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Useful Self-Assessment.

The role of self-assessment processes in school improvement

Daniela Robasto

ABSTRACT: *When the School is called upon to reinvent itself, it is also necessary to reinvent the decision-making processes within the institution. How are improvement decisions made? Using what data? Self-assessment processes risk still having a marginal role in the improvement process and being experienced by many with a compliance value. The goal is to overcome the gap between the narrated school and the lived school and this goal is achievable if we focus on some critical issues that characterized the first three years of application of DPR 80/2013 (2015-2018). This contribution illustrates some critical issues that have emerged within an empirical research, conducted by the authoress, on RAVs and PDMs. We will question what the essential elements of methodological accompaniment are so that the teaching staff can effectively participate in the drafting of a quality PDM, which can be monitored over time, pursued and consistent with the intervention priorities identified with the Self-Assessment Report. An implicit will be addressed that too frequently remains latent: the improvement of an institution necessarily passes through change and (quality) change should necessarily pass-through learning. The contribution therefore presents some proposals relating to training plans and learning elements that should be favored in the evaluation team (NVI but not only) in order to be able to tackle the challenge of useful self-evaluation with mastery.*

KEYWORDS: *Self-assessment, improvement plan, training plan, methodological competence*

The Italian legislation and new teacher professionalism - An empirical research.

A Decree by the President of the Republic (n°80), March 28, 2013, established in Italy the regulations concerning the national system of evaluation in education and training. The Decree set up a process by steps that includes: a) self-evaluation of educational institutions, b) external evaluation, c) improvement measures, and d) social reporting of educational institutions, through the publication and disclosure of results. Improvement actions are also expected to be developed through collaboration with universities, research institutes, and professional and cultural associations (without creating new or greater charges for public finance).

Ministry Note 4173 (April 2016), in which terms for drafting the Self-Assessment Reports (“Rapporti di Autovalutazione”, RAV) were reopened, helps us to understand that something in the first national process of school self-evaluation didn’t work as expected. Note 4173 informs the director of each school about the opportunity to decide whether to retain or revise the previous analysis in the self-assessment report. To understand that such emphasis on self-assessment is not purely formal but focuses on a nucleus of essential skills for the success of the school self-evaluation process, we need further analysis.

Following this legislative framework, some research questions were raised in reference to teachers’ skills put into action during the preparation of the self-evaluation report. How did teachers interpret the delivery of the school self-assessment report and what are the strengths and weaknesses of these reports? This paper presents some reflections in reference to these research questions.

The empirical evidence on which this paper is based is the published reports (RAV): the output produced (and published online) by each institution as a result of a self-rating process. This analysis aims at identifying weaknesses in compiling the reports and the gaps of teacher expertise expressed, and recalibrating the self-planned improvement plans and teacher training (that has now been made compulsory).

The hypothesis is that teachers who have prepared their self-evaluation reports didn’t possess enough methodological structure and self-assessment skills to draw up a self-evaluation plan and that the current self-assessment sections present misconceptions and/or large recourse to educational practices not supported by empirical research in pedagogy. The RAV is composed of open fields and closed fields. The closed fields mainly present statistical indexes (percentage frequency distribution available from Italian Minister for each school); open fields present free answers from teachers to questions asked by the Ministry. I believe that the analysis of the filled open fields on RAVs can provide useful information on teachers’ educational needs and can be the basis for designing a new model of teacher education, both at the college level and on-the-job.

Research strategy is based on a mixed method (or multimode exploratory sequential) design starting from an exploration phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) using analysis tools with a low degree of structure (predominantly paper-pencil and analysis of lexical frequency) and followed by a second step using structured data collection tools (checklist for the evaluation of RAVs).

The reference population is represented by the 8644 Italian state schools (database Ministry of Education 2011). The sampling is randomized by finite population with random draw (without re-introduction of this as a result of random selection). The sample, now, is stabilized at 65 schools but is expected to reach 150 institutions at the end of the research.

First results of RAV analysis: observed gaps in teacher education.

The Ministry has provided schools with statistical information not only about their school, but also those of schools in similar situations (by geographic area or socioeconomic status). The school was tasked, via the RAV, to provide a self-assessment of their position and to write down their perceived strengths and weaknesses. The statistical data made available by the Italian Minister for each school should have been the basis for the first self-assessment evaluation. Each section of the RAV has an

introductory section in addition to the evaluation ones. Evaluation is related to the presentation of the positioning of the given school (designed by an identification code) in a specific ranking, and to benchmarking of each school in relation to the ones situated in similar geographical or socio-economical context with reference to some evaluation criteria.

Each school institute was so enabled to make a quick comparison of its own data versus average values of their geographical region and geographical macroarea, referring to ESCS and test results. It is known that the evaluation goal is to go beyond the objective data and that the evaluation can be fruitless if not followed by an action aimed at shrinking the difference between the observed action and the preferred and achievable expected action. Analysis of the possible gap between “observed” and “expected” should drive the school to implement corrective actions focused to bridge the gap.

Self-evaluation process should imply that teachers and directors in a given school, analyzing the gap, have to reflect on what has been already done, what can be done and what cannot realistically be done to reach the expected target with explicit description (required) of the limits that the school cannot overcome on its own. This reflection in analyzed RAVs is basically missing, and certainly the 60 more days granted by the Italian Ministry to complete the compilation won't solve the problem.

Another problem is related to the degree of completeness with which the RAVs were compiled. Every section of the RAV contains a set of questions referring to a single factor (e.g.: student performance after completing their school years is being investigated based on the number of students who enrolled at the university, the number of university credits earned in a year, the number of students who have enrolled but have not really earned credits etc), but to many questions the teachers simply did not answer, instead providing just few words to fill the field.

Ongoing research (Robasto, 2017) has provided a later categorization of the open answers, analyzing 16.780 pages of RAVs. The open-questions have been classified according to this classification: 0 = no answer; 1 = only partially complete answer; 2 = complete answer.

The statistical classification analysis shows interesting data. The first set of questions with the highest non-response rate (88% absent answers) is questions referring to the design of educational projects customized on the basis of special educational needs, or the design of educational projects dedicated to pupils from disadvantaged areas. This result can be linked to the historical difficulties of the Italian school system, even if public and free for everybody, in effectively addressing the issues of social inequality and special needs students.

The second type of questions with the highest non-response rate (about 80% absent answers) is questions pertaining to the impact of the high school on student performance exiting the school system, both continuing to study or entering workforce. This result may to a significant degree be attributable to the school system's historical background, especially to the tendency to conceive of school as a closed environment whose outcomes should be good in themselves and not judged according to external expectations. A third group of questions (with an absent answers rate of around 75%) relates to how teachers have “treated” the difficulties and, conversely, the excellences expressed by students: e.g., how they design cognitive enhancement projects or to how they work when there are large disparities in outcomes. Finally, a fourth group of missing answers is for questions pertaining to student assessment (absent answers rate between 70-73%): if teachers design and communicate the assessment criteria, if they work according to evaluation rubrics, how and if they use the assessment results as educational tools and how the quality of teacher education is assessed.

It is no surprise that almost all questions on or relating to the evaluation have not been adequately answered: the concept of assessment is not clear and/or teachers are not educated to give rational explanations of their assessment and docimological choices (Bottani & Checchi, 2013). This is made still more evident by the “naïve” compilation of many sections of the RAVs. Enacting a law that forces self-assessment on teachers who are still unable to effectively evaluate students may be a questionable strategy.

Teachers’ educational needs and new teaching professionalism

The risk of having a mismatch between the available rich and articulated database and poor data analysis is high. The database that could allow each school to critically reflect and analyse its own situation can be “read” superficially or incorrectly with interpretations being non-evidence-based or incoherent given the nature of the data. This incorrect reading could be based on a popular pedagogy (Bruner, 1996) that resurfaces again and again (for example the common reference to digital natives).

Moreover, open fields in the self-evaluation section have been often used to claim additional resources and to report failures caused by other actors (municipalities, families, missing funding). All these matters are unfortunately really big issues, but their reference in the self-evaluation section is not appropriate. The considerable work related to DPR 80/2013, through RAV, could bring evidence, first of all, of a teacher education gap in the school field: the difficulty to collect evidence and support its own way of teaching² and the still greater difficulty in “reading” (in the sense of assigning a meaning to) the evidence supplied by a database. Building tools for reading a collection of useful information, detecting the data, and understanding the data are basic skills for an evidence-based approach to education. This scenario seems to be still far from the educational procedures adopted in most school contexts, where experimentation could sometimes mean simply the implementation of “trial and error” procedures without methodological expertise.

When the lack of an experimental approach is combined with unclear definition of evaluation criteria and lack of docimological competences, what has been made evident by the RAV analysis is inevitable: the teacher is asked by law to evaluate himself, but doesn’t own enough methodological skills.

The weakness of the process required by DPR 80/2013 is furthermore visible in Section 5 of the RAV, entitled Highlight of priorities and Process objectives, where priorities and objectives with a poor coherence with the data collected in the previous sections of RAV are to be found very often. These objectives, moreover, are not achievable by the school in the short-medium term due to structural or financial limits, or the explicit objectives given as priorities are not at all consistent with strengths and weaknesses emerged in the RAV.

It is noteworthy that Section 5 should be the basis for the redaction of the School Improvement Plan on which each school is asked to focus efforts and resources for, at least, the next three years. The application of the Decree could void the role of the teacher from its necessary interpretative role (essential for a self-evaluation process) to assign him a format and only an executive role, without addressing his educational needs.

We should not only limit ourselves to emphasizing school issues and gaps in teacher education. This is not fruitful on the long run, as the school could be tagged, another time, as guilty, missing or incompetent; right now that the process for evaluation and

self-evaluation of the school has started and is ongoing. Detailed analysis of the available RAVs could be a strong tool to identify, based on evidence and not unclear hypotheses, what needs improvement, and to propose feasible solutions focused on problems and suited to specific teachers' educational needs.

The need for teacher on-the-job education (Quaglino, 2004) is often defined as a gap to fill, a distance from one's own skills and the ones necessary to effectively perform their own professional duties, and is strictly related both to professional role and general competencies required by an organization, context or sector. Educational needs reflect the relationship between an individual and his or her school and are an "indicator" of a "system of needs" (Carozzi & Quaglino, 2004) that a single organization or a sector emphasizes as a gap to fill facing new and sudden change.

The most apparent teachers' educational needs emerging from the RAVs seems to be a need for a critical culture of evidence (Calvani, 2014, 9), whose realization implies at least three achievements by school staff: strong self-reflexive awareness of the teaching staff and the ability to critically assess their own assertions, the epistemological awareness of these assertions, and finally the adoption of a particular philosophy of evaluation, viewed with a dynamic and self-correcting approach, in order to operate towards improvement (Robasto, 2018; Freddano, 2018)

The project of a clear and micro-designed teacher education plan implies affording a matter of no small importance: educational needs should move from being taken for granted to being expressed and explicit, and it seems that in this process an important role is that of the school director. Last but not least, in analyzing RAVs and other school data we must finally take into account an unavoidable gap between the narrated school (and usually narrated by a few) and the real school (experienced by many), and always keep in mind that self-report documents will not always reflect the problems or difficulties perceived as such by people acting in everyday school life.

Useful self-assessment. The role of self-assessment processes in school improvement

The analysis conducted has highlighted, in particular, two types of criticism: a self-assessment process that is predominantly compliant and an improvement plan that is inconsistent with the self-assessment and / or impracticable process.

The first category of criticality includes all those self-assessment reports that are not at all guided by the guiding questions; this report are full of self-generated data tables but without reflection on the internal processes that could have originated such outcomes (an aspect particularly present in the RAV 2020 editions) or even mainly hetero evaluative or justifying reflections.

On the other hand, the second category of criticality includes those *Improvement Plans* which present long lists of activities in place of improvement objectives; long-term goals and not targets that can be monitored in the short term; expected results on pupils, inconsistent with the proposed activities; monitoring indicators not empirically detectable; indicators of satisfaction (at best) and not of change; data collection sample inconsistent with indicators and objectives.

Beyond the predominantly methodological issues, what actually seems to be missing in order for the self-assessment processes to become useful is a close link between the System self-assessment and *personal self-assessment*. It is a necessary link as the same

System improvement can only take place on condition that numerous and *repeated personal micro-changes* actually take place.

At this time it seems that self-assessment, regardless of how it is carried out, necessarily involves an improvement of the system and *automatically* also of the individuals who work within the school. But we know that this is not the case at all.

It is certainly a very delicate topic but the time has come to face it with sincerity: until it is revealed how everyone modifies *their actions* (didactic, evaluative, managerial, organizational) following a self-evaluation process, the discourse on self-evaluation and improvement scholastic will continue to be on a predominantly abstract level: without any effective relapse into schools.

Critically reflecting on these aspects also necessarily means asking questions about the links with training plans, not only in terms of recruiting new resources, but above all in terms of updating existing resources, their ongoing tutoring and *coaching* when the staff, having detected a criticality, actually wants to try their hand at new practices, new procedures, new strategies (Davoli, Mori, Freddano, Desco, 2019).

At present, a teacher who wants to change his actions runs the risk of feeling alone, of not having any *safety net*. He assumes a very high risk and therefore, in most cases, he prefers to move within his comfort zone even if that area is full of critical aspects.

At this moment personal change is not taken into account, fatigue, audacity are not taken into account but also resistance and how they could be overcome with actions to accompany the change.

Therefore, self-assessment can once again be a useful tool, a very powerful tool for achieving or improving certain quality standards. However, until the links with the human resource development plans, the expected improvement goals in terms of change and personal learning, improvement of the people who work in the processes, the actions to support the change are not highlighted in a more stringent way, it is difficult to imagine that this *new round* of self-evaluation can also have a real impact on improving the school system.

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