

Educational System Assessment: Italy and Finland, Comparative Case Study

Eleonora Mattarelli, Cristiana De Santis

Department of Social and Developmental Psychology, La Sapienza University, Italy.

Abstract

Educational system assessment allows the evaluation of some learning outcomes and permits the continuous monitoring of educational processes. The aim of this study is to explore the ways used to assess and evaluate school systems and universities and students' learning outcomes in Italy and Finland, two important educational realities as shown in PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results (OECD, 2019). The attention is focused on common and uncommon practices employed in each country and on perceptions that the educational system assessment creates in those who evaluate and in those evaluated. Ten stakeholders from Italy and Finland participated in focus groups or interviews one to one audio-taped, transcribed and analysed using qualitative methods. The results underline that the evaluation of school systems and universities helps build a large database and that the evaluation process have to be made with trust between stakeholders involved, with innovation and awareness. The general acceptance is increasing: stakeholders from two contexts considered highlight that, in order to improve efficiency and effectiveness, school systems and universities need a formative assessment and evaluation in which everyone is involved from central educational institutions to teachers and students.

Keywords: *educational system assessment; INVALSI; ANVUR; FINEEC-KARVI; external evaluation; standardized testing.*

1. Introduction

Evaluation in education is a systematic investigation that permits to assess the quality of schools, universities or school systems in terms of efficiency and effectiveness and in terms to capacity to meet the needs of local community. It is a practice that measures students learning outcomes, monitors educational process and provides data to local, regional and national stakeholders informing their decisions (Sanders & Davidson, 2003).

Know the practices employed in each country and the perceptions that the assessment in education creates in those who evaluate and in those evaluated is important because there are still doubts about the assessment and the evaluation in terms of accountability and educational benchmarking. School system and universities in Italy and Finland are different: when in 2001 PISA results (OECD, 2001) were published for the first time there was a surprised reaction. Finland was among the best countries in reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills, while Italy was among the low performers countries. Today the situation is a little bit changed (OECD, 2019), but Finland remains among top performers, while Italy is under the international average. As a *good management practice*, evaluation in education helps to: *identify needs, establish goals, clarify goals, select strategies to achieve goals, monitor progress, assess outcomes* (Sanders & Davidson, 2003).

Educational evaluation models vary in regard with their goals, focus and needs. Italian and finnish school systems are different in structure, process and results, but there are some differences also in the evaluation models of school and universities. However, assure to all young generations an education that is based on quality and on exchange of methods, models and criteria is an emergency now more relevant than ever in favor of which countries must cooperate. All young people, not only in Italy and Finland, but all over the world, must have same possibilities and same future perspectives. For these reasons having a mechanism that guarantee school success and well-being with fairness and equality is fundamental. National and international large scale assessment, infact, helps to better understand reasons behind learning outcomes and educational process and promotes flexibility and school autonomy. Nevertheless, the danger is concentrate attention only on a part of the school curriculum, even if the large database created and the informations provided should be considered during the decision-making process. Targeted decisions need to be made: educational evaluation can satisfy the necessity for different empirical evidences on which base decisions.

2. Comparative case study: Italy and Finland

This paper aims to provide more informations on the educational evaluation as a tool to improve school systems and decision-making process in two national contexts, Italy and Finland. A comparative case study approach is adopted to gain a detailed understanding and to obtain further in-depth information on the educational system assessment (Zanazzi,

2014; OECD, 2004). The study is realized through interviews and focus groups with ten subjects. The participants included directors of national evaluation centres, school principals and teachers. Over the course of three months (June-August 2019, compatibly with the availability of stakeholders) the interviews were conducted with open-ended questions in italian or finnish and audio-taped, transcribed and analysed using qualitative methods. The findings are analyzed in the following sections.

2.1. Italy

INVALSI (Istituto Nazionale di Valutazione del Sistema Educativo di Istruzione e Formazione, National Institute for Educational Assessment, <https://www.invalsi.it/invalsi/index.php>) and ANVUR (Agenzia Nazionale per la Valutazione dell'Università e della Ricerca, Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes, <https://www.anvur.it/>) are responsible for the assessment of the education system. It is divided into two levels: schools by INVALSI and universities by ANVUR. The National System for the evaluation of education (SNV – Sistema Nazionale di Valutazione) was born in 2014 and today is composed by INVALSI, INDIRE (Istituto Nazionale di Documentazione, Innovazione e Ricerca Educativa, National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research, <http://www.indire.it/>) and external evaluation units: the purpose is to evaluate the education system in order to get better and instill the perception that the national evaluation is a resource useful to improve and earn more awareness (Morini & Rossi, 2016).

INVALSI manages the national system for the evaluation of education called Sistema Nazionale di Valutazione (SNV) and is a public institute that was born in 1999 under the surveillance of Ministry of education, university and research (Trincherò, 2014). Among other things, it carries out systematic and periodic evaluations on students' knowledge and competencies in order to guarantee the assessment and evaluation of the overall quality of the educational national offer. Currently the assessment of students' learning outcomes is carried out through standardized tests administered on the entire cohort of students in second and fifth grades of primary school (italian and mathematics), in the last class of lower secondary school (computer based test - italian, mathematics and english) and in the second and last class of upper secondary school (as part of the final exam, computer based test – italian, mathematics and english). Computer based tests are a news recently introduced. Standardized tests in the last class of upper secondary school, longitudinal analysis of data and return of results to students as possessed competencies in italian, mathematics and english are others innovation recently adopted. Thanks to Anna Maria Ajello's interview (Mattarelli, 2019), director of INVALSI, emerged that the intent of the national institute is to provide informations at different levels starting from students, schools and teachers and arriving to Ministry. Infact, in her opinion, the fright about the standardized evaluation that some italian teachers had is not founded because they are not the only elements on which the

attention is focused: the quality of education is very important, even if the current educational emergency in regions like Calabria, Campania, Sardinia and Sicily is worrying and quickly solvable (INVALSI, 2019).

ANVUR is the Italian national agency for the evaluation of universities and research institutes. It *oversees the national quality evaluation system for universities and research bodies. It is responsible for the quality assessment of the activities carried out by universities and research institutes, recipients of public funding. It is also entrusted with steering the Independent Evaluation Units' activities, and with assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of public funding programmes or incentive programmes for research and innovation activities* (<https://www.anvur.it/>) in line with the principles of independence, impartiality and professionalism. In June 2019 ANVUR became a member of ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, <https://enqa.eu/>) for the next five years. Two of the ANVUR's activities (e.g. funding for basic activities related to research or rating of scientific journals) are the third mission that evaluates the impact on society and economy of universities and research institutes and AVA (Autovalutazione, Valutazione Periodica e Accreditamento). AVA stands for self-assessment, periodic evaluation and accreditation. One of the projects that are part of self and external assessment of quality assurance system is TECO (TEst sulle COmpetenze, TEst on COmpetences): it assess and evaluates university students' competencies through a standardized test with the purpose of improve the quality of the educational process (Ciolfi & Di Benedetto, 2019). It is non-compulsory and it is divided into two tests: the first one assess soft skills, while the second one hard skills. Considerations concerned by the last kind of test demonstrate that the effect of unfavorable entry characteristics does not correlate with hard skills, while this relation is not as strong as the relation between social and economical background and soft skills (Hilbig et al., 2015). Raffaella Rumiati, vice-director of ANVUR, during the interview reported (Mattarelli, 2019) that there is collaboration between the agency and Ministry and that universities' self-assessment and external assessment is unaware of ranking: the aim is not to classify universities and research institutes, but to make conscious about local or national differences and inequalities in order to fight them and promote the achievement of quality in education.

About perceptions on educational assessment in schools, two teachers, technical contacts for the assessment and evaluation, from a secondary school near Rome (Liceo Classico Ugo Foscolo, Albano Laziale) underlined how important is the dialogue and communication between similar schools also in terms of educational offer and results. In point of facts, to conciliate a global vision about educational process and outcomes with a particular situation is useful and positive deal with other contexts to have an image about what is going on. Unfortunately, in the opinion of two teachers, the problem in almost all Italian schools is that there are not in-depth discussions about the results of national system assessment.

2.2. Finland

If in Italy there are two institutes how handles with educational assessment and evaluation, in Finland there is an institute, KARVI-FINEEC (Kansallinen Koulutuksen Arviointikeskus – Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, <https://karvi.fi/en/fineec/>), concerned with national system assessment.

FINEEC is an independent agency born in 2014 from Finnish higher education council, Finnish evaluation council and Finnish national board of education. *It operates as a separate unit within the Finnish National Agency for Education. It carries out evaluations related to education including the operations of education providers from early childhood education to higher education. The FINEEC comprises the Evaluation Council, the Higher Education Evaluation Committee and four units: the General Education and Early Childhood Education Unit, the Vocational Education Unit, the Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education Unit, and Development Services Unit* (<https://karvi.fi/en/fineec/>). The main purpose of FINEEC is assess and evaluate learning outcomes, but also evaluate higher education institutions, implement system and thematic evaluations and support stakeholders during decision-making process (FINEEC, 2019): *the aim of the evaluations is to develop education and to support learning while ensuring the quality of education. The evaluations also produce information for local, regional and national decision-making on education as well as development work and international comparison* (<https://karvi.fi/en/fineec/>). In basic education the assessment of learning outcomes is focused on mother tongue (Finnish, Swedish, Sami, Finnish as second language) and mathematics, while in upper secondary education system assessment is carried out above all during the final exam: the assessment is focused on mother tongue and literature, mathematics, science, health education, religion and ethics etc. About higher education institutions the assessment is related to evaluation and quality assurance through audits of quality systems. Thematic evaluations, like peaceful and safe learning environments in schools and education and training institutions or impact of national budget cuts on educational rights, are realized from early childhood education to higher education. The implementation of evaluations related to education is one of the most important issue for FINEEC, said Harri Peltoniemi, FINEEC's director, during his interview (Mattarelli, 2019). It is fundamental that there is school welfare and that decisions are made consciously starting from data collected through national and international assessments. However, in Finland the assessment of learning outcomes is not based on all students cohort: only some schools every year are involved in the sample population, the purpose is have a truthful image of reality.

In the opinion of the school leader of Porvoo High School (Mattarelli, 2019) the final exam now is more difficult than in the past because the national tests require to link knowledges, abilities and skills to answer questions. Infact, the attention is gathered upon the ability to connect each other informations from different disciplines thanks to a critical reflection. Instead, in basic education the national evaluation is both a tool to have a feedback on learning outcomes and a tool to self-evaluate the school, in particular the ability of teachers to evaluate the students (this happen thanks to the match between learning outcomes assessed in standardized tests and in the everyday formative evaluation). In the opinion of Vesala's Comprehensive School leader (Mattarelli, 2019) educational assessment is a really important working tool because it helps to understand the direction that is taken and that the school should take to improve herself.



Figure 1. Vesala Comprehensive School and Porvoo High School. Source: author's photo (2019)

3. Conclusions

This paper focuses upon the functions linked with educational system assessment and upon the ways used to realize it (Philips, 2018) not forgetting that assessment always creates perceptions and different opinions in how is evaluated and in how evaluates. The purpose of the current study is to determine similarities and differences and to contribute to recent debates concerning the academic understanding of educational system assessment, but more than this, the findings will be of interest to those stakeholders who are involved in educational decision-making process.

Even if educational system assessment in Italy and Finland is a consolidated practice, stakeholders have to work in terms of social acceptance of this kind of assessment and evaluation: it should encourage a in-depth reflection that lead to understand the important role of educational assessment as a tool useful to build a strong and valid education system (OECD, 2019).

An interesting fact is that in some cases there are few discrepancies between participants: they underlines how practices in two national contexts are similar, while perceptions are very

different. A possible explanation for these results may be different educational cultures that have produced not only different approaches and assessment methods, but also specific ways of teaching and learning. In Italy Rumiati from National Agency for The Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes reports that the effect of unfavorable background variables, e.g. parents who have not a degree, is reduced on hard skills: in other words there is an extraordinary acquisition of competences over university years, in part this is true also for soft skills. At school level the endorsement about national system assessment is increasing, but instruments like standardized tests used by INVALSI are not always clear to teachers, for example, scared and stressed by external evaluation. Gap between north and south of the country, between schools, male and female students and immigrants and non-immigrants remains: problems which have to be solved through joint efforts and reflections over the results of educational assessment. On the other hand KARVI-FINEEC, in the opinion of his director, has to make the cooperation with schools even stronger and elaborate a timetable for national standardized tests that does not overload schools, as school leaders and teachers suggest. Future researches could usefully compare experiences across educational systems in other countries.

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