EVALUATING SCHOOLS IN ITALY: STUDENTS' VOICES – EFFECTIVE OR SUPPORTIVE?

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, assessing school quality is a policy fashion developing in many parts of the world (BROADFOOT, 2009; GURR, 2006). Approaches to school accountability are often strongly influenced by national policy agendas or even developed at a national level; Many greatly rely on the implementation and reporting in specific curriculum areas of standardized tests which are undertaken by students at selected moments of schooling. Moreover, policy makers seem to be attracted by the evaluative practices related to the "Measurement Paradigm" (BROADFOOT, 2009), such as the accountability testing of student performances, because these monitoring systems are cheap and easy to manage, as compared to more sophisticated measures (REYNOLDS *et al*. 2011).

The accountability system is widely discussed by many educational researchers. In particular, there is a great deal of literature assessing the impact of mandatory testing and school accountability on education. In this sense, some researchers stress positive influences on school improvement, by assuming that demanding standards and tests can encourage teachers to focus on content and introduce new pedagogical approaches (BENVENISTE, 1985; COLEMAN *et al*., 1997; PORTER, 2000).

By contrast to these studies and to the positivistic rationale of policy-makers, many researchers have taken a critical position towards this evaluation system. Some of them highlight the limitations and pernicious effects of text-based accountability (AMREIN; BERLINER, 2003; BROADFOOT, 2009; DARLING HAMMOND, 1994; WALFORD, 2002). Others have doubts about the possibility that through state-mandated tests we can judge whether targets have been reached (STOBART, 2008) or measure the "quality of education" (RESNICK, ROTHMAN, SLATTERY; VRANEK, 2003). These authors claim to employ strategies to remedy deficiencies in the use, and abuse (STOBART, 2008) of performance testing which is seen as a pervading system to evaluate school quality (BROADFOOT, 2007).

Other authors call for developing «an accountability system that is located from the student level upwards, directly involving and influencing the teacher and principal level, as such a system is more likely to have major effects on the quality of teaching and learning» Hattie (2005, p. 12-13).

To summarize, we notice that authors seem to suggest two general directions for a new way to evaluate schools. The first still refers to the *Measurement Paradigm* and consists in the use of more sophisticated measurement systems and a wider range of performance indicators, as many of the early studies on School Effectiveness (RUTTER *et al.*, 1979, MORTIMORE *et al.*, 1988, Smith and Tomlinson, 1990) have already defined as necessary. The second relates to the *Learning Paradigm:* «For institutions this is embodied in notions of self-evaluation and professional responsibility» (BROADFOOT, 2009, p. 78).

As a matter of fact, a key point which many studies on school evaluation from different perspectives all have in common, has been the increasing attention given to stakeholders' points of view (COWIE, TAYLOR, CROXFORD, 2007; GARDNER *et al.,* 2010; HARLEN, 2008; MACBEATH, 1999; 2006; MACBEATH, SWAFFIELD, 2004). Following Walford «One of the most important developments in the school improvement and effectiveness research in recent years has been the increase in attention given to the views of students» (2002, p. 55).

A strong belief of the researchers, who have developed the stream called "Student Voice", is that students may have very positive and realistic ideas concerning how their schooling might be improved (FLUTTER *et al.*, 1999; FLUTTER; RUDDUCK, 2004; GRAY, WILCOX, 1995) and provided that they actually want to change schooling, this cannot occur without taking participatory traditions of democracy more seriously (FIELDING, 2012). It is necessary to undertake actions where students may have the role of co-participants in change processes, ensuring that there are legitimate and valued spaces within which students can speak, re-tuning our ears so that we can hear what they say, and redirecting our actions in response to what we hear (COOK-SATHER, 2002).

This work is set within this wide framework. Building on the idea stated, among others (RUDDUCK, CHAPLAIN; WALLACE, 1996; WEIS; FINE, 1993; WILLIS, 1977), by COOK-SATHER (2002, p. 3) that «Students have a unique perspective on what happens in school and classrooms», our aim is to give voice to a group of Italians students of a Low Secondary School in order to understand their idea of "good school".

In this way, we want to stimulate Italian researchers and policy makers to focus attention on some questions concerning the Student Voice perspective. As we shall explain later on in this article, we believe it is time for the Italian government and in particular for INValSI - the National Institution for the Evaluation of the School System - to take into serious and critical consideration questions such as: "What does "quality of the school" mean?" "Who can make decisions about the quality?", by basing these reflections on the perspective of pupils.

THE ITALIAN WAY FOR EVALUATING SCHOOLS

Unlike countries with a long accountability and testing tradition such as USA and England, Italy started to develop its own evaluation of the school system at the end of 1990s, during the period of the European process of school autonomy reform. In the early 2000s l'INValSI, an Institution under the control of the Ministry of Education started to be developed, representing, therefore, the beginning of a national system for the evaluation of schooling. Since these years, we have started to test an external evaluation of schools through test-based instruments. Furthermore, this development has not been easy due to the frequent changes of Italian government. As a matter of fact, a proper accountability system became effectively working only in 2008 (EURYDICE, 2009). Since then it has been undergoing further implementations and today it is fully operational.

Until now, INValSI has assured an external value-added evaluation of schools by means of mandatory performance testing of curricular contents (Italian and Math) and produces each year a final report to the Minister of Education in order to describe the quality of education in different areas of Italy.

According to the Presidential Decree in March 2013, since the school year 2014-15, the school evaluation process will start from self-evaluation, while external evaluation should be carried out in critical situations where the need for support is a priority. The results of the evaluation should be the base of improvement plans that schools should create. However, despite the clearly positive aims of this projects related to the overcoming of an evaluation solely based on student performance tests, we think it's characterized by a very limited attention towards the voices of young people and has been built without attention to their ideas of school quality. Furthermore it doesn't see to the role which students can play in change processes.

By assuming a Student Voice perspective, we believe that if we want pursue effective changes in our system, we have to re-start from a redefinition/reconceptualization of the concept of "school quality" by referring to students' voices.

THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

In this framework we carried out a research aimed at listening to a group of students about their idea of "a good school" in order to identify the students' representations of this concept.

The research question which we wanted to address, is the following: What are the characteristics of a "good school" according to students, or rather, which dimensions exemplify it?

Thus, the broad aim of our wider project is to use these first qualitative results to derive some indicators of a good school according to a student's perspective.

METHOD AND DATA SOURCES

We collected qualitative data from direct consultations with pupils (DEMETRIOU, 2009).

In order to explore our research questions, we chose a *convenience sample* (Silverman, 2010) of students aged from 12 to 14 years, from lower secondary schools located in a middle town in North-East of Italy. During normal class time, we distributed 150 questionnaires which asked the following: "What do you think makes a good school?".

We considered an open question appropriate since it allows a very wide set of students' beliefs, expectations and wishes related to the idea of "a good school" to emerge, without limiting or directing the free expression of their thoughts.

We left students to freely answer in the time which each of them personally required.

145 questionnaires were returned: n=72 from females, n=73 from males; n =68 from students of the first year (Y1), n=36 of the second year (Y2) e n =41 the third year (Y3).

In order to achieve a better understanding of the object of analysis and an adequate enactment of the phenomenon analyzed (Johnson, 1997), two coders were involved. They read at least once all the students' responses to gain a general overview of the main issue. Then, they considered only limited parts of texts (about 20% of the Primary document) in order to codify the selected texts and compare the encoding and the first results (WEBER, 1990; SILVERMAN, 2010). A drafted coding framework with five main themes ("families" in *AtlasTi*) and a number of codes representing the first reading was shared; codes and families were applied to all the texts. During the analysis, the coders compared their results several times. In these occasions they often needed to change, increase, erase, group codes and families in order to achieve an agreement for a satisfying coding which could be widely accepted for all portions of text.

At the end of the process of analysis, all instances were coded by a number of codes grouped into three families which we considered the three dimensions of the construct "good school".

After the analysis was completed, in order to achieve a greater level of accurateness with respect to the object of analysis and therefore obtain reliable results (COHEN, MANION; MORRISON, 2010), another meeting was arranged with the students, where codes and families of

codes were discussed. Following this meeting we implemented the necessary adjustments and developed the final list of codes and families.

It is important to notice that data reliability and validity is further enhanced through the long-lasting presence of a researcher in the context, as a community member, i.e. an educator involved in an afternoon extracurricular activity.

RESULTS

Results revealed that the representation of "a good school" as seen by pupils is given by a great number of codes. They seem to cluster into three families (Fig. 1): the "quality of teachers" (38% of the units of analysis), the "educational offer" of the school (40%) in terms of aims and climate, the quality of the school as a "structure and organization" (22%).
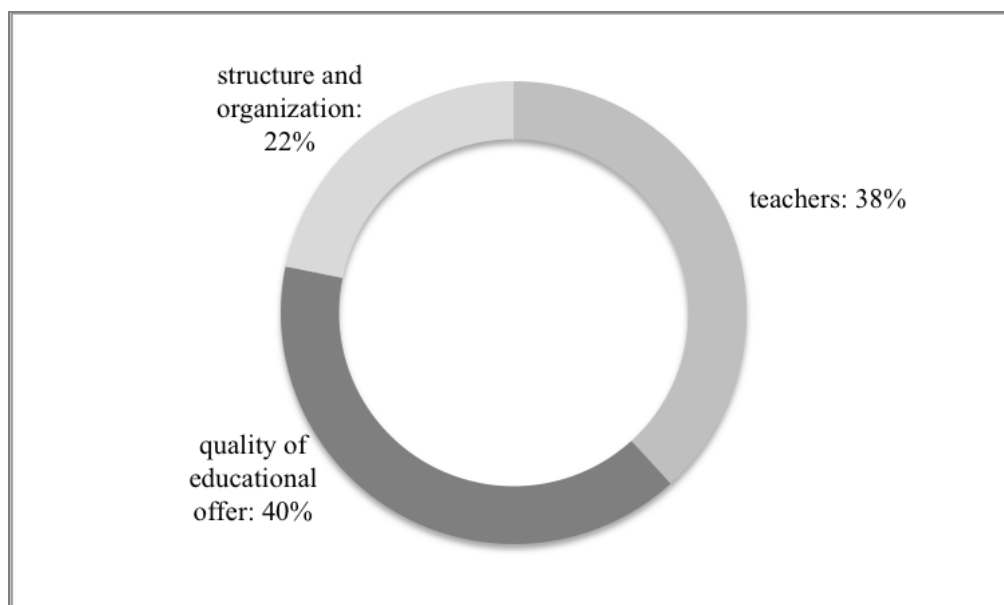

Figure 1: Families of codes constituting "a good school" as emerging from pupils' texts (data in percentage).
Font: GRION, 2011

QUALITY OF THE TEACHER IN A GOOD SCHOOL

A good school is a school where teachers are good, they do not pay attention only to marks but also to people; if a student has problems, they should help him or her overcome the issues, even only through a good listening to students. (Y2)

As the quote exemplifies, we believe it is important to notice that there is at least one reference to the quality of teachers in nearly all the 145 texts which were analyzed. Furthermore, this reference is frequently the first comment which pupils write in order to express their idea of a

good school. This supports the idea which has already been expressed by the studies carried out by the School Effectiveness Research (REYNOLDS *et al.,* 2011), according to which one of the most important variables for a good school is a good teacher, as children accurately write.

What features do children look for in teachers?

It is important to notice that, even though the descriptions on the three families of codes cover all the areas of competences established by the current Italian law for the education of teachers (subject competences, methodological-pedagogical competences, organizational and relational competences), the codes which are most frequently used to define a good teacher are the following: "developing an involving environment" and "helping"; the number of codes which refer to methodological-pedagogical competences, is much higher than those related to subject competences. We observe that this is actually in opposition to what the recent reform on the education of lower secondary school teachers calls for, since it emphasizes teachers' subject competences at the expense of the development of other competences, which are more appreciated by the students involved in our research.

The description of a good teacher, which emerges from the answers provided by students, consists in a teacher who motivates students, promotes an involving environment and supports their interests, teaches with passion, helps them with their problems and difficulties and understands them. It is a person who pupils feel good with, who motivates them towards studying and supports their interests. In other words we refer to a professional figure who is mostly centered on relational and methodological competences, more than subject competences.

It is particularly clear from our research that students are looking for a helping and supportive relationship, thus a general sense of lack of self-confidence emerges and a kind of almost fear of teachers and school life, as in the following quote:

P1 074: A good school is one where teachers are not only concerned with explaining but also help students overcome problems and difficulties. […] (Y1)

P1 303:…there should be kind and helpful teachers who do not make students feel bad if they find it hard to study and they do not understand things, teachers should help them instead. (Y3)

As for what concerns subject competences, students believe that in any case teachers should know (and love) their subject, mainly in order to be able to motivate students towards studying the subject and the topics:

[A good school] should have good teachers who have a strong passion towards the subjects which they teach and who are able to convey such passion to the students so that they are more willing to learn (Y3)

…Teachers should like what they teach because in this way they can explain better and involve students more [...] (Y2)

Another interesting feature which students increasingly look for in teachers during the three years of lower secondary school, is the ability to contribute towards the personal and professional future orientation of students.

Teachers should know their students well in order to be able to help them choose what to do in the future. (Y3)

Teachers who are good at teaching and involving students, can help you find the ways towards your future. (Y3)

This expectation is often quoted in the second dimension emerging from the analysis ("Educational offer"), and is identified as the aim of a good school.

THE EDUCATIONAL OFFER OF A GOOD SCHOOL

Following the student's perspective, three main categories of codes are featured in the dimension of "Educational offer" of a good school: a) the school climate (i.e. quality of relationships between teachers and students and among students, school's attention towards the need to avoid stress and academic pressure); b) methodology, range and type of activities proposed (i.e. theory/practice-oriented activities, curricular and extra-curricular activities); c) school's attention towards orienting students and encouraging perspectives (i.e. activities aimed at making students aware of their resources/potentials, activities for their future career prospects).

[A good school] is the one where you feel well, where you get along with teachers and school mates, where you are not anxious for tests (Y2).

The comment of a year two pupil summarizes what many of the pupils in the sample have described. Their idea of "a good school" mirrors their need to find, a peaceful environment, avoiding testing pressure and excessive homework stress. They enhance also their need to have good relationships with teachers and peers.

The importance which the pupils of this age give to relationships (that is being in the company of others) is highlighted when they talk about the activities which a "good school" should have. They look for activities where they can stay with others and share their efforts:

A school is where many group works are done, to make friends and learn how to work together (Y1);

A school where teachers involve students and try to study more what students really like through researches and group works so that, besides studying, there are opportunities where you can stay with school mates, learn and make friends … (Y2).

As for what concerns the methodology which schools should make use of, pupils (maybe mirroring the excessive emphasis which the Italian schooling places on theory rather than practice), express preferences for a school where "learning by doing" is more developed and implemented:

It is important to do many practical activities, such as school trips in order to learn things by seeing them, so that we can learn better (Y3).

A good school should have a lot of practice and little theory, a lot of laboratories and not only studying from books, like what happens in our schools (Y2).

This idea seems, in particular for students belonging to the third year, to relate to the need for schools to guarantee competences which can be directly exploited in the workplace:

[a good school] is the one which prepares us for work. It needs to have many hours of laboratories so that once we have finished we already know how to work and we can immediately enter the workplace (Y3)

The focus on these kinds of aspects does not mean that the pupils do not think of schools according to a more traditional perspective; as a matter of fact, the idea that schools should "provide knowledge" is a code that appears rather frequently in the texts which have been analyzed.

A final interesting aspect, concerning the second dimension denoted by "Educational offer", consists in the contribution which schools should provide to pupils' expectations towards their future. As a matter of fact, students are clear when they say that:

A good school is the place where a better future can be built […]. Teachers need to discover which are the qualities and capabilities of students and help them to develop them for their future (Y3).

In particular, older students express a certain attention towards their professional future:

It is a school which opens doors to your future, it should provide a good preparation for work and help you understand what you are really good at and what you really want to do as a grown-up (Y3).

STRUCTURES AND ORGANIZATION OF A GOOD SCHOOL

To express their idea of a good school, children focus on structural and organizational components, i.e. available tools, timetable, activity/lesson spaces, etc..

Quite a large number of assertions refer to the aesthetic features of the school building, through the use of adjectives as "beautiful", "clean", "new". They also claim the need for an equipped school, where they can find a comfortable dining hall and (consistent with what was previously stated in the second dimension, as described above) many laboratories for "learning by doing" activities.

As for what concerns the organization of physical spaces and time, students believe that a good school cannot limit itself to handling curricular activities, but should also extend the offer with:

P1 125: activities for students, such as participating in literary contests or theater courses…even after school lessons (Y1);

P1 062: …afternoon activities to stay in the company of the other students, where you can learn new things thanks to group works so that students do not get bored.. (Y1);

As highlighted in the second dimension "Educational offer", students of this age need to stay in company and share experiences with their peers, as expressed by the large number of codes related to occasions, spaces and times for socialization, in order to:

P1 285: *...form friendships and stay with other students ...(Y3)*;

P1 189: *...to be in company and make a lot of friends which will be kept even when we have finished school...(Y2);*

P1 222: *...have spaces where we can stay with other students even if we are not in class. (Y2).*

DISCUSSION

Our findings let us define a model of "a good school" from a pupil's point of view.
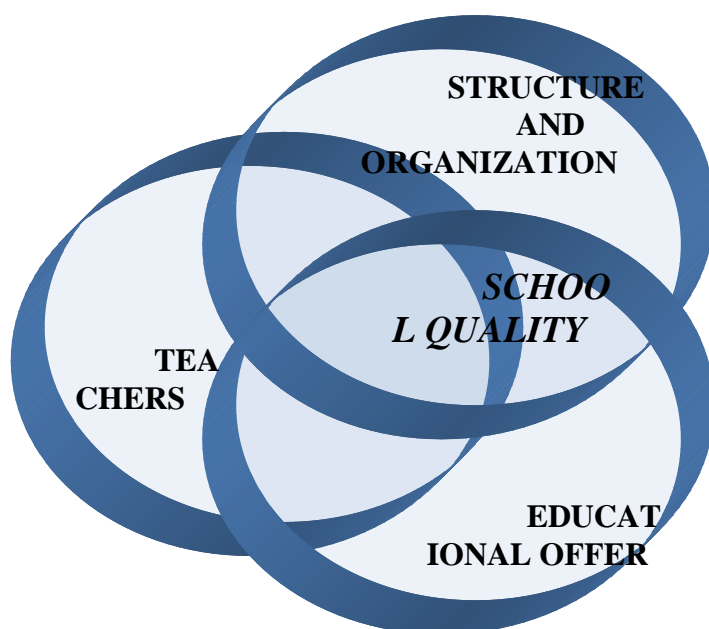
Figure 2: Dimensions of "a good school" as seen by pupils

Font: GRION, 2011

Figure 2 illustrates the main components of the concept of quality as expressed by the pupils themselves. This model helps us think about fundamental questions such as: What do pupils expect from their teachers?, Which are the purposes of schooling according to pupils?, What do they look for in schools?

In our study pupils reveal some emergent perceptions concerning the idea of the good school. They give importance to the following factors:

1. Supportive teachers who help them to overcome the common difficulties which they normally experience at school;

2. Good teachers are those which listen and improve children's interests and also explain well in order to motivate and involve them;

3. A peaceful class climate which avoids stress and pressures deriving, above all, from a lot of testing and excessive homework;

4. A school which gives them knowledge;

5. Spaces, times and purposes which support good relationships with teachers and especially with peers;

6. Spaces such as laboratories and practical activities aiming at improving learning by doing;

7. High quality of structures, such as new, clean and pleasant schoolrooms and equipment;

8. Purposes and activities linked to their personal and professional future and to the job market.

We believe that at least one of these factors is particularly linked to the specific Italian situation of schooling. The references which children make to laboratories as spaces where they can learn by doing and their suggestions concerning more practical activities could mirror pupils' resistance towards the excessive emphasis that Italian schooling places on "theoretic knowledge" as the main (or only) way to learn, in opposition to "practical knowledge" and to "practically-based learning" approaches. Related to this first aspect, there is also the claim made by pupils concerning the need for schools to prepare them for future jobs. It is a common opinion in Italy that school is far from guiding young people to entering the job market and it could be that our sample of pupils mirrors this common widespread belief too.

Further factors identified in our research are consistent with some previous studies (see for example MCNESS, 2006; OSBORN, 2001; RYAN; PATRICK, 2001).

Still, our aim in this context is to highlight a specific feature of the idea of quality which emerges from the pupils in our study. We believe that our results highlight that the pupils' idea of "a good school" is nearer to a "supportive schools" model as proposed by J. Gray (GRAY *et al*., 2011; GRAY, 2012) than to an "academically-oriented school". The author explains that in a supportive school there are some key school factors contributing to young people wellbeing, as illustrated in the second column of Tab. 1.

Factors emerging from our data		Key factors of Supportive School model
Spaces such as laboratories and practical activities aimed at improving learning by doing;	Academically-oriented factors	
A school which imparts knowledge		
Supportive teachers, who help overcome the common difficulties pupils normally experience at school	Socially-oriented factors	General satisfaction with educational experience
Good teachers who listen and improve children's interests and explain well in order to motivate and involve them		The feeling of membership of the school as a learning community
A tranquil class climate which avoids stress and pressure		Schools which avoid the pressure of schoolwork
Good relationship with teachers, and especially with peers		Relationships with teachers and peers
High quality of structures such as new,		Thinking "small" (i.e. attention to

clean and pleasant schoolrooms and equipment		size and organization of schools/classes).

Table 1: Comparison between factors emerging from our data (first column) and factors characterizing the Supportive School Model (second column)

Font: GRION, 2011

Considering our data, as illustrated in Table 1, we can find many comments which are related to the key factors of the Supportive School model (Table 1). The role of the school social climate, as a product of different factors constituting the Supportive School, emerges as the most important characteristic of "a good school". Pupils highlight in different ways that "A good school is a school whose aim is to teach not only subjects, but also to behave well and to respect rules in order to live together", "is a school where we can make new friends" "where we can learn to get along well with other people", and "where we can be quiet and cool, without being anxious about marks and oral assessments". When they write about the teachers of a "good school", pupils cited several times, adjectives such as "helping", "supporting", "encouraging", "respecting"…

We think this is an important point which evaluation systems should pay attention to. 'The factors which contribute to making a school academically effective are not the same ones which make it a more "supportive" institution' (GRAY, 2012, p. 30). In this light, schools need to develop separate strategies to be sure of delivering effectively in both areas (GRAY, 2012) – academic effectiveness and wellbeing. In the same way, evaluation systems need to consider both aspects in a specific manner.

This last consideration opens the problem of exploring ways to evaluate aspects which are not easily assessable, such as the factors discussed above, which determine the social climate of a school. In this sense we believe that a tool, such as a questionnaire, is appropriate for letting pupils express their voice and opinions. Our research is moving into this direction.

CONCLUSION

To give a conclusion to this work, we decided to borrow the words of the title of an article written by Doddington et al. (2001), because they summarize the actual sense of our work very well: Testing, testing, testing…can you hear me?

As Cook-Sather (2002) wrote more than ten years ago:

There is something fundamentally amiss about building and rebuilding an entire system without consulting at any point those it is ostensibly designed to serve. The inefficacy of this

approach becomes increasingly apparent as we move into the 21st century (COOK-SATHER, 2002, p. 3).

We are fully aware of the fact that this study is limited and only at the very initial stage of a much longer path aiming at giving voice to Italian pupils and bringing it to a "political level" to help them to move from silence and invisibility to influence and visibility (RUDDUCK, 1998); however, with this first step we want to sensitize Italian school institutional awareness on the possibility of a new perspective for the quality of schools: the Student Voice perspective.

Moving beyond the Italian context, we built our study from a general concern to include popular involvement in decision-making and allow young people to be increasing input for the decisions which affect their lives (FIELDING, 2012). We founded our research in particular on McNess (2006) who believed that in the context of evaluation systems, the idea of school quality needs to be re-conceptualised because its definition, as expressed through policy, may not match the constructions given to the concept of quality by pupils. In this sense we carried out this research.

Our future perspectives move in two directions.

At a school level, assuming a school improvement approach, we are going to use these data to open a discussion among stakeholders into the institutions in order to stimulate shared reflections about the concept of school quality and put into action a form of engagement intended to promote intergenerational learning through lived, communal responsibility (FIELDING, 2011).

To pursue our evaluative aim, we are going to build quantitative tools based on the results here discussed, in order to extend our inquiry to a wider population in Italy and, at the same time, to work with other European and International countries to explore the potential in order to discover possible communalities and define a set of shared indicators for school evaluation based on an idea of quality derived from the pupils' point of view.

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ABSTRACT

Assessing schools by performance testing is a current policy practice in most countries. However many educational researchers assume a critical position toward this evaluation system and highlight its limits. This is particularly the case of Italy where, until now we have had only an external value-added evaluation by performance testing. In order to explore other directions to evaluate schools, we conducted an empirical work to verify the possibility of establishing a set of evaluative indicators, based on Italian pupils' representations of "a good school". The results highlight that the pupils' idea of quality is nearer to a "supportive schools" model as proposed by J. Gray et al. (2011) than to an "academically-oriented school". In this light we open a discussion.

Keywords: School quality. Evaluation. Student voice.