

Privatising education policy-making in Italy: New governance and the reculturing of a welfarist education state

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Abstract

Philanthropies and private foundations are increasingly acting as key nodes of the policy assemblages through which neoliberal and neomanagerialist policies are entering the field of education in Italy. In a country where public school ‘ineffectiveness’ and ‘resistance to innovation’ are taken for granted nowadays, policy philanthropists-entrepreneurs are attempting to lead the way in re-thinking education according to the new globalised economic imperatives.

Starting from the ongoing ‘evaluation turn’ of the Italian education system, the article unravels the complexities of those processes of policy influence. The analysis addresses multiple foci: the emergence of new discourses of education reform and the networks of social interaction they are rooted in; the generative effects such discourses can have on producing new positions, subjectivities, opportunities; and the structural selectivities influencing education policy-making. The article highlights the first moves of a peculiar process of ‘policy privatisation’ whose main potential outcomes are both a process of education policy-making privatisation and a reculturing of education according to a new private-business ethos.

Keywords: policy privatisation, philanthropy, education governance, neoliberalism, NPM, Italy

Introduction*

The paper analyses the first moves of a peculiar and troubled process of education “policy privatisation” (Ball 2007) in the Italian system that involves both the entering of “non educational actors” (Gunter 2012) in the key policy-making nodes and the “the importing of ideas, techniques and practices from the private sector” (Ball and Youdell 2008, 14).

In doing so, it aims to offer a contribution to help grasp those “processes that point to [the] dislocation of the place of the [Welfarist Education] State and its associated ideas of public interests and public services” (Newman and Clarke 2009, 71) through the establishment of a new business-like governmental and professional ethos. Those processes are interpreted here as part of a wider transformation of the deeper texture of Italian education depending on the intertwining and mutual shaping between the translation and inflection of policy ideas drawn from the

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globalised education policy-speak and the political and socio-cultural peculiarities of the Italian education field.

Since the 1997 School Autonomy Reform, the Italian welfarist education system has been subjected to repeated attempts to rework schools' organisational ecologies and the whole Education State according to neo-managerial and neoliberal mantras (Benadusi and Serpieri 2000; Grimaldi 2010, Grimaldi and Serpieri 2010). The perceived imperatives of global competitiveness have been increasingly used as a rationale for a project to modernise the education field that has focused on three pillars: a) the shift from a centralised system towards school autonomy and decentralisation; b) the constitution of educational professionals as new 'managerial', 'entrepreneurial' and 'accountable' subjects; and c) the establishment of a new evaluation machinery to measure system, school and individual effectiveness. This modernisation project was initially promoted by a centre-left coalition government and inspired by a Third Way discourse. Later on, it was further developed by two centre-right governments and informed by a more overt neoliberal approach (Berlinguer and Panara 2001; Cipollone and Sestito 2010).

In fact, in an early stage of this process of modernisation, school autonomy and the initial education reform efforts were intended to free schools from bureaucratic constraints and make them more effective and efficient, entrepreneurial and partnership-oriented organisations. Evaluation was also introduced as a principle to make them more accountable for their results (Benadusi and Consoli 2004).

The entering of OECD-PISA results as technologies of calculability in the Italian education debate paved the way for a second step in this process (Giancola 2009). The [perceived] crisis in student performance was still there. In so far as the school autonomy reform proved to be disappointing in terms of improving schools' effectiveness, new authoritative voices entered the educational policy arena highlighting how education needed to be fundamentally re-thought and re-designed, following those countries that were leading the way in reforming education. It is since then that in the media and the corridors of power it has been possible to observe the stronger presence (and influence) of a new generation of policy experts from fields other than education (mainly economics, business and management) with their 'undisputable' diagnoses and suitable solutions. It is this presence that has contributed to the opening of spaces for a process of questioning public education (Grimaldi and Serpieri 2012).

Since then, a plethora of recommendations to redesign welfarist public education mimicking certain private sector characteristics has been increasingly "sold to the public by emphasizing how they will increase [. . .] public accountability" (Magnusson 2005, 130) and the effectiveness and equity of education. This has been claimed to be a key challenge to deal with for the future of young people and the competitiveness of the Italian economic system (Cipollone and Sestito 2010).

Policies directed at restructuring and reculturing education have produced harsh struggles in Italian education, an institutional field where public bureaucracy's ethos, professional autonomy and adversity to privatisation are historically deeply rooted (Barzanò 2011). In fact, in the last few decades the lobbying of unions and large movements of resistance growing within professional communities have opposed and restrained the enactment of those 'privatisation policies' aiming at making public education more business-like through the introduction of the logics of competition, performance management, choice, contract, devolution and enterprise (Jones et al. 2008; Barzanò and Grimaldi 2013). Political instability has also affected the 'effectiveness' of this complex reform strategy, producing stop-go dynamics of change and leading the way to a sort of never-ending state of experimentation and non-decision-making (Landri 2009; Viteritti 2009; Serpieri, 2012).

However, some outcomes of this fuzzy and troubled reform strategy are starting to become visible.

First, some evidence is emerging of a deep process of the re-culturing of the education field according to a new private-business ethos, changing the ways in which policy-makers, professional and public communities think about education and the whole public sector, its relationships and practices (Grimaldi and Serpieri 2012).

Second, the 'policyscape' of education has changed recently, with private sector organisations being ever more involved in policy design, development and enactment and the state playing a key role in a paradoxical process of the destatisation (see Jessop 2002 about destatisation; Serpieri 2012) of education policy. In particular, philanthropies and private foundations¹ are acting more and more as key nodes of the policy assemblages through which neoliberal policies and managerialist devices are entering the field of education in Italy. In a country where the (old bureaucratic) public school 'inefficiency' and 'resistance to innovation' are taken for granted nowadays, policy philanthropists-entrepreneurs are attempting to lead the way in re-thinking education according to the new globalised economic imperatives, offering advice, consultation, research, evaluations or exerting other forms of influence. This involves the displacement of new discursive and practical devices, as well as the shaping of new alliances and subjectivities (see for instance, Treelle 2012, a recent publication by an influential philanthropic actor entitled: *The numbers to be changed. School, University and Research*).

In this paper, we focus on the entering of a heterogeneous but powerful coalition of philanthropic actors into the Italian education policy arena and the progressive centrality of the discourses of which they are relays. These new philanthropic actors represent new subjectivities which play a key role in the actual transformation of the patterns of governance in the field of education (Grimaldi 2010) and opening spaces for a path-dependent process of destatisation of Italian education policy-making and promoting a peculiar process of 'endogenous privatisation' of public education.

In the first section of the paper, we present the theoretical sensibilities underlying our analysis and the research methodology, locating our work in the tradition of governmentality studies (Foucault 1991; Rose and Miller 1992; Dean 2010). The combination of policy discourse archaeology (Scheurich 1994; Gale 2001; Grimaldi 2012) and network ethnography (Ball 2012; Ball and Junemann 2012) is described as a dual research strategy through which we tried to explore the ways in which such a powerful assemblage of policy actors, discursive devices and policy technologies is attempting to install a private ethos and to a certain extent a quasi-market-rule, together with some of its key values, in the processes of education reform.

In the following sections, starting from the ongoing “evaluation turn” of the Italian education system (Barzanò and Grimaldi 2013), the paper unravels the complexities of those processes of policy influence. The analysis addresses multiple foci: a) the emergence of new discourses of education reform and the networks of social interaction involving philanthropists, policy-makers, banks, consultants, unionists and professionals they are rooted in; b) the generative effects such discourses can potentially have on producing new positions, subjectivities, opportunities; and c) the structural selectivities influencing the processes of mediation through which those discourses influence education policy-making.

The paper offers a detailed analysis of the “how” (Dean 2010) of this ‘policy privatisation’ in the Italian education system, highlighting the new discursive devices, enunciative modalities and strategies displaced to prepare the terrain for neoliberal reforms in a country where the public and the professional communities have, generally speaking, been quite protective of public services. Borrowing Rose and Miller’s (1992, 176) words, this is a humble contribution to the understanding of “the multiple and delicate networks that connect the lives of individuals, groups and organisations [. . .] to the aspirations of [new] authorities” that seek to govern Italian education as though it was a private or business-like field.

Theoretical sensibilities and methodology

Our analysis of the ongoing processes in the Italian education system has been deeply influenced by the Foucauldian tradition of studies in governmentality (Foucault 1991; Rose and Miller 1992; Dean 2010).

In defining our focus and choosing our interpretative toolbox, we were aware of Rose and Miller’s (1992, 174) claim that in advanced liberal societies “political power is exercised today through a profusion of shifting alliances between diverse authorities in projects to govern a multitude of facets of economic activity, social life and individual conduct”. This creates “mobile mechanisms” of political power (ibid.), whose analysis requires the de-centring of the state as the main focus of attention, fragment its unity and shift the attention to the proliferation of complex bodies of knowledge and ‘know-how’ about government, the means (both human

and non-human) of its exercise and the performative powers of these new assemblages of knowledge, actors and technologies.

In this perspective, we explored the attempts to import ideas, techniques and practices from the private sector into the Italian education field by looking at the complex intertwining between: a) *rationalities of government*, that is those knowledge, programmes, practical know-how and strategies that shape the “representation for the field to be governed, [...] the techniques to be employed, and the ends to be achieved” (Dean 2010, 268); b) *technologies of government*, that is “the diverse and heterogeneous means, mechanisms and instruments through which governing is accomplished” (ibid., 269; Rose and Miller 1992, 175–76); and c) the *agencies* that at the same time act as relays of those rationalities and technologies and are constituted by them as subjects to be considered and enrolled in governing (Dean 2010, 268).

This is why we chose a dual research strategy. First, we adopted discourse (Foucault, 1972) as heuristic device to explore the ongoing organising of “statements [...] slogans, recipes, incantations and self-evidences” (Ball 2007, 3) into discursive formations that provide “possibilities of political thought” and make “policies accumulate credibility and legitimacy” (ibid., 2). Being inspired by Foucault’s early work (Foucault 1972), we carried out a “policy archaeology” (Grimaldi 2012; Scheurich 1994; Gale 2001) of our process of ‘policy privatisation’ and educational reculturing. Thus, we explored the discursive field within which education problems as forms of visibility (Rose and Miller 1992, 178) have been shaped and accorded significance and tried to outline their performative effects in the formation of the fields of validity, normativity and actuality (Foucault 1972). These are the key questions we addressed in the attempt to understand how new philanthropic actors are increasingly playing a key role in representing educational reality, in analysing its effects, weak points and failures and rectifying it, and in outlining its desirable outcomes. Policy archaeology allowed us to:

- offer a generative understanding of the deep implications of our process of policy change, shifting the focus from policy itself to the relations between policy statements and wider discursive formations and to policies’ conditions of existence;
- avoid a reductionist and simplistic analysis, offering an image of ‘policy privatisation’ as a contested and dynamic policy trajectory where processes of co-option, subjugation, exclusion and translation take place and policy production can be read as part of the struggles developing between different regimes of truth; and
- provide a detailed and critical exploration of the multiple and subtle forms of influence discursive ensembles exert, contributing to shape the social world and its subjectivities through the production of truth and knowledge (Grimaldi 2012, 447–448).

Second, we engaged in a reconstruction of the heterarchical policy networks (Jessop 2002; Ball 2009; 2012; Grimaldi 2011) whose actors, technologies and devices acted as relays of these knowledge, programmes, practical know-how and strategies. This is a key analytical move in the analysis of contemporary education policy-making that occurs more and more “in spaces parallel to and across state institutions and their jurisdictional boundaries” (Skelcher et al. 2005, 3) where the power of self-organisation is increasing and the emergence of complex self-organising systems structured through the overlapping of horizontal and hierarchical relationships is becoming a common trait of the new governance landscape (Hatcher 2008, 26). As Rose and Miller (1992, 175) argued, government “is intrinsically linked to the activities of expertise, whose role is [...] enacting assorted attempts at the calculated administration of diverse aspects of conduct through countless, often competing local tactics of education, persuasion, inducement, management, incitement, motivation and encouragement”.

In particular, we tried to bring out of the complex and fuzzy web of social relations constituting the infrastructure of education policy those assemblages of connections, nodes, actors and devices through which the Italian way of privatising education policy is unfolding. Another aim was to highlight, at least in part, the heterogeneity of actors, logics of action, interests and objectives constituting the deeper texture of these heterarchical networks.

In doing so, we carried out “network ethnography” (Wittel 2000; Howard 2002; Ball 2012; Ball and Junemann 2012) to identify the key actors, relationships, assemblages, network nodes, policy programmes and experiences that ‘populate’ the new heterarchical terrain of Italian education policy-making. It involved an activity of ‘discovery’ of non-hierarchical and heterarchical networks that had two distinctive features.

On the one hand, ‘network ethnography’ was a state-decentring research strategy. It consciously moved out from the traditional sites of policy-making to focus on the circulation of actors, objects, meanings, policies, technologies and devices in a diffuse time-space (Wittel 2000, 2). The ethnography field was re-conceptualised as a time-space made up of interlocked multiple socio-political sites and locations (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 37), with ethnography becoming an activity of tracing the connections and flows between the networks’ nodes. On the other hand, this methodological choice was based on an exploration of the potential of the Internet as both a new space and a new tool of research. Networks were analysed matching multiple and heterogeneous data sources: web searches, social networks explorations, academic literature and policy document analysis.

The starting point of our data collection was to identify a key set of private and philanthropic actors which in the last decade have played a relevant role in the process of ‘policy privatisation’ in Italian education organising conferences, funding research studies, publishing influential reports and pamphlets and being (directly or

indirectly) involved in several ministerial committee, public/private think tanks and so on. This ‘discovery’ activity unfolded through the web following the multiple connections between those philanthropic actors, individuals, organisations, public institutions, policy networks, programmes, devices and technologies and grasping their involvement in such a process.

The mapping of the connections (network ethnography) was paralleled by the collection of 148 public policy documents (regulations, reports, guidelines, publications, newspaper articles, interviews, web videos, public speeches transcriptions). Using the lenses of policy archaeology, the collected data were analysed using coding and sub-coding (following the analytical procedure proposed by Strauss and Corbin 1990) as a heuristic strategy to organise materials and identify key themes and problematisations.

A new education polycscape in Italy: Privatising the educational imagination

As an exception to the typology presented by Esping Andersen (1996), Italy is classified as belonging to the *Southern European Welfare Model* (Ferrera 1996; Landri 2008) whose main traits are commonly depicted in terms of “a) low performing system[s] of education with enduring difficulties [...]; b) an [...] institutional architecture identified with the tradition of the *statist legacy* (Green 2002; Prokou 2008); and c) a certain degree of school elitism [...] which reflect school institutional regimes of practices still reluctant to a full democratization of education” (Landri 2009, 76–77). Since World War II, the Italian education system has combined the choice of bureaucracy as the main vehicle of rationalisation and guarantee of control with the liberal principle of professional autonomy and responsibility. What has emerged is an organisational scenario within which hierarchically structured public administrations define the main traits of the institutional context by establishing standardised rules and procedures. In this perspective, the state is the schools’ monopolistic owner, the sole employer of personnel and the only decision-maker regarding educational matters such as curriculum development, assessment or testing. Within these strictly regulated contexts, the head teachers and teachers have been allowed to “exercise their professional judgement in the delivery of services”. Being accountable means providing formal evidence of adherence to centralised government regulations. In such a way the welfarist discourse combines legal and technical rationality. The state has been the main provider of public mass education, although some residual spaces for private schooling (especially Catholic schools) have been left. Even if compulsory schooling interests all students until the age of 16, the Italian system nonetheless has a lasting strong legacy of splitting the destiny of its population into two main tracks (lyceums and technical/vocational education) (Semeraro 1999; Benadusi 1989).

In 1997 a significant shift in the centralistic legacy occurred with the *School Autonomy* (site-based management) *Reform* which at the same time represents an attempt to modernise the Italian education system in a Third Way-like perspective and to revitalise democratic participation in the governing of education, but also the entry-point of neoliberal and neo-managerial policies (Benadusi and Serpieri 2000; Viteritti 2009). The following years (especially after 2001 with the rise of the second centre-right government led by Berlusconi) witness the troubled introduction of New Public Management principles and methodologies, especially for what concerns accountability devices and the subjectivation of ‘new’ professionals (head teachers and teachers) required to be ‘entrepreneurial’ and act as competitors in a quasi-market-like environment (Fischer et al. 2002; Ribolzi 1999). The clashes between the bureaucratic and welfarist legacies, the pushes provoked by neoliberal policies, the democratic expectations and professional resistances have resulted in a decade of failed reforms of the Italian education system (Grimaldi and Serpieri 2012). The harsh institutional struggles have involved governments, political parties, unions and professional communities.

In this respect, the fundamental shift in education policy-making and acceleration of this process of importing values from the private field into the education system coincides with the rise of the third Berlusconi centre-right government in 2008. As part of the long wave of a public campaign against the ineffectiveness of public sector bureaucracies, new non-educational actors are starting to enter education policy arenas, having initially been enrolled by the conservative Minister of Education Mariastella Gelmini in response to the challenge to reform a public education system that was described as “recalcitrant to change, improvement and innovation”. Figure 1 summarises the web of discursive devices adopted by the government to depict the rationale, values and objectives inspiring the reform project in policy documents, public speeches, interviews and newspaper articles:

A paradoxical tangle of powerful watchwords such as merit, improvement, performance, innovation and evaluation is starting to colonise the education debate,

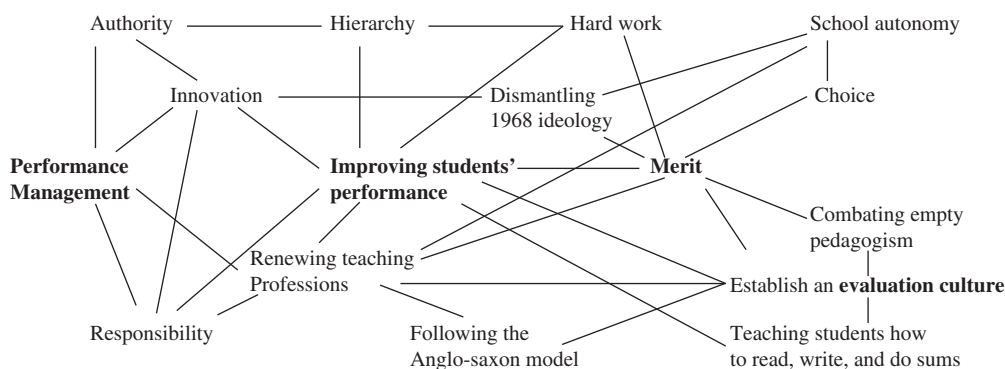


Figure 1. The discourse of education reform under the second Berlusconi government (2008–2011)

acting as organising principles for the ongoing formation of a discourse of education reform whose cornerstone was the blaming and shaming of public education's ineffectiveness and resistance to change and innovation, and a radical but subtle attack on the core tenets of teachers' professionalism (autonomy, public ethos, self-evaluation and so on), masked by the denouncing of teachers' laziness and lack of responsibility.

Interestingly enough, the ongoing formation of this new discourse of education reform is occurring simultaneously with a relevant change in the education policy landscape. A powerful group of philanthropic actors is entering education policy-making, opening the way for a process of 'policy privatisation'. Most of them were already playing a key policy advisory role after the school autonomy reform of 1997. However, it is in this political contingency that a set of conditions has emerged to create the space for their direct involvement in education policy-making.

Their stepping into the education arena reflects the ongoing formation of a constellation of heterarchical networks of social relations involving philanthropists, business and charity organisations, banks, politicians, civil servants, national and international institutional agencies, experts and consultants, universities and academics, pioneer schools, head teachers, teachers, and professional unions. Since 2008 these new policy entrepreneurs have been gaining increasing centrality in education policy-making and this coincides with the intense activity of cognition, calculation, experimentation and evaluation (Barzanò and Grimaldi 2013) and a flourishing of reports, conferences, publications, newspaper articles, press releases and public debates. A two-way flow of actors and ideas between state and [education] services and the private sector has commenced that is heavily influencing policy thinking about education. Philanthropic actors and their experts are becoming the key promoters, relays and legitimisers of the organising watchwords of the new discourse of education reform.

Figure 2 offers an overall view of this new education polycscape whose fuzzy image results from the overlapping of different interlocking heterarchical networks of public and private actors.

Within this new education polycscape, three philanthropic actors, namely the *Compagnia di San Paolo School Foundation*, the *Treille Foundation* and the *Agnelli Foundation* play a crucial role in the attempt to promote the reculturing of the Italian education system according to a 'private sector' ethos. Their managers and experts engage in direct policy writing activity and are involved in a variety of policy work such as assessing and reviewing and drafting education legislation, as well as producing ideas, policy technologies, tools and methods, reports and researches to legitimate policies, recipes and technologies. Their overall mission seems to be the selling of new policy recipes to introduce changes in the behaviour of the 'ineffective' and 'past-oriented' public education organisations. The importing into the daily activity of public schools and education administration of some key technologies of

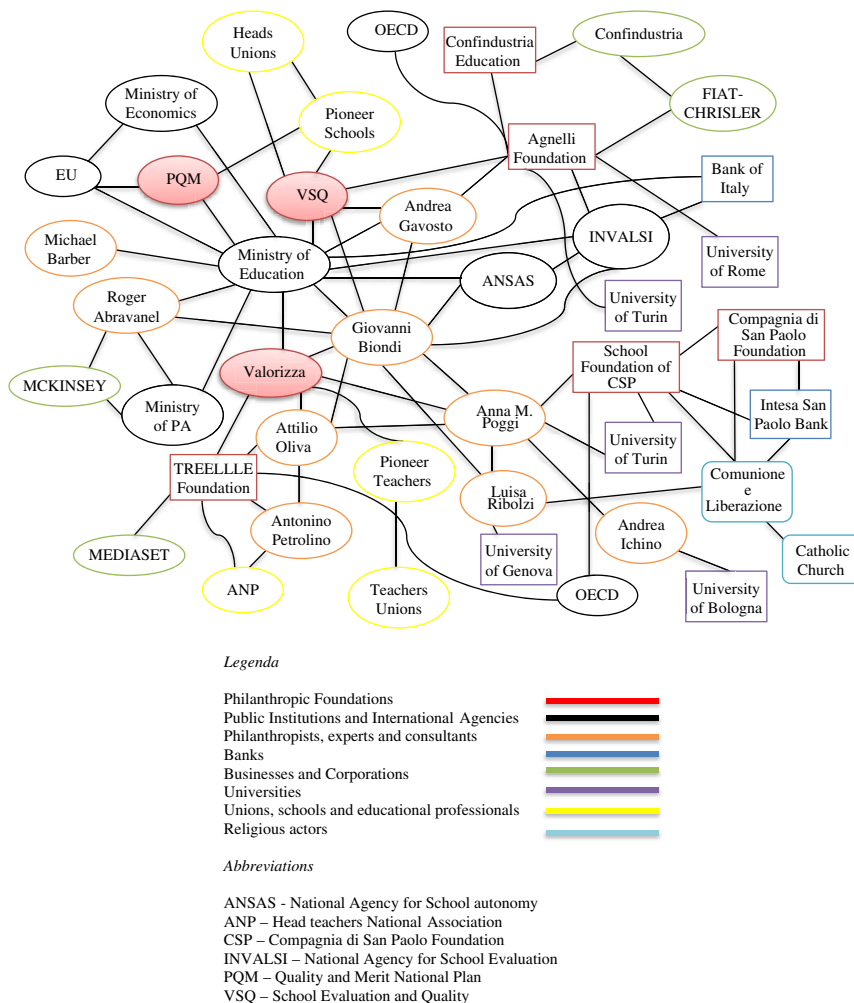


Figure 2. The new Italian education polycscape (2008–2011)

the agency and performance of the private sector is indicated as an ‘indispensable solution’ to make administration, schools and professional communities more effective, fair, productive, responsive and accountable to the country’s interests. These new policy entrepreneurs embody a new set of knowledge, strategic capacities and interests, acting as networkers, negotiators, disseminators and relays of discourses and structures drawn from the private sector imaginary and regime of practice.

Interestingly, the mimicking of the private sector’s ethos and practices is not an overt rhetoric. On the contrary, these new philanthropic actors employ apparently neutral, fair and undisputable discursive entry points, such as quality, improvement, meritocracy and effectiveness, to legitimise their involvement in education policy and open the discursive possibility to propose their diagnoses of the ‘diseases’ of Italian public education (see, for instance, Abravanel 2008, an advisor to Minister Gelmini and former McKinsey consultant).

Quality and the empowerment of school autonomy are keywords in the definition of the mission of the *Compagnia di San Paolo School Foundation*:

Working with schools and for schools to promote a better quality of education, with a specific focus on the changes originating from the introduction of school autonomy: this is the mission of the *School Foundation* (www.fondazione scuola.it/magnoliaPublic/ita/la-fondazione/presentazione-e-missione.html).

An 'ecumenical dialogue' to promote school modernisation and improvement is the core mission of the *Treille Foundation*, which notably declares its ambition to act as a bipartisan bridge between the different 'worlds and imaginaries' within the new heterarchical landscape of education policy:

... TreeLLLe aims to serve as the 'bridge' between the gap which too often separates research, public opinion and decision-makers - a gap which hinders progress in modernizing and improving our educational system. TreeLLLe operates strictly without links to Government or political parties: the uniqueness and ambition of the project lie in harnessing the contribution of well respected personalities and experts who best represent our country's different traditions and cultural identities. Today these traditions and identities need to be brought face-to-face in dialogue within an environment free from everyday political competition and tensions (<http://www.treille.org/english-site>).

The quality of the human capital along with the development and competitiveness of the country and the social mobility of talents are, instead, the main concerns of the *Agnelli Foundation* whose commitment in the field of education is explained as follows:

Since 2008 [...] the Agnelli Foundation decided to focus its research activities on education (school, university, lifelong learning). This choice is rooted in the widely shared belief that economic welfare and social cohesion of a country mainly depend on the quality of the competences and skills of its population [...]. A more educated and skilled population guarantees a higher productivity and, then, a better positioning of the country in the global competition; education is, moreover, one of the most powerful lever for individual empowerment and an important means of social mobility, since it gives the possibilities to talented and motivated young people to reach prominent social positions, independently of their social background (<http://www.fga.it/home/la-fondazione/programma-education.html>).

These accounts show the capacity of these discursive devices to co-opt and enrol most of the key values and principles of the welfarist public ethos such as equity, professional autonomy, mass education and social mobility, modernisation. However, it is in the activity of these new philanthropic actors as policy designers that the generative relations between the statements of the new discourse become clearer, revealing the nature of the strategies of reform, modernisation and quality improvement these new actors are relays of.

Strikingly, these philanthropic foundations and their experts not only act as key players of the contexts of policy influence, but also take on the role of policy designers. Two policy initiatives launched in 2010 are of great interest because of the Ministry of Education becoming the implementing subject of policies, logics of action and tools conceived within the nodes of the networks represented in Figure 2.

In particular, this ongoing privatisation of the policy imagination has resulted in the launch of two policy experimentations entirely designed by the think tanks of the three foundations, i.e. *Valorizza* and *School Evaluation and Quality* (VSQ). These policies are becoming the ‘pioneering’ devices through which the attempt takes place to change the daily life of Italian schools according to a private sector ethos and logic of action. The troubled enactments of these policies represent some key events of what we have elsewhere named the Evaluation Turn of the Italian Education System (Grimaldi and Serpieri 2012; Serpieri 2012; Barzanò and Grimaldi 2013).

The rationales of the two policy experiments are briefly described below.

Valorizza (enacted in 2010–2011) – Teachers’ evaluation

A pilot policy involving a national sample of 33 voluntary schools and 976 teachers. The aim is to test a ‘reputational model’ of teachers’ evaluation. Teachers are evaluated by an internal committee (the head teacher and two elected teachers-evaluators). In each school, the committee has to rank teachers in a league table on the basis of their reputation, using a complex set of qualitative and quantitative data as ‘objective’ anchoring of the judgement: teachers’ self-evaluation, curriculum vitae, parents and pupils preferences. The teachers in the upper 30% of each school rank are evaluated as ‘deserving teachers’ and receive a salary award. The aim of the model is to promote ‘virtuous competition’ between teachers as a lever for a collective ‘mimetic improvement’.

VSQ (enacted in 2010 and still ongoing) – School Evaluation and Quality

A pilot policy involving 77 voluntary schools. The aim is to test a ‘blended’ model of school evaluation combining inspections and students’ performance evaluation to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of schools’ work. The overall objective is to identify the ‘added value’ schools bring in determining the quality of students’ performance. Students’ performance is measured through INVALSI national tests on literacy and math competencies. Inspection teams are made of Ministry Inspectors, and private and academic experts and consultants and have the duty to formulate a judgment on school organisation and leadership. Schools are evaluated along three years. After the first ‘diagnostic’ year, schools are asked to produce and implement an improvement plan. At the end of the three years, schools are ranked. The upper 30% of the rank receive a money award as ‘outstanding’ schools, whereas the ‘failing’ schools receive advice to improve. Money award and competition between schools are implicitly intended as motivational levers to raising quality and promote improvement in students’ performance.

Valorizza and *VSQ* have had a troubled and contested enactment (see Barzanò and Grimaldi 2013 for a detailed account of this), producing the harsh resistance of

unions and professional communities that have nowadays partially succeeded in impeding the entering into force of the two evaluation models at the national level. *Valorizza*, with its research reports and dataset that tell of a great success and an innovative experience widely appreciated by international agencies such as the OECD, is at the moment in the 'limbo' of the policy garbage can, waiting to be refreshed in a favourable political conjuncture. *VSQ* is a still ongoing experiment and even after the fall of the Berlusconi government its underpinnings are heavily influencing the designing of the new School National Evaluation System undertaken by the current and the last Ministry of Education.

Although the trajectory of the two policies could be depicted as a partial failure of the new philanthropic actors in introducing new evaluation technologies in the education field, we argue here that the discursive problematisations underpinning the two policies have gained a significant degree of 'embeddedness' in the education debate in Italy.

These discursive problematisations and the new regime of truth they attempt to establish clearly reveal a strategic project to change the regime of practice that regulate the conduct of schools and educational professionals, redrawing it according to a new business-like ethos and the nice tale of 'virtuous competition' as a lever for improvement. The main traits of this overall attempt can be summarised as follows:

- a. using the 'indisputable' value of merit as 'picklock' to draw new professional ecologies where utilitarian actors engage in 'virtuous' competition and competition itself functions as a 'steering at a distance' mechanism that assures the pursuit of the common interest (that is school improvement) in a market-like environment;
- b. introducing the logic of differentiation (and abjection) as an incentive for organisational and individual improvement, reproducing the zero-sum games and winner-loser logic of the market;
- c. dismantling the professional principle of autonomy and professional self-evaluation through importing some substitutes of customer-satisfaction technologies (i.e. reputational evaluation);
- d. subjectivating new educational professionals, heroic, committed to change and improvement, competitive but also keen to abandon the professional qualitative and internal criteria in favour of externally-driven measurable indicators to judge both the effectiveness of their individual work and the overall quality of their organisation's work; and
- e. importing into the education field the private-sector rule stating that which is not measured is not valued, transforming education into a domain of calculability where educational effectiveness is only intended as the production of numerable outcomes.

In the next section of the paper we will grasp in more detail both the texture of the policy networks developing around these three philanthropic foundations and the main traits of this effort. A descriptive analysis of the key features of the heterarchical networks in focus will be coupled with a brief exploration of the discursive problematisations informing the diagnoses, the identification of the policy problems and the solutions invoked to save the Italian education system from its diseases.

The ‘holy crusade’ for merit as a picklock for reculturing education

In 2008 a ‘holy crusade’ for merit was launched in Italy by a powerful coalition of public and private actors. Ministries and institutional agencies, business CEOs, experts and consultants, journalists and politicians constructed an image of a country where economic development and equity are hindered by the lack of meritocracy and the waste of talents. This is the ‘unmerciful’ diagnosis appearing in a plethora of publications, interviews, conferences, public debates, articles and websites. In particular, Public Administration and the whole Public Sector are pointed out as the ‘dead weight’ of the country whose main traits are depicted to be political patronage, incompetence, laziness and ineffectiveness. In contrast, the private sector was held to be a virtuous example to be followed, where competition and incentives ‘naturally’ assure effectiveness, the selection of the most talented and the aptitude for innovation. The introduction of incentives is widely recognised as the way to modernise the public sector. As Piero Cipollone (Bank of Italy manager and President of INVALSI) wrote:

The valuing of merit does not imply *in sé* the coincidence between private and public interests. It requires on the contrary a careful definition of incentives that must stimulate behaviours that are consistent with the results the public sector wants to pursue. This means [...] to address a thorny issue [...] that is the identification of the ‘adequate’ award for a specific obtained result or a deserving behaviour. [...] It is clear that merit, before being awarded, needs to be sustained, valued and adequately evaluated, first of all in schools (Cipollone and Visco 2007, 33).

The *Treille Foundation* and the *Compagnia di San Paolo School Foundation (CSPSF)*, together with *Roger Abravanel* (a former McKinsey consultant), are key players in the translation of this discursive problematisation in the field of education. In 2010 the Presidents of the two foundations *Attilio Oliva* (Treille, a former entrepreneur) and *Anna Maria Poggi* (CSPSF, a professor at the University of Turin) were invited by the then Ministry of Education to be part of a *Scientific Committee*² (chaired by *Giovanni Biondi*, the Ministry General Director) whose mission was “to define the strategic guidelines for the construction of national evaluation system that values merit and talent and promotes a continuous improvement of the quality of teaching and schools”.

They became the ambassadors of a “rhizomatic” tangle³ (Deleuze and Guattari 1980) of non-educational actors who stepped in to design of a key feature of the Italian education system.

The *Treelle Foundation* is an admirable example of a bipartisan think tank. It has among its founders Fedele Confalonieri (Mediaset CEO) and Marco Tronchetti Provera (one of the most influential Italian top managers) and includes among its members two former centre-left Ministries of Education, academics, newspaper directors and opinion leaders. Born in 2004, its activities are funded by a group of leading Italian banks including *Intesa San Paolo* and *Monte dei Paschi di Siena*. Its explicit aim is to inform and involve “decision-makers, education authorities and media via public presentations of [annual publications]” and “to attract the attention of media”. Its overt mission is to carry on with:

transparent lobbying through the circulation of data, analysis and proposals to decision-makers - both at national and local levels -, parliamentarians, political parties, education boards in order to assure that TreeLLe proposals influence the Government action and are transformed in actual experiments (<http://www.treelle.org/english-site>).

In its nine years of activity, the *Treelle Foundation* has addressed a wide range of ‘strategic issues’ regarding the modernisation of Italian education, such as the establishment of a national evaluation system, the comparison with other European countries, the reform of teaching and teachers’ recruitment, the construction of a lifelong learning system, the reform of school leadership, the Europeanisation of higher education, the empowerment of school autonomy, accountability and responsibility (see the website <http://www.treelle.org/english-site> in the Quaderni section).

The *CSPSF* was created in 2001 as an ‘educational branch’ of the *Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation*, one of the biggest philanthropic foundations in Europe whose origins date back to 1563 and whose areas of intervention range from education to cultural activity, social policy, health and economic research. The *Compagnia di San Paolo* was formally established in its current juridical form in 1991 as the philanthropic division of a stockholding company, the bank *Intesa-San Paolo di Torino* that directly or indirectly finances the *CSPSF*’s activities. Within the *Compagnia* governing council (as well as in its financing bank), the influence of the Catholic Church is relevant. The *CSPSF*’s governing bodies are appointed by the *Compagnia* itself, whose governing council consists of catholic-oriented politicians, bankers, entrepreneurs and top managers.

Since its establishment, the *CSPSF*’s activity has concerned five main areas of intervention: a) support to school networks engaged in the development and transfer of best practices; b) ICT innovation; c) scientific education; d) civic education in a European perspective; and e) the integration of migrants. The tools employed by the

foundation are the direct financing of innovative initiatives, the advertisement of competitions among schools for selective funding and the organising of seminars and professional development activities for head teachers and teachers.

Both foundations are strictly linked to many public universities in mutual relationships where funding, legitimation, expertise exchange and co-option flow through multiple connections.

This tangle of philanthropic and non-educational actors uses merit as a powerful discursive device to legitimise its attempt to reshape the education welfarist legacy. The diagnosis they offer of the diseases of education is a 'classic' neoliberal trope, where international performance indicators are used as the main symptom to be observed and education is conceptualised as a function of economic development and the country's competitiveness:

The shared system indicators, the quality and effectiveness of the Italian Education System offer an image of a system that is late if compared to international and European standards. This delay is so significant that it can undermine the capacity of the country to sustain an acceptable level of competitive development (CSPSF 2009, 2 – 2009–2012 Strategic Guidelines).

On the basis of this diagnosis, the two foundations identify a set of policy problems to be addressed. Teachers' ineffectiveness and demotivation is the key point, being the main cause of this delay. Merit is the solution. The key policy recipes to bring merit into the education field are said to be the "introduction of mechanisms of awarding evaluation" and the differentiation of professional careers. It is said merit will enact a collective rush towards improvement where the awarded teachers will be finally valued and the ineffective teachers will be pushed to work harder to mimic the outstanding teachers and receive the award in the future.

Through the design of *Valorizza*, its logics and technologies, these actors attempt to offer some tools to introduce into the organisational and professional ecologies of the Italian education system the first seeds of a new private ethos. Below we will try to highlight the main traits of the discursive problematisation underlying this attempt and its implications in terms of processes of subjectivation (Foucault 1982; Butler 1997).

The discursive construction of the policy problems the two foundations identify is underpinned by an implicit ontological reframing of educational professionals as individuals, who are conceived as economic and self-interested actors whose agency is moved by:

the desire that the quality and quantity of the work made to contribute to the improvement of their school is recognized and valued both in terms of status and economic treatment (Valorizza Final Report 2011, 23).

Commitment, education as a mission and the idea of the professional community as a collaborative group, i.e. the core tenets of welfarist professionalism, disappear to leave the scene to new atomist subjectivities whose hard and quality work depend on status and economic incentives. It is clear here how the 'indisputable' value of merit is used as 'picklock' to draw new professional ecologies in a market-like fashion. The 'virtuous' competition among utilitarian actors is conceptualised, like happens in the private sector, as a key lever to improve 'productivity' and raise performance standards. Competition is intended as the only effective, efficient and responsive tool to promote improvement and raise the standards, and to make professionals more accountable to their 'clients' and more enterprising. Competition itself functions as a 'steering at a distance' mechanism that assures the pursuit of the common interest (that is school improvement) in a market-like environment.

Valorizza also represents a potential tool for dismantling the professional principle of autonomy and professional self-evaluation through the importing of some substitutes of the customer-satisfaction technologies. Adoption of the so-called reputational model implies the submission of professionals to the judgment of a number of external authorities that do not share the professional expertise (parents and students) and external evaluation as a technology of visibility that is drawn from the private sector (satisfaction questionnaires; CVs; self-evaluation standardised grids). The subjecting of professionals to external authorities and the new logic of visibility are well synthesised in the following quotations from the *Valorizza* final report:

in every school there is a shared and rooted belief about who can be regarded as the best teachers. It is known that this positive judgement is based on arguments and feelings that differ according to the points of view, but tends to concentrate on some individuals. Thus, the reasons why a teacher is highly regarded by the head, by colleagues, by non teaching personnel, by parents and pupils change, but they are always the same teachers that are highly regarded (*Valorizza* Final Report 2011, 25).

Teachers are discursively subjectivated as professionals who have:

the awareness that what is not evaluated loses any value, for public opinion as well as for teachers themselves. A whole professional category, if deprived of the possibility to confront with an evaluation system, loses social visibility and undergoes through a dangerous decrease in self-esteem (*Valorizza* Final Report 2011, 23).

Finally, the promotion of a new regime of practice based on the match between competition and performance-related pay for regulating the profession has another potential implication. It introduces the logic of differentiation (and abjection – see Youdell 2011) as an incentive for organisational and individual improvement, reproducing the zero-sum games and the winner-loser logic of the market. Such a

new regime of practice has the performative power to split the professional field into two groups, the deserving and outstanding professionals and the ineffective ones, with the risk of ‘crystallising’ negative identities and undermining long-term trust relationships within professional communities.

Then, *Valorizza* seems to represent a profound and pervasive cultural/ethical/procedural attempt to re-engineer public education and its professional ecologies by making them business-like. The power of this discursive problematisation lies in its capacity to co-opt a vast array of commonly ‘socially positive’ values, offering a legitimising image of a reform to bring merit, fairness and responsibility into a field where they are lacking. Paradoxically, a sort of dualism is established where traditional bureaucracies and professionalism are pictured as defensive, self-interested and not keen to change, and opposed to an efficient, virtuous and modern business world.

Making education a domain of calculability

The *Agnelli Foundation* and its network of influence play a key role in another strand of the overall attempt to change the Italian education system we are trying to describe in this work, that is, the making of education as a domain of calculability.

Since the school autonomy reform of 1997, as part of the long wave of international pressures and the tyranny of international benchmarks Italian governments have struggled to establish a national evaluation agency (INVALSI) and an evaluation system based on standardised national tests to evaluate students’ performance. This has been regarded as an unavoidable step to support policy-making with a reliable diagnostic tool to identify the system’s problems and to orient policy design and the allocation of funds (Cipollone and Poliandri 2012).

The harsh resistance from professional communities and unions, which boycotted the tests, and political instability, have produced a still ongoing troubled policy trajectory. It has only been four years that INVALSI has been delivering longitudinal data on students’ performance based on standardised tests realised every year in a national sample of schools.

Despite this turbulent story, the logic of calculability seems to have partially succeeded in colonising the education field, establishing data on student performance (whether it be INVALSI, OCSE-PISA, TIMS or something else) as the only reliable device to formulate a ‘realist’ and ‘objective’ judgment on the functioning of the education system, its organisations and professional communities (Serpieri 2012). As in the case of merit, this discursive problematisation paves the way to a variety of changes in the professional ecologies, but also to the entering of new technologies and the formulation of new policy problems and solutions that constitute “bits and pieces” of the redesigning of public education (Grimaldi and Serpieri 2013).

As with the case of *Treille* and *CPSSF*, the *Agnelli Foundation* is a key actor in this process. The *Agnelli Foundation* can be regarded as a philanthropic spin-off of

*FIAT*⁴ (now *FIAT-Chrysler*), which directly or indirectly funds its activities. Established in 1966, its mission is defined as follows on the foundation's website:

Since its establishment, the Foundation has played a role in Italian and European cultural debate, with the aim to offer a contribution with its research activity to the understanding of the Italian society changes and to the design of policies that promote the economic and civic development of the country in the European and global context. The Foundation interacts and dialogue with its full autonomy with civil society, intellectuals, political and economic forces, and public institutions (<http://www.fga.it/home/la-fondazione/origine-e-scopi.html>).

On the foundation's board of directors there are currently the *FIAT-Chrysler* Ceo *Sergio Marchionne*⁵, the President of the *Compagnia di San Paolo* *Sergio Chiamparino* and *Gianni Letta* who has for years been Berlusconi's political right-hand man. The Director of the Foundation, *Andrea Gavosto*, is an economist. The experts of the *Agnelli Foundation* work in a close relationship with the INVALSI analysts (who are mainly economists and statisticians) and those of *Confindustria Education* (i.e. the education division of the Entrepreneurs National Association). Since 2000, *Confindustria Education* has been advising on marketisation of the education field, invoking choice policies, quasi-markets and performance management technologies to modernise Italian schools. The *Agnelli Foundation* is also an active funder of several public universities, acquiring academic expertise to pursue and legitimate its cognitive aims.

Since 2008, the *Agnelli Foundation* has strategically chosen to focus on education as a key area of intervention given the strategic role education has in guaranteeing the development and competitiveness of the country. The themes addressed in five years of intense activities (policy design and lobbying, conferences, publications, interviews and press releases, newspaper articles) range from school and system evaluation and staff recruitment to quality management and human capital development. The education system's capacity to respond to the demands of the labour market and knowledge society stands as a key concern for the foundation. Moreover, the North/South divide and identification of the weaknesses of the system have been underlying issues of all of the foundation's works.

As with the case of *Treille* and *CSPSF*, a deficit model inspires the diagnosis of the *Agnelli Foundation* about the diseases afflicting the Italian welfarist public education. International data on students' performances offer incontestable and objective measures to calculate public school ineffectiveness. Like in competitive environments, ineffectiveness is defined through performance comparisons:

International data on students' performances offer with a merciless frequency worrying evidence about the Italian school and – although they do not have to be understood as demonstrating its overall failure – they show the Italian school has serious weaknesses. If primary school students obtain gratifying results, at the beginning of the secondary

school our students experience a significant gap in literacy, maths and science competencies if compared to their peers of the countries we are used to dealing with: this is a gap that, given the cumulative character of the processes of human capital formation, could become unrecoverable. In short, nowadays school is a serious national emergency and a profound rethinking of its general aims and its functioning mechanisms is urgent (<http://www.fga.it/home/la-fondazione/programma-education.html>).

It is clear that a radical rethinking of the welfarist educational aims and practice is asked for: “*Between the myth of equity and the incapacity to address the challenges of quality*” is the title of one of the most discussed and influential working papers of the *Agnelli Foundation* that harshly criticises on the basis of incontrovertible objective data on students’ performances the ineffectiveness of a large section of public education (lower secondary school).

Such a discursive problematisation leads the *Agnelli Foundation* to identify performance evaluation, import the logic of performance management and improvement, establish a peculiar mechanism of reward/punishment and to ‘indirectly’ introduce a competitive logic between schools as the policy recipes to start this deep process of rethinking and making the Italian education system more responsive to the needs of the knowledge society and global competitiveness.

VSQ, as an outcome of the *Agnelli Foundation’s* policy design capacity, represents a policy technology to translate the above discursive problematisations into a new regime of practice where the public ethos and the professional logic of action are replaced by a new private sector-inspired ‘govern-mentality’ where schools and professionals are subjectivated as ‘business-like’ and ‘utilitarian economic subjects’. *VSQ* is another device displaced in the attempt to reshape the organisational and professional ecologies in the field of education. As in the previous paragraph, we will try to highlight the main traits of the discursive problematisations inspiring the *Agnelli Foundation* strategic action and the *VSQ* policy. We will also focus on its implications in terms of processes of subjectivation, avoiding redundancies and repetitions. In fact, *VSQ* shares with *Valorizza* the attempt to bring into the field of education some key private sector values and technologies such as virtuous competition, economic incentives, performance-related pay and external evaluation (see the previous paragraph for an analysis of these values and technologies).

Despite these shared discursive underpinnings, *VSQ* and the discursive strategy surrounding it add something else to this overall attempt of change. In an effort to make public education more business-like, *New Public Management*-inspired technologies of performance management and new elements of the private sector ethos are introduced. Moreover, a new calculative logic is imported into the field of education, where qualitative and professional criteria to judge the adequacy and effectiveness of educational practices are replaced by “neutral instruments of scientific measurement” that translate education into something numerable, measurable and calculable.

With VSQ being an indirect mechanism to evaluate the effectiveness (or *added value* as it is named) of head teachers and teachers in determining/raising students' performances, here a key issue is becoming the subjectivation of new educational professionals, heroic, committed to change and improvement, competitive but also keen to abandon the professional qualitative and internal criteria in favour of externally-driven measurable indicators to judge both the effectiveness of their individual work and the overall quality of their organisation's work. These new educational professionals are asked to renounce their professional autonomy, externalising the judgement of the quality of their work to external authorities, in this case the INVALSI statisticians and economists, the central government, EU or OECD experts or someone else.

Moreover, the head teacher becomes a key figure who is asked to act as an educational manager and key lever of modernisation (Serpieri 2009; 2012). This new professional is asked to adopt a set of methods, ideals and concepts (planning of objectives, human resources, performance monitoring, and accountability) imported from the private sector in order to promote improvement, change and a reculturing of professional and organisational ecologies. We witness an attempt to establish a new kind of relationship between heads-managers and teachers, where the head teacher is de-professionalised and embodies the policy 'measurable' priorities established elsewhere. Then, VSQ could be regarded as a device to borrow from the managerial ethos of private enterprise systems of cost-benefit analysis and management by objectives.

The VSQ model of performance evaluation becomes here a peculiar strategy of "governing at a distance" (Rose and Miller 1992; Rose 1999; Dean 2010), where the new rationality of government is shaped by private sector logics and values. Interestingly enough, here the plea for competition is coupled with advocacy for centrally-driven regulation, direction and involvement, outlining a regime of government where the state essentially plays the role of objective setting and output evaluation.

A further trait of the attempt to reculture education consists of importing into this field the private-sector rule that "what is not measured is not valued", transforming education into a domain of calculability where educational effectiveness is only intended as the production of numerable outcomes. The following quote from an *Agnelli Foundation* expert talking about the VSQ rationale is quite indicative of the new calculative logic:

Our objective with the VSQ project was to create 'added value' on students' performance... after all, their weight in the overall evaluation process was 60% of the final judgement [...] the remaining 40% depended on outputs as well like the inclusion of immigrants and special needs, guidance, remedial teaching [...] after all how can we evaluate processes rather than outputs? (Interview with an Agnelli Foundation expert, May 2012).

INVALSI tests and data are key non-human actors in this strategic effort, acting as a “nodal point in a disciplinary network” that establishes its own truth and “its own standards of normality” (Pongratz 2006, 473). The calculative turn is legitimised in this discursive problematisation also co-opting the democratic value of transparency, where the provision of information is said to enable the public to act as well-informed consumers and promote virtuous competition as a driving force of service improvement.

Conclusion

As our analysis has shown, in the last decade powerful networks of non-educational experts, such as economists, non-educational academics, neoliberal think-tanks, high civil servants, specialists in evaluation, statisticians, politicians and management gurus, have claimed some expertise in the field of Italian education. They increasingly offer their unmerciful diagnoses and the self-serving recipes to ‘rescue’ the failing and ineffective Italian public education system. They operate like boundary-spanners, designing leading organisations and institutions in the field of education, creating linkage devices, establishing new technologies as obligatory passage points and generating new visions to regulate schools and professionals’ self-organisation. And above all, in our story, they increasingly affirm themselves as the legitimate providers of “mechanisms for collective feedback and learning” (Jessop 2002, 242) about the effectiveness, quality and even fairness of education, its organisations and professionals.

To borrow Jessop’s words, this new complex heterarchical tangle of public and private actors seems to be engaged in a relentless effort of metagovernance (see Grimaldi 2010 on the peculiarities of Italian governance in the field of education). Such an effort of “action at a distance” (Rose and Miller 1992, 180), that is a key characteristic of advanced liberal governmentality, consists of a “metaorganisation” (Jessop 2002, 241) of the education field, that is the “reflexive redesign of organizations, the creation of intermediating organizations, the reordering of inter-organizational relations, and the management of organizational ecologies”. The regulation of conduct is made dependent upon not only political actions, but new authorities are established outside the domain of politics “through the activities and calculations of a proliferation of independent agents” (Rose and Miller 1992, 180). The project seems to entail the establishment of a new regime of government (Dean 2010, 27) in public education, where organisations co-exist, compete, cooperate and co-evolve according to a paradoxical coupling between market rule and managerialist regulated self-regulation. This process of meta-governance is also developing as an attempt of meta-heterarchy (Jessop 2002, 241) that involves “the organization of the conditions of self-organization by redefining the framework for [...] reflexive self-organization”, mainly through the establishment of competitive

relationships and the subjectivation of new economic, competitive and entrepreneurial subjects.

In these concluding remarks, recalling our dual focus on discourse and changes in the governance structures, we will try to highlight some key points emerging from our analysis.

The discursive performativity of the reculturing of education

We could partially interpret those policy processes as parts of a more or less intended project to use knowledge and other symbolic media to modify the structural, strategic and ethical contexts in which education functions so that compliance with neoliberal and managerial projects of education reform “follows from their own operating codes rather than from imperative coordination” (Jessop 2002, 228). With a view to the historical path-dependencies of the Italian system, this strategy could be interpreted as a means to prepare the ‘moral’ grounds for the introduction of more overt forms of quasi-markets, overcoming the resistance to marketisation that is a key feature of Italian professional unions and communities (Barzanò and Grimaldi 2011).

Thus, Italian philanthropic foundations are trying to play a key role in shaping the cognitive and normative expectations of education field subjects by promoting a new moral agenda (Grimaldi and Serpieri 2013) inspired by managerialism and neoliberalism, developing at the same time solutions to sequencing problems that originate and are legitimised in the fields of validity, normativity and actuality created through these new discourses. As has already happened in other countries with a long standing tradition of neoliberal reforms, the introduction of “market-mimicking devices [...] seek two different sorts of effects. The first is to institutionalise principles of coordination based on competition that challenges, disrupts or controls producer/professional power. The second is to encourage all sorts of agents [...] to think of themselves as economic agents” (Newman and Clarke 2009, 82).

However, the values underpinning the new re-moralising agenda are not always overt. On the contrary, in a typical neo-managerialist fashion, the new Italian philanthropists seek to legitimise the entry of private logic into the public field by transforming self-serving economic and social views into technocratic facts. Thus, they elide and obscure under the veil of technical neutrality those political choices that are made in the ‘remaking’ of public education and the changing relationships between the state, the professionals, the market as a regulatory mechanism, the public and other private non-educational actors (Pinto 2013).

A further ‘legitimising’ discursive move consists of the co-option and subjugation by the new ‘privatising’ discourse of a set of ‘socially positive’ values and objectives like improving human capital quality to compete in the globalised space, combating drop-outs, modernising public education and promoting fairness and social justice

through meritocracy. We are witness here to the raising of a new “scientific philanthropy” (Dean 2010, 177) whose mission seems to be to care for public education, the regulation of the professions and the future of the country and its young people. Nonetheless, when grasping the hybrid and complex assemblage of discursive devices displaced by such a new philanthropic community, what emerges is the paradoxical enrolment (and exploitation) of the social issues (equity, meritocracy, young people and the country’s future and so on) within an economics-oriented framework of government (Cobalti 2012).

Given the local peculiarities and inflections, the potential performative power of such a strategy is well summarised by Cribb and Ball (2005, 115) in their discussion of the English case:

[...] policies like privatisation are used to rework the purposes and motivations of educational practitioners to reflect such as things entrepreneurship, competitiveness, and being business-like’. [All of this has ethical effects, that is] ‘the creation through privatisation of new ethical spaces and new clusters of (what we are calling) ‘goals, obligations and dispositions’ which re-construct institutional norms and constraints, practices, subject positions and subjectivities, and produce a new ethical common-sense for action in educational institutions.

In the Italian case, the potential ethical effects are the ongoing formation of new political, professional and public imaginaries, celebrating the virtues of competitiveness, entrepreneurship and performativity. Each of the changes advocated by the new philanthropic policy entrepreneurs creates new potential fields of practice, establishes a new type of calculation and subjectifies new kinds of agents. All of this stands against the key tenets and aesthetics of welfare professionalism, leading the way, as has happened in other national contexts, to a subtle process of de-professionalisation.

Although the Italian educational scenario is frequently depicted as “plastered” in a sort of continuous impasse (Ribolzi 2006; TreLLLe 2012), here we want to suggest a slightly different reading. A close glance at the education debate, the recurrence of the arguments and the voices legitimised to speak in the last five years shows that, despite the repeated failures of the attempts by Italian philanthropic actors to enforce the policy technologies advocated, their incessant action seems to be succeeding in changing the way in which education, its aims, outcomes and professional ethos are thought and talked about. These new policy networks are providing new languages through which the understandings of the key subjects of welfarist education, i.e. head, teacher, student/learner, parent, are changing according to a hybrid rationale emerging from a ‘war’ of discourses such as managerialism, neoliberalism, marketisation and performativity (Serpieri 2008, 2009; Tamboukou 1999).

Privatising policy and the fuzzing of institutional boundaries between education and the domain of economics

A second point we wish to raise here is that in Italy we are witnessing a process of the delegation of education policy-making functions or, more precisely, of the function of education policy imagination to non-state actors, “who then act as proxy principals for the state” (Newman and Clarke 2009, 73). Interestingly, the state seems to be abdicating its monopolistic function of a general principles outliner, devolving some of its public responsibility, in our case the design of key aspects of education regulation, to the private sector. The issues involved here are: a) what education; b) how to conceive the quality of education; c) the regulations of educational professions and expertise; and d) the definition of the equity of the education system.

This is a somewhat peculiar process of destatisation where the public-private divide in education policy-making is radically redrawn and fundamental policy tasks are reallocated. New public-private partnerships acquire increasing importance in designing education, its goals, structures, processes and subjectivities where the state is often only first among equals and new private agencies aid government in designing policy. An entrepreneurial policy space is unfolding where public and private actors develop a shared commitment to constructing a broad and consensual vision of the future of education, while at the same time designing the appropriate structures and mobilising the resources to actualise this future.

However, these processes also have a paradoxical side. As Ball and Youdell (2008, 12) observe about privatisation as a policy strategy of a post-welfarist education state:

Privatisation is a policy tool, not just a giving up by the state of the capacity to manage social problems and respond to social needs, but part of an ensemble for innovations, organisational changes, new relationships and social partnerships, all of which play their part in the re-working of the state itself.

In this perspective, we could interpret the burst onto the education scene of the new philanthropic policy entrepreneurs as an increase of the relevance in education policy of parallel policy networks that redistribute power in a positive-sum process, cross-cutting the state apparatus and connecting it to other social forces. This new tangle of policy relationships is characterised by processes of mutual enrolments, where new policy entrepreneurs try to shape the education field in a guise that is consistent with their perceived interests and their ideological commitments and the state seeks to mobilise knowledge and power resources performed by non-governmental actors to project its influence and secure its objectives.

This complex of policy moves can be interpreted as both a resort to heterarchy by the state to manage a key institutional domain such as education and as a further

step of a more or less intended fuzzing of institutional boundaries between education itself and the domain of economics.

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Notes

- * This article is the outcome of the collaboration of the authors. However, in order to ascribe responsibility, we declare that the Introduction and the Conclusion are co-authored, Roberto Serpieri wrote the “Theoretical sensibilities and methodology” and “The ‘holy crusade’ for merit as a picklock for reculturing education”, while Emiliano Grimaldi is the author of the “A new education policyscape in Italy. Privatising educational imagination” and “Making education a domain of calculability”.
- 1 In this paper, we use the terms “philanthropy” and “private foundation” to refer to distinct legal entities that are provided for by Italian civil law. They have some peculiar traits: a) they are private and non-profit entities with a non-distribution constraint; b) they have a distinct patrimony independent of its founder and hold assets that are dedicated to a public utility purpose (cultural, educational, religious, social and/or scientific) established by the founder (an individual, a bank, an enterprise, and so on) and set out in its constitutive documents; c) they have no shareholders, although they may have a board, an assembly and voting members; and d) their administration and operation are carried out in accordance with its statutes or articles of association rather than fiduciary principles.
 - 2 Another member of the Scientific Committee was Michael Barber, a world renowned Third-Way guru. However, Barber did not take part in the work of the Committee for reasons that are difficult to reconstruct here.
 - 3 Referring to the tangle of multiple, heterogeneous, non-linear and non-hierarchical relations
 - 4 FIAT was founded by the Agnelli family in 1866 and has always been held and governed by family members.
 - 5 Since 2008 Marchionne has been a key player in the Italian entrepreneurs’ struggle to decentralise at the firm level the welfarist national collective bargaining in labour relations and to abolish the social-democratic inspired 1970 Labour Statute.

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