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Mixed Methods for Research in Education. Studying an Innovation

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Abstract

In the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland a reform of the secondary school system is taking place. This reform originates from some preliminary reflection started during the '90ies. During the academic year 2004/2005 started the first visible transformation in school. A study on this process of change has been conducted during the years 2006 - 2012.

Data from different sources of information have been collected and analyzed: public documents concerning the reform; interviews to opinion leaders and decision makers; four cases of scholastic institutes and a questionnaire administered to all the teachers belonging to the school system.

Analysis of data collected and consequent results allow to confirm and up-date the initial theoretical framework; a system of detection and a grid for the analysis of the educational institutions and the school system has been produced.

To use model of investigation that come from different contexts (for example institutional, national or cultural) may cause problems in evaluating different aspects of the phenomenon; the process of including field data in pre-existing theoretical framework has been explored.

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1. Introduction

At the present time, a reform of the secondary school system (CITE 2) is taking place in the Italian region of Switzerland called Canton Ticino; the process of its institutionalization is going on. In Ticino the “Scuola media”, the lower secondary school (CITE 2), is organized in four years, from the age of 11 to the age of 15. Moreover,

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the years are divided in two blocks each one of two years. The secondary school system in Canton Ticino can be said to be “inclusive”, because all kind of students attend normal schools, so that only 2% of students are enrolled in special schools. The advantages of these inclusive systems are seen both in terms of quality (OECD, 2005) and equity (Corbett Burris, Heubert, & Levin, 2005).

The reform project named “Riforma 3” (R3), confirms the effectiveness of Ticino’s model for secondary schools, and suggests a process of modernization on different levels, namely structural, pedagogical and didactical. The reform started in 2004-2005; according to the operating project, there has been a process of generalization of the reform, then, in 2005-2006 it has been extended to the third year of the “Scuola media” and to the fourth year in 2006-2007.

The aim of the reform is to “ensure a wide structural, pedagogical and didactical innovation to answer the new requests of students, society and professional change for teachers, consistently with basic principles and general aims of secondary school” (UIM, 2005). According to the R3, changes will be focused on three different elements: the curriculum, the organizational structure and the pedagogical structure.

The new curriculum, named “Piano di formazione”, is based on subject matters, but its crucial point is the “Mappa formativa generale”. This map should answer the basic question “what a student should have learned at the end of the secondary school”; one of the most relevant aspects of the “Piano di Formazione” is that much importance is given to the development of competencies. Concerning the organizational structure, relevant changes are going to be taken in language classes, namely compulsory classes of English for all the students, optional classes of French for second biennium, and an increase in classes of Italian.

The pedagogical elements are linked to the “Piano di Formazione”, but they keep their autonomy and their presence in all the parts of School. The Reform emphasizes particularly the idea of “pedagogical differentiation” and “formative evaluation”. As a matter of fact, a school that is said to be “inclusive” has to practice a differentiated teaching, to develop the potential of each single student.

The evaluation of education is a necessary practical consequence for an effective differentiation; the R3 promotes a certain form of evaluation, though already being included within the regulation has not yet been put into practice. The Reform further includes other issues, such as maladjustment, integration, wellness, teaching and class hours, self-evaluation of scholastic institutes and computer literacy. This paper is based on the project of evaluation of the R3 that began in 2006.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework in which the process is investigated refers to the main international streams on scholastic innovation, starting from Hargreaves, Lierman, Fullan, & Hopkins (1998), to the studies of Fullan (1993, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003), Leithwood, Jantzi, & Mascal (2002), Huberman & Miles (1984) and Huberman, Miles, Taylor, & Goldberg (1983).

According to Fullan (2001) the main problem in school is that there are too many untied, episodic, scrappy and chaotic projects, rather than in the lack of innovative initiatives. Bryk, Sebring, Easton, & Luppescu (1998) refer to the “problem of Christmas tree”: schools are often decorated with a large amount of small projects (as Christmas balls), but the global sense of them is hard to understand.

Projects of innovation are given to schools in an uncoordinated way, and each single institute does not have a real opportunity – or the capability – to choose between them. Unfortunately schools involved in effective projects are part of a narrow minority. The further important step for scholastic institutions is then to switch from a superficial and fragmentary change to coherent and deep programs. This means to carry out different reforms, processes that are clear and perceptible to everyone involved.

As many organizational authors (e.g. Schein, 1998) sustain every change induces anxiety and insecurity, rather than enthusiasm. These aspects need to be taken into consideration, not only as negative. They are natural and

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