fact modelled on the basis of the PISA tests¹¹⁵⁰ (whose administration in Italian schools is, as mentioned, the institute’s responsibility), but the fact remains that there are some significant differences between the two types of survey. Specifically, “there are at least three main differences between SNV tests and PISA studies: the frequency (annual vs. triennial), the type of tested population (census vs. sample size) and the chosen sample (grade-based vs. age-based students)”¹¹⁵¹.

¹¹⁴⁶ See the news reported by La Tecnica della Scuola, *Bonus merito docenti: non esiste più, il fondo serve per pagare tutti, anche il personale Ata*, 5th April 2021.

¹¹⁴⁷ See Tuttoscuola, *Valutazione INVALSI obbligatoria dal 2005*, 6th October 2004, which reports Union’s opinions

¹¹⁴⁸ See L. Mentini & A. Levantino, p. 11.

¹¹⁴⁹ See P. Landri, p. 32.

¹¹⁵⁰ See S. Breakspear, p. 22. Damiani is of the same opinion, stating that “the theoretical assumptions of PISA have been used as a model of best practice for the creation and adaptation of national assessment procedures” V. Damiani, p. 537.

¹¹⁵¹ F. Arzarello, p. 252.

Marcello Dei in his *La scuola in Italia* makes a list of the limitations of the INVALSI tests: some can be ascribed to the standardized survey tool in general, that is to say, the inability to measure the ability to reason, abstract thought, critical thinking and so on, and the fact that teachers are forced to become ‘coaches’ in order to enable students to perform at their best in the tests; others are peculiarities of the Italian system, where it is not clear what type of sanction or reward for schools and teachers is linked to the evaluation¹¹⁵², and the administration of the tests is entrusted, due to lack of resources, mostly to teachers and not to specialized external personnel, so that in more than one case the results have been found to be false¹¹⁵³.

This analysis appears very reasonable and explains both the general opposition to the tests by teachers¹¹⁵⁴ and students¹¹⁵⁵ (who hold that the tool is completely unsuitable for assessing the quality of a school and the efficiency of a school system) and the initiative of some organizations to develop other tools for evaluating schools, producing full-on rankings. This is the case, for example, with *Eduscopio*, produced by the Fondazione Agnelli for the first time in 2014, which publishes a ranking of upper secondary schools based on the success of students in their pathways after the conclusion of their school career¹¹⁵⁶. According to Vuri, who wrote a paper to evaluate the impact of the first and second rankings made public by *Eduscopio*, the influence exerted on the choices of families and students was significant¹¹⁵⁷.

In general, it seems, the problem of the innovation that the National Evaluation System should have represented lies in the inability to adequately train the protagonists of this innovation and to better inform public opinion by involving it in an open and broad debate; instead it has been experienced as

¹¹⁵² Mentini and Levantino write that this is why, despite being mandatory, INVALSI tests are viewed “as mild [tools], meaning that, should schools fail to reach the established goals, no consequences are foreseen in relation to school resources”, L. Mentini & A. Levantino, p. 4.

¹¹⁵³ See M. Dei, p. 135.

¹¹⁵⁴ The unions also contested the government's decision to use the INVALSI tests as an indicator for identifying the schools in need of intervention with a gap reduction plan financed with over one billion euros under the PNRR (National Recovery and Resilience Plan). In particular, they claim that “through the PNRR the intention is to promote a pervasive use of standardized tests that risk becoming the reference tool for identifying students' weaknesses, thereby significantly reducing one of the fundamental functions of the teaching profession, the assessment of female and male students, and directing educational activity towards performance in the INVALSI tests” FLC-CGIL press release, 15th November 2022

¹¹⁵⁵ In particular, the Students' Union has organized various forms of boycotts of the tests. See for example: Fan Page, *Prove Invalsi 2016 tra blitz al Miur, test boicottati e ironia: ecco i risultati*, 12th May 2016.

¹¹⁵⁶ See *Eduscopio* on Fondazione Agnelli website.

¹¹⁵⁷ See D. Vuri, *Ranking scolastici e scelte familiari: Prime evidenze da Eduscopio*, Fondazione Agnelli, WP n. 58 (05/2018).

a top-down imposition, the result more of the need to adapt to standards external to the system itself and to demands from supranational players, especially those of the European Union, than of a discussion involving the stakeholders operating in Italian schools. For schools and school managers (but also for administrative staff) it has all translated into a huge increase in bureaucracy that has aggravated the already difficult situation of understaffed offices. In addition to this is the fact that school autonomy, desired by Berlinguer himself and formally never questioned, cannot be said to be truly complete¹¹⁵⁸, and that therefore the balance between decentralization and evaluation seems to have failed, confirming the centralist and conservative tendency typical of the Italian system¹¹⁵⁹. Among the things that, despite the succession of regulations and projects, continue not to change are, as it has been seen, the results of all the statistics that continue to show a country deeply divided between North and South, where the social context and family background of students weigh enormously on their performance. What is surprising, according to Polesel, is in fact not so much the weight of these elements, as “the powerlessness of the government to moderate this impact”¹¹⁶⁰. Attempts have been made to strengthen the quality of the school system, above all through the projects of the National Operational Programme (PON) 2007-2013 and 2014-2020¹¹⁶¹, some of which were intended, in particular, for the less developed regions, those of the so-called ‘Convergence Objective’¹¹⁶², to which one can add the gap reduction plan, which, as mentioned, is part of the PNRR projects. However, the results so far are far from what one might hope.

So the problem of the Italian system in the period that has been examined seems to have been, alongside the fragmentary nature of the policies primarily caused by the succession of numerous governments within a relatively short period of time, the lack of planning based on scientific evidence¹¹⁶³; as Bottani critically points out, “Italian politics blindly gropes its way forward. Reforms are made without strategic thinking, without rigorous scientific experimentation, without evaluations, and therefore, without reliable evidence and data. The Italian debate on schools in institutional

¹¹⁵⁸ See L. Berlinguer, *Ri-creazione*, pp. 51-53.

¹¹⁵⁹ L. Mentini e A. Levantino talk of ‘centralized decentralism’ perfectly capturing the point, p. 11.

¹¹⁶⁰ J. Polesel, p. 184.

¹¹⁶¹ PON is financed through the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund.

¹¹⁶² See V. Damiani, p. 536.

¹¹⁶³ “politicians ‘barely and infrequently’ follow scientific research institutions and [...] there is a very limited number of institutional policy documents using empirical evidences to justify political proposals” L. Volante L. & Don A. Klinger, *PISA and Education Reform in Europe: Cases of Policy Inertia, Avoidance, and Refraction*, ‘European Education’, 53:1, 45-56, 2021, p. 50.

environments is anchored in the past”¹¹⁶⁴. It is surprising that the same opinion is shared by the person that has been identified here as the initiator of the reform process that characterizes this entire period, Luigi Berlinguer, to whose words, written in 2014, it seems right to entrust the conclusion of this chapter: “for too long Italy has been almost impervious, in public opinion, in the media, in the culture itself, to the new ideas of pedagogical doctrine [...] And it has remained closed to the concrete proposals for educational change, to the pleasing results achieved in other states, because it is poorly informed or indifferent to the question of education, for the most part translated in the memory of the past. The same debate between parties, trade unions, political and educational institutions has revealed itself in recent years as partisan, sometimes in vain, perhaps a means to an end for one side rather than the other, if not downright ideological and therefore the more heated it is the less decisive it is”¹¹⁶⁵.

It is difficult to explain Italian ‘policy inertia’ ¹¹⁶⁶ in this area better than this.

¹¹⁶⁴ N. Bottani, *Il difficile rapporto tra politica e ricerca scientifica sui sistemi scolastici*, p. 35.

¹¹⁶⁵ L. Berlinguer, *Ri-creazione*, p. 20.

¹¹⁶⁶ See L. Volante & Don A. Kinger, pp. 49-50.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this work was to determine how the Italian education system has been influenced by supranational actors such as the OECD and the European Union and how this influence has affected the accountability of the system itself. In concluding it, I will return to the research questions that inspired it in order to then try to provide policy advice based on its findings, taking a solution-oriented approach to the democratic problem that has emerged several times in these pages.

It has been shown, particularly when analysing the period running from the end of the 1990s through to the approval of the implementation decrees of the *Buona Scuola*, notwithstanding legislative changes, how deeply the Italian education system has remained linked to its old roots in a sort of immobilism that has been thoroughly described in the last section of the third chapter. What has emerged clearly is the fact that the only profound change that occurred during the period under examination was the introduction of a National Evaluation System, conceived as an accountability tool. In fact, from Berlinguer to Giannini, all the of the minsters responsible for educational policies in Italy during this period agreed on the need to introduce a method of assessing students' skills, and essentially all of them publicly acknowledged that this idea was linked to the poor performances of Italian students in the International Large-Scale Assessments.

With regard to the diffusion of the use of the accountability concept in the educational field, it has been seen how Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, in his letter to the European Union, expressly mentioned his government's desire to strengthen the accountability of schools by leveraging the INVALSI tests. Similarly, it has been described the implementation of a system for surveying and measuring results and the publication of the *Bildungsbericht* by the German KMK as accountability tools, introduced right after the bad results obtained in the first PISA survey. Lastly, Finland's flexible accountability, not based on standardized tests, but on trust-building mechanisms for schools and teachers, as has been said, is viewed as one of the key elements of that country's education system, although the excellent results obtained in the first PISA tests effectively blocked the implementation of other measurement tools more similar to those used in the other two countries examined.

With reference to the definition of accountability taken from Schedler and already mentioned in the introduction - “A is accountable to B when A is obliged to inform B about A's (past or future) actions and decisions, to justify them, and to suffer punishment in the case of eventual misconduct”¹¹⁶⁷ – one can say that an educational system is accountable to whatever it relates through the triad of information, justification and sanction. As it has been seen, in the Italian system, individual schools transmit information on the performance of their students to the Ministry, explain and justify the actions they carry out in their *Piano Triennale dell’Offerta Formativa* (PTOF, “Three-Year Academic Programme” in English)¹¹⁶⁸, and await sanctions from the Ministry - or, in this case, more appropriately, adjustments - when these actions do not produce the desired results. If the A in the definition represents individual schools, then the B must be the Ministry of Education. In this case, the measurement tools developed by central institutions are proper accountability tools and can play a very important role. If, on the other hand, one views the A of the definition as the whole Italian educational system, then the B can only be seen as the entity that has provided policymakers with an electoral mandate within a given constitutional framework. Again, having third-party measurement tools available to support the actions of policy makers is not in itself a weakening element of the system; on the contrary, it can be a practical tool when it comes to identifying what strengths to leverage and weaknesses to address. However, when the policies implemented by decision makers respond, above all, to a perceived need to climb the rankings drawn up by those who measure, through testing, the quality of the system (in this case the OECD), then the relationship between A and B has been somewhat fractured: indeed, this means that information regarding the state of the educational system is being given to an external and supranational entity, and sanction, in terms of ‘shame and blame’ when the policies put in place to improve the performance have not been effective, is expected from it. If the only significant reform regarding education enacted in Italy in the period examined has involved the implementation of a measurement system aimed at ‘training’ students for testing¹¹⁶⁹, it is because one of the few goals shared by ministers from different political parties has been, as seen, to climb the PISA rankings. In addition to this, as has been mentioned several times, the

¹¹⁶⁷ A. Schedler, p. 17.

¹¹⁶⁸ For more an in-depth description of the PTOF see the details in the first section of the first chapter.

¹¹⁶⁹ See M. Dei, p. 135.

measurement tools represented by the OECD-PISA tests, rely on definitions and standards that cannot be considered neutral, but are instead the result of a genuinely political discourse.

The crux is that the concept of competence, which today lies at the heart of the dynamics of measuring the quality of education, and the standards used as points of reference, are the result of a discourse that has not been democratically legitimized¹¹⁷⁰. By statute, the OECD regularly interacts with national governments, and it needs, as it has been seen, national partners who are indicated by individual states to carry out its surveying and measurement work in the educational field, but it has never obtained an explicit and formal mandate to define what the goals of education systems should be and, therefore, what should be measured through testing. And, moreover, the Organisation could not have obtained it, since there is no arena at this level that can directly decide on an issue of such great strategic importance for individual countries.

Chapter 2 has shown that many scholars believe precisely this element to be one of the most critical ones in terms of the influence on states' educational policies exercised by the OECD through the PISA tests and the DeSeCo Project¹¹⁷¹. Since, as it has been said, ILSAs in general, and the PISA tests in particular, are not neutral measurement tools, but are, on the contrary, supported by a very clear and well-defined ideological system¹¹⁷², and since it is not possible to measure anything without standardizing and thereby determining indicators, whoever determines these indicators actually decides what the purpose of education should be. This is the origin of a democratic weak point that creates a problem concerning accountability that has been mentioned above. To whom or what are the educational systems that extensively adopt this kind of standardized tests accountable? This is not just a matter of shifting the discussion on education from the national level (given that education is a fundamental element of identity, as it has been said) to the international level, nor is it a question of loss of sovereignty, it is a democracy-related issue. And this is all the truer and more problematic the more one adheres to the idea of a structural and systematic connection between education and

¹¹⁷⁰ To quote L. Figazzolo, p. 7: "The OECD does not have a legally binding mandate on member countries in the field of education, and cannot use regulations and sanctions; however, it does act through 'soft' power instruments, such as recommendations, guidelines, and policy orientations".

¹¹⁷¹ Among others, the most interesting comments on this point are perhaps Bottani's in D. S. Rychen & L.H. Salganik *Agire le competenze* p. 28, Vertecchi's in Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema dell'Istruzione (CEDE), *Ricerche valutative internazionali 2000*, pp. 15-16, and Caputo's, p. 32.

¹¹⁷² The same thing can be said for all national measurements that are modelled on the PISA tests, including therefore the Italian INVALSI tests and the German standardized measurements.

democracy, that is - like the one expounded and systematized by John Dewey, particularly in his *Democracy and Education*, and embraced and developed by the whole of the subsequent philosophical-pedagogical tradition - linked to the belief that citizens are formed through education, in other words, the fundamental primary element of every democracy¹¹⁷³. If education has the essential function of training citizens, that is to say, the protagonists of democratic life, how can the quality of an educational system be measured without first establishing, through the democratic process, what is meant by quality and, therefore, what the efficiency indicators of the system itself should be? If one limits oneself to accepting, without discussion, a model developed in a context that, like the OECD's, is not in itself democratically organized, one runs the risk of structuring a mechanism that is in itself coherent and functional, but unstable. Putting aside purely ideological issues, it must be admitted that teachers and students in Italy who dispute the validity of the PISA surveys and question the INVALSI tests¹¹⁷⁴, which have been modelled on them¹¹⁷⁵, cannot but concede that a fundamental problem exists. Even if it is true that blaming the thermometer when one has a fever is not a very constructive attitude, it is nevertheless necessary to establish, a priori, within a public discussion involving all of the stakeholders in education, what is meant by 'fever', and therefore, what the 'thermometer' of the tests should actually measure. It is not necessarily the case that the structure of the INVALSI tests needs to be overhauled, but it is true that without a public discussion of the type just mentioned, the instability of the accountability mechanisms that have been built remains evident, and they are therefore greatly weakened.

At this point, it is natural to ask whether this problem also exists as a result of the influence exerted by the European Union on the educational policies of its member states, which has been examined in the second section of the second chapter of this research. Although the European Union is seen, in a

¹¹⁷³ According to Dewey, the fundamental characteristic of human beings is their growth by renewing themselves, and this is true for the individual, but also for society as a whole (the basic idea is one of continuity through renewal). For Dewey, education is the means of this social continuity of life, made necessary by the inescapable and primary facts of individuals' life and death; thus education is a necessity of the life of both individuals and society. As such, the link between education and democracy should be viewed as 'organic', as democracy is nothing less than the highest expression of social life, and education, as has been said, is a natural function of the individual and thus of society. This is why Dewey saw school as the "laboratory of democracy".

¹¹⁷⁴ See, for example *Il Messaggero*, *Test Invalsi alle superiori, "no" dei prof: «Telequiz». I docenti: servono solo a dare le pagelle al nostro lavoro*, 18th March 2011 and *Il Manifesto*, *Boicotta i quiz Invalsi: siamo studenti, non numeri*, 9th May 2017.

¹¹⁷⁵ See S.Breakspear, p. 22.

certain sense, as a model of globalization¹¹⁷⁶, there are nevertheless very significant differences between EU's influence and that of ILSAs in the education context. In order to discuss this point more fully, it is necessary to invoke the concept of Europeanization, which, as it has been already seen, applies to education as well¹¹⁷⁷. The introduction clarified how extensive the debate about this concept has been and still is, and therefore, that it is necessary to identify, within the context of this research, a definition which can guide reflection on the application of the term Europeanization to the educational field. To this end, the definition provided by Radaelli has been selected as it is both sufficiently broad and detailed; repeated here for convenience: "Europeanization consists of processes of a) construction, b) diffusion, and c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things' and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU policy and politics and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies"¹¹⁷⁸. As seen, through a range of very diverse tools, the European Union has assumed a leading role in the evolution of educational policies in its member states: from the generic effort to promote European values made since the first meetings between the Ministers of Education, to the specification of certain objectives that took place following the signing of Maastricht Treaty, to the establishment of a genuinely shared strategy with Lisbon, and to the monitoring policies based on real deadlines that need to be met renewed in the latest European Strategic Framework.

In Italy, the culmination of this progressive growth in European proactivity in the sphere of education was reached with the funding associated with the National Recovery Plan which, as shown, even includes a constraint on the effective reform of the recruitment of teachers. However, there is a very significant difference between this and the approach taken with ILSAs; in fact in this case, it is a matter of adherence – formalized through decisions made democratically – to strategies that are discussed at the European level and translated into action at the national level, that is to say, in a context that can be considered always fully democratic. The long debate, also analysed in the second section of second chapter, which led the European Union - through reports but also, and above all,

¹¹⁷⁶ See R. Dale, p. 27.

¹¹⁷⁷ *Europeanizing Education* is the title of a publication by Lawn and Grek repeatedly referenced in chapter 2 of this research and in the title of the section dedicated to the influence of the European Union on the educational policies of its member states.

¹¹⁷⁸ C.M. Radaelli, *The Europeanization of Public Policy* in K. Featherstone & C.M. Radaelli, p. 30.

through various resolutions and decisions - to define a set of key competencies for education and to consequently set shared indicators and objectives, then break them down into targets for individual member states, has always taken place within a democratic arena; indeed, if there was a certain underlying slowness, this was due to the need to reach an agreement and a compromise between the states' desire to maintain their prerogatives and responsibilities in the educational field, and the need to equip themselves with systems capable of adequately training their students in the face of the growing challenges of globalization and technological development.

The real issue, however, is that a large part of the European discussion about education has been, and is, influenced by the debate about ILSAs, and that some of the objectives shared by the member states are explicitly aimed at improving positions in the rankings published by the OECD following the various rounds of the PISA tests.

In the past few decades, the European Union has endowed itself with a very broad scope for action which, starting from the sphere of research and universities, has then explicitly extended to that of school education, the object of interest of this research. The commitment to building the European Education Area¹¹⁷⁹ is based on the definition of actions that cover European citizens' whole training path with a view to lifelong learning, from early childhood education and care through to the various forms of adult learning, passing through school, university and tertiary education in general¹¹⁸⁰. It is within the context of this constructive effort, whose goals according to the strategic framework are set for 2025 and 2030¹¹⁸¹, that, in my opinion, it is necessary to find room for public discussion about the function of education. The moment one chooses to, once again, put reducing the percentage of low-achievers in the PISA tests among one's key objectives (if not the most important one) one has clearly accepted a model that views this measurement tool as an automatic point of reference.

¹¹⁷⁹ See the EEA website. Note that the official slogan is: *quality education and training for all*.

¹¹⁸⁰ "The idea to create a European Education Area was first endorsed by European leaders at the 2017 Social Summit in Gothenburg, Sweden. The first packages of measures were adopted in 2018 and 2019", see the EEA website.

¹¹⁸¹ According to the *Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)* 2021/C 66/01, the goals to achieve are: "By 2025: at least 60% of recent graduates from VET should benefit from exposure to work-based learning during their vocational education and training; at least 47% of adults aged 25-64 should have participated in learning during the last 12 months. By 2030: less than 15% of 15-year-olds should be low-achievers in reading, mathematics and science; less than 15% of eight-graders should be low-achievers in computer and information literacy; at least 96% of children between 3 years old and the starting age for compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education and care; less than 9% of pupils should leave education and training early; at least 45% of 25-34 year-olds should have a higher education qualification" see European Strategic Framework on EEA website.

However, if what has been said about the democratic deficit being intrinsically associated with these ILSAs is true, then the European Union cannot adopt, *tout court*, a doubtfully democratic accountability model. Ensuring quality education for all European citizens is a noble goal, but in order to achieve it, it is necessary to define what quality education is, and therefore, to first discuss what the function of education is today. Thus here too, the a priori passive adoption of the OECD's model brings with it doubts about its democratic legitimacy that require greater attention. This does not mean that that model and its basic concepts cannot be integrated into the European discourse, but it does mean that this calls for a discussion, that has not yet been held, on what the objectives of education are today, which in my view should directly involve all of the stakeholders in education - students, teachers, families, think-tanks and so on – with a great spirit of openness, and also, to this end, making use of the platform developed for the Conference on the Future of Europe¹¹⁸². This is the political advice I found linked to my research's results.

Reflecting on this point, whilst Delors' white paper defined a model of a knowledge-based economy where education had an indispensable link with employment, as it was aimed at preparing individuals for a specific labour market, conditions today seem to have profoundly changed, and even those assumptions need a rethink. In fact, what Robert M. Hutchins said in 1968 seems much more current than the considerations of Delors and Cresson: “the more technological the society, the less *ad hoc* education can be. The reason is that the more technological the society is, the more rapidly it will change and the less valuable *ad hoc* instruction will become. It now seems safe to say that the most practical education is the most theoretical one”¹¹⁸³. The rapid change the world of work is subject to nowadays, especially with the advent of the fourth industrial revolution and the spread of AI, calls for much more abstract thinking than was envisaged thirty years ago. The reasoning underlying the idea that one must replace approaches aimed at measuring simple disciplinary knowledge, which one finds in OECD documents, is very useful in this sense; however, when the point of reference for measuring the efficiency of an educational system is no longer the quantity of information transmitted, but the quality of the training that it is able to ensure, it becomes even more important that the concept of quality is the result of a democratic discussion and is not simply accepted as a fact

¹¹⁸² See the Conference on the Future of Europe website and archive.

¹¹⁸³ R. Hutchins, p. 18.

by virtue of the pervasiveness of tools such as the PISA tests¹¹⁸⁴. That is to say, it is not necessarily the case that measuring competencies in Reading, Mathematics and Science, and adding elements of non-cognitive competencies, as the OECD has been doing for some time, is really the best way of ensuring the efficiency of an education system, nor that standardized tests, and particularly that kind of standardized test, should be used to measure these competencies. It is not my intention here to represent objections based on the idea that the tests are in themselves tools that have a negative impact, which I often see as ideologically flawed a priori, nor to accept the assumption, interesting as it may be, of those who believe that education brings with it elements that are, by nature, unmeasurable. Instead, my thesis is that - needing to safeguard the accountability of education systems with a view to ensuring quality education for everyone - the discussion on what is meant by quality at the European level, and therefore, what the function of education is today, should be conducted publicly and must produce democratically legitimized outcomes, possibly through parliamentary discussion that examines the results of public consultation, mediated by the Commission, and identifies the fundamental guidelines to finally submit to the scrutiny of the Council. If I believe that this discussion should take place in Europe, it is because I appreciate the positivity of the open-minded approach that has enabled education to the step outside the mindset of the simple perpetration of elements of national identity - an outlook that has substantially been rendered obsolete by globalisation. In short, I believe that the European Union is the most appropriate forum in which to give substance to a “learning society” based on the model proposed by Hutchins, and the most capable, in my view, of tackling the current challenges. In this context, if “education is taken to be the deliberate, organized, attempt to help people to become intelligent”¹¹⁸⁵, then the link with the economy and the world of work must be seen as a secondary (though obviously relevant) consequence and not as a primary fact. By maintaining this outlook it will also be possible in Europe to build the highly dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy that many have hoped for: “an educational system that aims at understanding will make the most impressive contribution to power and prosperity, whereas one that aims at power and prosperity will fail in that ambition, and fail as well to bring about understanding”¹¹⁸⁶. It all depends on the ability and willingness to conduct - within the context of the

¹¹⁸⁴ In other words, turning again to the DeSeCo document, it is a question of discussing what a ‘successful life’ and a ‘well-functioning society’ are, and of whether these should really be the goals of education that the definition of a set of key competencies is based on.

¹¹⁸⁵ R. Hutchins, p. 9.

¹¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 44.

European Education Area¹¹⁸⁷ currently under construction - an open and practical public debate on these issues.

Lastly, returning to the first research question underlying this work, it can be said, as it has been said, that the influence of the PISA tests, and of the OECD's intellectual output in the educational field, has produced as a concrete result in Italy the creation of the National Evaluation System and the systematic implementation of the INVALSI tests. However, these innovations have not been perceived in schools as the result of a real reform process, but rather as a simple increase in the bureaucratic workload aimed at objectives that have not been fully shared or even discussed with those actually involved in educational processes, especially not with teachers. One could say that in Italy a building has been repainted, but its fundamental structure has remained exactly the same, especially in terms of its defects, as the one that Berlinguer started trying to reform at the end of the 1990s. As proof of the veracity of this statement, in addition to the largely stable performance of Italian students in the PISA tests¹¹⁸⁸, consistently below the OECD average, one can see how the latest INVALSI report precisely mirrors the same problems identified by the analysis conducted 30 years ago: the North-South gap has worsened, students' social origins continues to weigh decisively on their journey through school and, consequently, on their professional careers, and a reduction in early school leavers has been counterbalanced by the number of students who, despite completing their studies, have not acquired the fundamental skills in Italian, Mathematics and English, that is still very high, especially in the South¹¹⁸⁹. In conclusion, it should once again be noted that in Italy the measurement of the quality of the education system is in fact also based on tests which are constructed, as it has been said, on the model of the PISA tests and that therefore, more than the shared goals at the European Union level, here, as elsewhere, the OECD model carries a lot of weight, and is adopted as a point of reference without any real public discussion on the aims of education; this is the strongest influence exerted by an international player on the national education system.

¹¹⁸⁷ It “can be seen as an opportunity structure framed formally by Treaty responsibilities, substantively by the Lisbon Agenda and the European social Model, and historically by the ‘pre-Lisbon’ education activities of the European Commission” R. Dale, p. 32.

¹¹⁸⁸ Particularly in Reading and Science.

¹¹⁸⁹ See INVALSI report 2023 on INVALSI website.

The influence of the European Union is linked to this same pressure regarding the need to climb the international rankings¹¹⁹⁰ and is exerted through specific programmes financed by EU funds, which, however, as shown, in most cases only yield inconsistent results and do not lead to real reforms. An exception, already mentioned several times, is what has recently happened with the National Recovery Plan¹¹⁹¹.

The Italian problem of the democratic deficit inherent in the systems for measuring and defining basic competencies, which risks weakening the accountability of the system itself – aside from the specific characteristics resulting from that elastic conservatism typical of the Italian education system, well described by Ricuperati - is identical to the European problem just discussed and, as such, a solution can be found, in my opinion, precisely at the European level, in the European Education Area.

¹¹⁹⁰ It has been noted, especially in Chapter 2, how frequently European documents mention the need to improve students' performances in Reading, Maths and Science in the PISA tests.

¹¹⁹¹ See the website of FUTURA- National Recovery Plan for Education, which provides a list and details of the six reforms included in the plan to which the allocations of individual funding tranches are linked.

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