

Resist! Italy's Teachers and Students in the Face of Neoliberalism in Education

Gianfranco Bandini
University of Florence (Italy)

1. *Neoliberalism and education: an unprecedented contamination*

There is a disconnect in the values, behaviours and educational styles traversing education systems at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: it is the long wave of neoliberalism that even in Italy, at a later time and with results as yet incomplete, has left many traces behind it. The aim of this essay is to highlight the transformative aspect of neoliberal ideology and its effects on education in Italy. These effects may be partial, but they still have two important and distinctive characteristics:

In the first place, they are shared more widely by the population and the political class than they are in the economic field, the preferred arena of neoliberalism and the main battlefield for the opposing factions. Secondly, although Italian education has traditionally been strongly anchored to other paradigms, both operational and idealistic, neoliberalism has brought about several major changes which have now entered the mainstream public debate on education. They have in essence “naturalised” the use of a general framework for interpreting educational phenomena that is different from the past. Even those who challenge these views (not only in Italy¹) and who find themselves in a position of cultural resistance have had to discuss them within a set of questions and an agenda that was imposed from outside the world of education. However, as will be seen below, the feelings and perceptions of teachers and students do not appear to be engaged, except to a minimal degree, with the prevailing public debate or with the national (also in some cases regional) laws that have implemented certain ideas.

In this context we can refer to certain events that, through various changes in the law and a new public narrative, have on several occasions encouraged schools to cast off traditional educational ideas and practices, which are broadly shared even among different schools of thought and are essentially based on the primacy attributed to certain basic principles of education that can be summarised as follows:

1. the importance of collaboration between pupils;
2. a focus on the disadvantaged, with the objective of inclusion;

¹ See S. O'Brien, *Resisting neoliberal education: For freedom's sake*, in T. Rudd, I.F. Goodson (eds.), *Negotiating Neoliberalism: Developing alternative educational visions*, Rotterdam, Sense Publishers, 2017, pp. 149-166.

3. the role of schools as peer communities;
4. the devaluation of tests and of quantitative educational assessment practices in general;
5. the priority given to state schooling, in the light of two principles: 1) only state schools offer a secular education that is open to all cultural expressions; 2) the indicator of average cost per student is not helpful in assessing the state school/private school relationship (Article 33, paragraph 3, of the Italian Constitution: «Entities and private persons have the right to establish schools and institutions of education, at no cost to the State»);
6. the conceptualisation of the school as a cultural community not governed by market logic, maintaining the substantial difference between education and the systems used to produce tangible and intangible goods (so-called “services”).

Particularly since the first Berlusconi government (10 May 1994 to 17 January 1995, XII Legislature) the new neoliberal lexicon has emphasised:

1. the importance of competition among pupils as form of preparation, training and anticipation of a society based on this principle;
2. a focus on the merits of the best and brightest, in other words the percentage of the school population that is destined to play a leading role in society;
3. the world of education considered mainly as an organisation which, despite existing in a specific area, cannot escape the rules of efficacy and efficiency that apply to the world of economics, as seen in the corporate world;
4. absolute reliance on tests and other quantitative methods of assessing scholastic performance, as an objective way of giving an account to the general population of the money spent on public education;
5. a necessary balancing between state schools and private state-recognised schools, in the light of two concepts: 1) schools not run by the state are an expression of the educational freedom of the parents, the only ones who have the right to choose; 2) the lower cost per pupil of state-recognised schools is an indicator to be taken into account in order to regulate funding levels (Art. 33, paragraph 3, of the Constitution does not prohibit the granting of tax breaks and subsidies to families choosing state-recognised schools, almost always religious schools);
6. the conceptualisation of the school as an organisation with its own special characteristics that is part of a market of education service providers, in a competitive system. The issue (which also includes the cost of education, referred to above) must be framed within the broader concept of liberalising public utilities and privatising services which can be delivered better and more efficiently by the market than by the state.

As a preliminary point, it is also worth noting that the neoliberal agenda has been based on a new communicative model, aimed at emphasising that the needs for change have an objective value that can only be challenged by unionised teachers who are not open to dialogue. Think of the repeated references to the Europe that wants to impose a series of virtuous behaviours on its Member States; think, above all, of the use of quantitative research and assessment methods, touted as the only possible rational and scientific vision, and therefore not subject to the opinions of teachers.

2. *From collaboration to competition: the advent of a new public narrative on education.*

Going back quickly over the various points, we can start with the «school of the three I: English, Computer Science and Enterprise» (*Inglese, Informatica, Impresa*) according to the programmatic definition given by Silvio Berlusconi in 2000, when talking about the technological revolution and new literacy². This is the most obvious evidence of a neoliberal agenda in the education sector, although clues can be found from much earlier, especially from the 1980s onwards.

Within a short time, Letizia Moratti, Minister of Education, University and Research, in explaining the plans of her department³, started by commenting on the dramatic situation in schools and by highlighting that reforms from within were impossible:

We are aware that we face a complex world and that time is running out if we want to ward off the risk of a gradual decline in our education and training system. The first sign of this decline is the growing distance between the efforts being made within the world of education and the results those efforts produce⁴.

Moratti went on to highlight very clearly some of the basic principles of the neoliberal approach, starting with the need for a competitive structure both in the economy and the world of education:

The gravity of the situation is therefore known, but I believe that the implications are becoming more and more serious. Worldwide, the level of scholarisation is rising and there is an increase in the number of people entering the world of education (I am of course referring to the developing nations but also to the inclusion of women and young people), and this has led to a widespread strengthening of earning capacity and the ability to participate in improving wellbeing. In this type of context, the meritocratic values typical of a competitive society will also tend to be strengthened.

The causes of the decline in schools can be identified in a system that cannot reform by itself and which is not adequate for a competitive society because it is still anchored to statist visions:

I believe that the crisis in the education system is due to insufficient quality and also to a lack of freedom of choice for families. We believe that the State cannot be the sole promoter of the value of human capital, nor the sole guardian of technical and scientific knowledge. [...] this is how we want to

² L. Lanna, *Lottimismo della libertà, interview with Silvio Berlusconi*, «Ideazione», 7 November 2000, http://www.ideazione.com/www.ideazione.com/1.politica/05_07-11-2000/lanna.htm, available at https://web.archive.org/web/20010124070000/http://www.ideazione.com/www.ideazione.com/1.politica/05_07-11-2000/lanna.htm (last access: 30.01.2023).

³ Letizia Moratti, Minister in the 2nd Berlusconi Government (11 June 2001-23 April 2005) and in the 3rd (23 April 2005-17 May 2006).

⁴ Hearing of Letizia Moratti, the Minister of Education, University and Research, at the Chamber of Deputies – 7th Committee on Culture, Science and Education (under Article 143, paragraph 2 of the Regulation), session held on Wednesday 18 July 2001, stenographic report, Ferdinando Adornato, President, http://documenti.camera.it/_dati/leg14/lavori/stencomm/07/audiz2/2001/0718/s010.htm (last access: 30.01.2023).

interpret the role of schools and education. We imagine a modern system that is certainly competitive, innovative, democratic, open and transparent. [...] We believe that families should be guaranteed equal conditions with respect to their choices [...], in a system that integrates state and non-state components to create a school that genuinely belongs to the civil society.

The new narrative for education has thus introduced terms that are antithetical to those shared in the educational community, with great awareness that this is constructing a dialogue that opposes teacher sentiment, as Moratti states: «We strongly feel the responsibility of representing different opinions».

The plethora of official documents and interviews issued by the minister contain several which are particularly important when analysing the new language of education⁵. If we use as an example the hearing of Minister Moratti on the implementation of Law No. 62/2000, we realise that its reasoning is dotted with all the concepts (and their terminological variants) identified in the first paragraph: “competition”, “merit”, “meritocracy”, “INVALSI” (national assessment tests organised by INVALSI, the *National Institute for the Assessment of Education and Learning*), “freedom of choice”, “freedom of education” and “state-recognised schools”⁶.

Not only the political world but also some intellectuals and journalists lend strong support to the competitive and operational vision of education: examples include Angelo Panebianco, Luca Ricolfi, Ernesto Galli della Loggia, Roger Abravanel but also Luciano Canfora and Umberto Galimberti who have not missed an opportunity to chastise the state schools of today with nostalgic observations.

In the years that followed, we must mention a watershed reform, the one implemented by education minister Mariastella Gelmini⁷ (Law 133/2008 and Law 169/2008; in effect from 1 September 2009 for primary and middle schools and from 2010 for secondary schools). At primary level, these reforms reintroduced the “single class teacher” (cancelling out more than thirty years of educational thinking) and introduced the 1-10 assessment scale (although this was mitigated by a teacher assessment of the pupil’s level of achievement). The 1-10 assessment system was also introduced for middle schools, while at high school the mark for behaviour (which in practice had never been abolished), was re-included in the range of grades used to decide the pupil’s final mark.

⁵ For further information on the new language of political communication in Italy, see V. Bagolini, E. Lombardi Vallauri, *La comunicazione della nuova élite politica: novità e continuità*, «Parolechiave», n. 2, 2018, pp. 63-82; E. Lombardi Vallauri, *La lingua disonesta. Contenuti impliciti e strategie di persuasione*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019. In the international context: J. Gray, J.P. O’Regan, C. Wallace, *Education and the discourse of global neoliberalism*, «Language and Intercultural Communication», vol. 18, n. 5, 2018, pp. 471-477; M. Sardoč (ed.), *The Language of neoliberal education: Problems, challenges and opportunities*, «Šolskopolje», vol. 29, n. 1-2, 2018 (see, in particular, the interview with Henry Giroux, pp. 97-106).

⁶ Hearing of the Minister of Education, University and Research, Letizia Moratti, on the implementation of Law No. 62/2000, laying down rules for equal education and provisions on the right to study, Chamber of Deputies, 7th Committee on Culture, Science and Education, session held on Tuesday 4 May 2004, stenographic report, Ferdinando Adornato, President, [https://leg14.camera.it/_dati/leg14/lavori/bollet/200405/0504/html/07/|pagpro=\[all=off\]commis=07](https://leg14.camera.it/_dati/leg14/lavori/bollet/frsmcdin.asp?AD=1&perciboll=/_dati/leg14/lavori/bollet/200405/0504/html/07/|pagpro=[all=off]commis=07) (last access: 30.01.2023).

⁷ Mariastella Gelmini, Minister in the 4th Berlusconi Government (8 May 2008-16 November 2011).

Again, it is easy to pinpoint the various sources in which the vision of the school as a “sick” institution has become consolidated, with an accentuation of the importance of merit, seen as the individual value of the more intelligent students and the result of better-managed schools. According to Maria Stella Gelmini:

High doses of meritocracy must be introduced at all levels. First of all, the best-performing students should be rewarded. Their talent should primarily be rewarded in terms of opportunities for their future. I am thinking, for example, of ways to enable them to enrol in universities and the best courses in the future. Secondly, create incentives for the better-organised schools which are best able to improve their pupils' learning, taking into account the starting points. We will give them more resources and the means to offer an ever better service⁸.

Moving further down the timeline, we must remember the self-definition of “good school” given by the President of the Council Matteo Renzi when presenting his reforms in 2015, continuing on from those illustrated above⁹.

Finally, the latest news is that the current Meloni government (in office since 22 October 2022) has changed the name of the Ministry of Education to “Ministry of Education and Merit”, in line with the thoughts expressed in the “League Manifesto for the government of Italy”, which connects merit to the need for solidarity:

Moving away from the idea of “exam factories” towards a model of education that favours the individualised development of talent and skills and which “leaves nobody behind”¹⁰.

Regarding the Ministry's name, I think a brief parenthesis might be helpful as it allows us to consider both the long duration of the “Ministry of Public Education” and also the periods in which education has lost its “public” status. From the Cavourian “Ministry of Public Education of the Kingdom of Italy” of 1861 we have to wait until 1929 to see the first name change, to the “Ministry of National Education” which remained until the 2nd Badoglio Government (22 April until 8 June 1944). The title of Ministry of Public Education was reinstated with the Royal Decree No. 142 of 29 May 1944 and was maintained by the subsequent 1st Bonomi Government (18 June-10 December 1944), remaining unchanged until the Dini Government (17 January-17 May 1996). In the Prodi Government that followed (17 May 1996-21 October 1998), the name was changed to “Public education, universities, scientific and technological research”, becoming “Education, universities and research” in the 2nd Berlusconi government (30 May 2001-27 April 2006).

⁸ G. Vinciguerra, *Gelmini: “Ecco come introdurrò il merito”*. Interview with the Minister of Education given to the Director of «Tuttoscuola», 5 September 2009, <https://www.tuttoscuola.com/gelmini-ecco-come-introdurr-il-merito/> (last access: 30.01.2023).

⁹ Law No. 107 of 13 July 2015 and subsequent implementing decrees; the education minister was Stefania Giannini (22 February 2014-12 December 2016).

¹⁰ See G. Valditarà, A. Amadori, *È l'Italia che vogliamo. Il manifesto della Lega per governare il Paese*, Milano, Piemme, 2022 (chapter entitled: *Progetti concreti per un Paese che rinasce*).

Following the loss of the accent on the public nature of education¹¹ (which had been approved for 130 years in total), the last government of the Republic recently changed the name to “Ministry of Education and Merit” (Decree Law No. 173 of 11 November 2022 introducing urgent provisions on the reallocation of ministerial powers).

The sole exception to the terminological dyads examined so far, which contrast different visions of the school (collaboration/competition, inclusion/merit and so on) is represented by a particular definition: the “classist school”. This is a term that appeared in the Sixties and Seventies, in close connection with Marxist interpretations of society, as it identifies a relationship in which one social class is subordinate to another. It carries with it the idea of an opposition between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and is complementary to the “bourgeois school”¹².

Lorenzo Milani (in 1967) also defined it with this terse indictment:

We have read the law and the plans for the new school. We are happy with most of the things it says. And then there is the fact that the new middle school exists, it is the same for all, it is compulsory and is not popular with the right. That's a good thing. It's just sad to know it's in your hands. Are you going to make it *classist* like the other one?¹³

It is interesting to note the reply given by the new minister Giuseppe Valditara, in one of his first interviews, to the question «Why did you change the Ministry's name to include the noun “merit”?»:

Because today, schools are *classist*. Schools aren't places of equality and don't help pupils to fulfil their potential and build a satisfactory adult life. [...] As Ernesto Galli Della Loggia wrote in the *Corriere*, «it is not a school of equality because it is not a school of merit». This awareness gives rise to the challenge of merit, which gives substance to the word “education”¹⁴.

This is the most recent act in the chronology of the neoliberal wave, which not only introduces new terms into the narrative of education, but reinterprets and changes the meaning of the traditional terms. What we are witnessing is the removal of one of the symbolic words of progressive education and the pedagogy of emancipation and its replacement in a world of different meaning, in a complex discursive process that allows the new education of merit to artificially place itself inside and not outside the Italian educational tradition. The term “class” is taken away from its link to socio-economic

¹¹ The loss of this linguistic indicator is very important and obviously not accidental, as neoliberalism brings with it a devaluation of the character of the public asset of education: see M. Baltodano, *Neoliberalism and the demise of public education: the corporatization of schools of education*, «International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education», vol. 25, n. 4, 2012, pp. 487-507.

¹² See Google Books Ngram Viewer, <https://books.google.com/ngrams/>. Search using the following parameters: Data set “Italian (2019)”, period “1950-2019”, terms “bourgeois school, class school” (last access: 30.01.2023).

¹³ Scuola di Barbiana, *Lettera a una professoressa*, Firenze, Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, 1967, p. 30.

¹⁴ G. Fregonara, *Valditara: “La scuola di oggi è classista. Alleanza per il merito con studenti e insegnanti”*, «Corriere della Sera», 31 October 2022, https://www.corriere.it/scuola/medie/22_ottobre_31/valditara-ministro-istruzione-scuola-oggi-classista-f6bdd48-5874-11ed-9e79-0ca6cc80307a.shtml; last access: 30.01.2023.

condition, just as in parallel with merit, it is given an individual meaning linked to capacities and motivation, separated from any ties to the family and social context. This is not merely a rejection of the lessons of emancipatory education but also of all the solid sociological theory – from Bell and Gintis to Passeron and Bourdieu, with its fundamental concept of cultural capital¹⁵ – which has clearly shown the decisive role played by learning environments compared to individual characteristics, without failing to underline the difficulty that schools have in compensating for the socio-economic and cultural differences of the family¹⁶.

3. *The world of education, between indifference and resistance*

The communicative process, which I have described so far in summary terms, is located in particular in the world of digital communication, which is characterised by a progressive disintermediation between scientific culture and popular culture which culminates in the current condition of the “post truth era”¹⁷. This means that despite the huge increase in the ease of access to culture that has taken place in just a few years, scientific literature is barely understood and re-elaborated by the general public. We are witnessing a proliferation of simplifications and approximations, alternative visions and conspiracy theories, whose great pervasiveness and diffusion were seen during the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is easy to see how the process of branding and mediatisation of the narrative on education finds fertile ground in this new and unprecedented digital context, giving space for politics to establish a direct link with public opinion on an issue that apart from a brief period in the 1970s has never fired the debate in the political or the cultural arena. This is where Silvio Berlusconi’s “three I” (English, computer science and enterprise) and Matteo Renzi’s “good school” find common ground. In both cases, skipping over any mediation by experts, advertising slogans are used to define the validity, acceptability and desirability of the proposal.

It is no coincidence that those who have resisted this vision of education have tried to use the same communication tools, but without much success. There has been talk of “sheriff principals”, “chicken coop classes” or “INVALSI state scorecarding”. It is worth considering this last issue for a moment, as INVALSI, has become a symbol for the hostility of the whole educational community – students, teachers and unions – towards the neoliberal reforms.

¹⁵ P. Bourdieu. *The forms of capital*, in J. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986, pp. 241-258.

¹⁶ By way of example, see: J. Vegard and T.B. Strømme, *Advantages of upper-class backgrounds: Forms of capital, school cultures and educational performance*, «The Sociological Review», vol. 70, n. 6, 2022, pp. 1199-1219.

¹⁷ R. Keyes, *The post-truth era: Dishonesty and deception in contemporary life*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 2004.

The world of education has in general been extremely wary of all forms of standardised assessment, unlike a significant part of Italy's experimental pedagogy community, which since the Seventies and Eighties has allowed pupils to take part in basic comparative studies, from TIMMS to TALIS, from PIRLS to PISA (in particular we could mention the commitment of Benedetto Vertecchi and his school). As for the INVALSI national assessments themselves, which began in the 2005-2006 school year, they would not have attracted so much hostility had certain characteristics of these tests not made them so very different from the reference models used internationally. It is necessary to start with the consideration that these standardised assessments were intended as tools designed to improve the quality of learning, with the aim of providing – to political decision-makers in particular – measures to assess the overall performance of schools in order to support the strategic actions of government. At the same time, they represent a form of “public accountability” that gives society as broad and objective a picture as possible of how public funds are used, particularly at times of reform¹⁸.

However, concerns began to emerge from the moment the training courses on the INVALSI data were first rolled out for teaching staff, starting with the advice given to school principals on how to compare a school against others in the local area, within a competitive framework. This method of using the INVALSI data is based on increasingly detailed statistics, measurements and numerical evaluation of the teacher and pupil performance. The result is that schools are included in performance rankings, and this has taken the assessments away from the initial national objective and closer to a metric that measures quality at local level, school by school and class by class¹⁹.

During the years we are now discussing, the Agnelli Foundation launched the *Eduscopio* project²⁰, which publishes the rankings of school achievements in an increasingly transparent and open way. The rankings are calculated retroactively based on the subsequent university results gained by the students (obviously without considering their social and cultural backgrounds, thus by attributing merit to the best results based on a combination of just two factors: the efforts of the students and those of the teachers)²¹.

The ministerial procedure for appointing the INVALSI president and board members has been a further area for criticism, as the assessment systems are set up to be independent administrative authorities and as such they should have «ownership of the power to

¹⁸ See E. Hutt and M.S. Polikoff, *Toward a framework for public accountability in education reform*, «Educational Researcher», vol. 49, n. 7, 2020, pp. 503-511.

¹⁹ On this effect of neoliberal policies, in particular the pressures exerted on individual teachers, see D. Attick, *Homo Economicus at School: Neoliberal Education and Teacher as Economic Being*, «Educational Studies», vol. 53, n. 1, 2017, pp. 37-48.

²⁰ The *Eduscopio* project. *Confronto, scelgo, studio* was launched in 2014, <https://www.eduscopio.it> (last access: 30.01.2023).

²¹ On this subject, researchers are either highly in favour or heavily critical: see for example M. Bordignon, P. Carapella, G. Turati, *Information and quality of public services: The case of the Eduscopio internet portal of the Giovanni Agnelli Foundation*, «Stato e Mercato», n. 1, 2021, pp. 117-139; P. Landri, *To resist, or to align? The enactment of data-based school governance in Italy*, «Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability», n. 33, 2021, pp. 563-580; M. Pitzalis, *Le domande inevase sul mercato scolastico e il “buono scuola”*, «Scuola democratica», vol. 9, n. 3, 2018, pp. 631-636.

appoint their management bodies [...], accentuating their detachment from political power»²². Not only that: over time the arrows launched by the teachers' unions, lecturers' associations and most of all by the students, have focused on additional aspects which are giving more weight to the idea that this is not about having strategic comprehensive assessment systems, but about systems of individual assessment and control for both teachers and pupils.

It must be remembered that the state exams have been significantly reformed, with the new obligation to take part in the INVALSI assessments introduced from the 2007-2008 school year (the introduction of the national test in the final exam for the third year of middle school)²³. This mandatory participation is still a requirement for admission to the final exams. Between 2010 and 2017 it was included in the grade average and thus in the determination of the final mark²⁴. The score on the INVALSI assessment has been converted into a 1-10 grade, using a standard conversion table which is the same for all Italian schools²⁵. As required by Presidential Decree 122 of 2009 «the final assessment of the examination includes the result of the national written exam» and «the final grade comprises the average 1-10 grade obtained in each test and in the overall assessment, by rounding up to the higher number by a fraction equal to or higher than 0.5»²⁶.

Even for the secondary school-leaving examinations, the INVALSI tests have been a mandatory requirement for admission since 2013; this was introduced on a trial basis but it is left to the schools to decide whether to use the results in assessing the students. The plans to include the INVALSI result as part of the school-leaving diploma, in the same way as for the final year of middle school, have been announced several times but always accompanied by strikes and protests. After the 2015 exams, pupils started using *social media* to create humorous memes about the new INVALSI assessments. To the question Q1 «Think about what studying means to you. For me studying is like...», the answers soon went viral: «opening the kitchen cupboard and not finding the Nutella», «renal colic», «Chinese water torture», «having a cold shower in Norway», «not having a social life», «combing a raccoon»²⁷.

It is all too easy to dismiss these comments as “absurd” or “amusing”, “typical kids’ stuff” but in reality they are just one of the many examples of opposition and resistance, even boycotting, displayed towards the ministerial reforms over a very long period, as the

²² L. Orlando, *Genesi delle autorità amministrative indipendenti: natura e funzioni principali*, «Il Diritto Amministrativo», vol. 14, n. 12, December 2022.

²³ See INVALSI, *Il Decennale delle Prove INVALSI. Esiti, strumenti e riflessioni verso il Sistema Nazionale di Valutazione* (Rome, 4-5 December 2014), https://www.invalsi.it/invalsi/doc_eventi/12-2014/4/Documento_DecennaleProveINVALSI.pdf (last access: 30.01.2023).

²⁴ MIUR Press Office, *Scuola, esame terza media al via per quasi 580mila studenti. Più rigore nell'ammissione. Lode per meritevoli*, Roma, Press Release, 14 June 2010, <https://www.istruzione.it/archivio/web/ministero/cs140610.html> (last access: 30.01.2023).

²⁵ INVALSI, *Griglia per l'attribuzione del voto della prova nazionale*, https://www.invalsi.it/snvpn2013/documenti/pn2011/Griglia-Correzione_PN1011.pdf (last access: 30.01.2023).

²⁶ Presidential Decree No. 122 of 22/06/09 concerning the assessment of students, Art. 3, paragraphs 4 and 6, and subsequent ministerial circulars.

²⁷ V. Roscioni, *Test Invalsi 2015: le risposte più divertenti*, 12 May 2015, <https://www.studenti.it/test-invalsi-superiori-2015-foto-risposte-divertenti.html> (last access: 30.01.2023).

tone and purpose of the reforms date back to the tenure of Letizia Moratti (2nd Berlusconi government, 11 June-23 April 2005).

The object of the criticisms is the assessment, calculated according to a standardised national table, which means that a not inconsiderable part of the final assessment is left to the teachers (of Italian, Maths and English); this runs counter to the very principle of assessment, which by its nature should be contextualised and individualised.

The opinion of Giorgio Israel, an eminent and influential academic, is incisive and clearly delineates the crucial question posed by the INVALSI assessments:

What is the function of the INVALSI assessment? An attempt to provide – using a variety of qualitative tools – a picture of the state of Italy’s education system that might constitute a valid tool for its improvement? If this is the function of the INVALSI, there is nothing to object to. Actually, we can only look favourably on this type of activity, which can take various forms [...]. On the other hand, if the intention is to gradually replace the teacher’s role as an assessor of pupils – which in my view is an absolutely essential one – for reasons which are at the very least questionable, as we have seen, and by only using tests, and if the aim is to assess teachers and schools with those tests, then no, we really do not agree²⁸.

But the criticism does not stop there, as there are other “perverse” effects created by a quantitative assessment being converted into a 1-10 grade:

Instead of simply trying to assess the achievements resulting from ordinary teaching, they bring in a test [...] which has two effects. The first is to disrupt the result of the exam: it’s as though a chemist who is asked to determine the components in a compound stirs the mixture not with a neutral stirring stick, but with one imbued with a reagent. The second effect is even worse: it stimulates teachers and students to teach and study a new subject, the INVALSI tests.

As we can see, these are not extremist reactions, disorderly reactions to the advent of “the new”, nor dogged adversity to ministerial reasoning. Instead, this is an articulate and precise statement of reasoned arguments that dismantle the argument that these assessments are objective and have nothing to do with preconceived ideologies. The lesson of Israel is all the more interesting because it allows a better evaluation of the strong criticisms coming from certain circles of the educational community, which are well-represented and summed up in a mural documenting the latest clash between teachers and the government (17 November 2022): «Giving a scorecard isn’t assessment. No INVALSI»²⁹.

This is the reaction to another cause of friction with the world of education, in addition to all those mentioned above: the issuing to schools of codes to match the assessments with poor results with the students who completed them: these pupils are then labelled as “vulnerable students” and identified by name³⁰. This is not the place

²⁸ G. Israel, Speech at the Convention *In classe ho un bambino che...* (Florence, 6 February 2015), *Dibattito a due voci sul tema: Sono utili le prove Invalsi?*, <https://youtu.be/7ZVmqGAAVC8> (last access: 30.01.2023).

²⁹ See <https://comune-info.net/la-schedatura-degli-studenti-fragili> (last access: 30.01.2023).

³⁰ Roars (Return On Academic Research and School), *Schedatura di Stato INVALSI: nomi e cognomi degli studenti ‘disagiati’*. *E adesso?*, 15 November 2022, <https://www.roars.it/online/schedatura-di-stato-invalsi-nomi>

to further investigate the condemnation of “scorecarding”, considered by the president of the INVALSI assessments, Prof. Roberto Ricci, as «another interpretation of things that favour obscurantism»³¹. However, it is worth noting that as we have seen, this is just the latest episode in a series, all of which are aimed at changing the international system of comparative assessments which provide data that are regularly aggregated and anonymous.

At this point we cannot say that the forms of rebellion mentioned here, concentrating on just a few exemplary cases, are merely the preserve of a small part of the education community. There is no doubt that the repeated calls to boycott the INVALSI assessments were supported by a minority of teachers and students. However, it would be wrong to think that these are only extremist movements, as the crude neoliberal invites us to think, relegating them to the ranks of those who do not understand innovation or reforms. In reality, much of the education community (perhaps in silence and resignation) agrees with the reasons for such resistance, even if they dislike some of its methods.

The long but necessary premise of historical contextualisation now gives us a better and deeper understanding of the teachers' stories, just three of which are given here as examples. The words of primary school teacher Danilo Serafini (who began teaching in 1983) are emblematic³². When asked about the usefulness of the INVALSI assessments, he replies:

I hope they won't take my pension away now! I can't deny that I've called them “the Invalid assessments” [It's a play on words: Invalsi / Invalid; N.d.A.] more than once, because [...] I think it's crazy to assess [pupils] after doing something they aren't used to doing. [...] that's not meant as a criticism of how the INVALSI assessments are structured because there are some excellent ideas. Maybe it's the teachers' fault, maybe the ministerial plans are to blame, maybe it's whoever else's fault, I don't know, but it's clear that [...] the test given to the children has absolutely nothing to do with how they work day to day.

When asked about the areas in need of urgent reform to improve education, the primary school teacher Maria Grazia (who started teaching in 1972) questions the practical utility of national assessments:

e-cognomi-degli-studenti-disagiati-e-adesso (last access: 30.01.2023).

³¹ V. Santarpia, *Invalsi, scoppia il caso del 'bollino di fragilità' agli studenti*. Ricci: “Solo uno strumento per distribuire i fondi”, «Corriere della Sera», 15 November 2022, https://www.corriere.it/scuola/medie/22_novembre_15/invalsi-scoppia-caso-bollino-fragilita-studenti-ricci-solo-strumento-distribuire-fondi-fcbf8720-64b6-11ed-afef-649581263307.shtml (last access: 30.01.2023). See also the reply from ROARS, *Invalsi conferma la schedatura di massa degli studenti fragili. Unbeknown to parents*, 16 November 2022, <https://www.roars.it/online/invalsi-conferma-la-schedatura-di-massa-degli-studenti-fragili-a-insaputa-dei-genitori> (last access: 30.01.2023).

³² Interview given by Daria Isolani to Danilo Serafini (elementary school teacher since 1983) on 18 January 2020, available online at <https://youtu.be/ZN143580IG0> (as of minute 33:31) (last access: 30.01.2023). See the comment card by Monica Dati, *Avevo imparato a leggere prima di andare alle elementari grazie ad Alberto Manzi: i ricordi del maestro Serafini*, «Memorie Educative in Video», DOI: 10.53221/628, published on: 26.10.2021, <https://www.memoriascolastica.it/memoria-individuale/video-testimonianze/avevo-imparato-leggere-prima-di-andare-alle-elementari> (last access: 30.01.2023).

Who is in charge of teaching? just the poor teachers, left to themselves? teaching hasn't been given due recognition for many years now. Now we have the new INVALSI assessment system, but that's something else, it's out of context, it's a different thing. I think a lot of attention is needed [...]. I think it's up to the Minister to recognise the value of teaching³³.

Other testimonies reveal some ambivalence, such as the primary school teacher Maria Galatolo (a primary school teacher since 1972), although she starts from a position of opposition to assessing [pupils] with grades and scores:

Personally I'm against grading, but on the other hand I was also against the summary opinion "good", "satisfactory", "excellent" because to me those are just labels given on the basis of personal opinion because it's not true there are really objective tests³⁴.

However,

I tend to disagree with this kind of label. I am more in favour of a global judgement than one based on a report card [...] where a global opinion is given on all the various aspects of a child's personality. But [...] now we have the famous INVALSI tests and I have to say, while I'm opposed to them, I can tell you something positive: the last INVALSI tests I held with a fourth-year primary class, I did them in the second year. My class managed to beat the national average so even though I'm against this type of grade, but...

4. *Epilogue*

Taken together, the testimonies of teachers, the statements made by students, the strikes and declarations made by teaching unions over a period of more than twenty years, are a tangible sign of an education system that despite having a number of different currents within it, does not want to be seen as an organisation, nor as part of a public administration to be guided towards destinations it does not want.

We have seen that there is a vibrant and well-documented dialectic between national (and ministerial) power and local institutions and also between the mass media and school culture. There is, in essence, a strong disconnect between the action of a government that sees the school as a dependent entity which can be shaped to its will (with constant changes between the administration in office and the next one) and the school which, as the study of the history of education has clearly shown us, expresses its own specific,

³³ Interview by Caterina Rinaldi with Maria Grazia (a primary school teacher since 1972), given on 29 March 2014 and available online at <https://youtu.be/jB29eWxlwM> (from minute 26:39) (last access: 30.01.2023).

³⁴ Interview given by Maria Galatolo to the primary school teacher Manuela Nepi (primary school teacher since 1972) on 1st February 2013, available online at <https://youtu.be/qq3rENHgShg> (starting at 16:12) (last access: 30.01.2023).

original and distinctive culture³⁵. Teachers, in particular, cannot be relegated to the role of executors of reforms. They must be recognised as intellectual subjects of the learning they are committed to improving on a daily basis. In this sense, the reform of education, taking into account what its history tells us, necessarily means listening to what schools have to say³⁶.

³⁵ See D. Julia, *La culture scolaire comme objet historique*, «Paedagogica Historica», 31, sup. 1, 1995, pp. 353-382.

³⁶ On these themes, for a broader historical excursus, starting from the Gentile Reformation, see G. Bandini, *The Italian debate about the role of teacher within teacher education, a long dialectic between two opposing concepts: educational intellectual or cultural employee*, in N. Mead (ed.), *Moral and Political Values in Teacher Education over Time. International Perspectives*, London, Routledge, 2022, pp. 49-71.