

The Italian National Evaluation System: a quasi-project. Critical reflections and open questions

Il Sistema Nazionale di Valutazione: un quasi-progetto. Riflessioni critiche e questioni aperte

Renata Viganò

Full Professor of Experimental Education | Department of Education | Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan (Italy) | renata.vigano@unicatt.it

abstract

The issue of the evaluation of students, teachers, school managers, schools themselves and entire education systems has begun to attract particular attention among governments and policy-makers, both internationally and, increasingly, at national levels. School evaluation is used as a tool to improve understanding of how students progress in their learning, to provide information to parents and indeed society at large about performance, and to improve schools in terms of their leadership and teaching practices. In Italy, a National Evaluation System (SNV) was introduced in the 2014-2015 school year. The realities of the political landscape and the contradictions, uncertainties and complexities of the school sector have substantially conditioned the SNV's implementation and continue to exert a major influence on it. This paper focuses on some of the many points worthy of attention and on the numerous open questions, with particular reference to their implications for pedagogical and educational research.

Keywords: school, system, evaluation, improvement, educational policy

A livello internazionale e con crescente interesse a livello nazionale, i governi hanno iniziato a prestare particolare attenzione alla valutazione di studenti, insegnanti, dirigenti scolastici, scuole stesse e sistemi educativi. La valutazione scolastica è impegnata come strumento per comprendere meglio come gli studenti progrediscono nei loro percorsi di apprendimento, per fornire informazioni ai genitori sul rendimento e alla società in generale per migliorare le scuole in termini di leadership e pratiche di insegnamento. In Italia, in particolare, dall'anno scolastico 2014-2015 il Sistema di valutazione nazionale (SNV) è stato progressivamente implementato. La realtà degli scenari politici, le contraddizioni, le incertezze e la complessità del mondo scolastico hanno pesantemente condizionato e continuano ad influire sull'attuazione dell'SNV. Questo contributo si sofferma su alcuni fra i molti punti che meritano attenzione e sulle numerose questioni aperte, con particolare attenzione alle implicazioni per la ricerca pedagogica ed educativa.

Parole chiave: scuola, sistema, valutazione, miglioramento, politica educativa

1. Some notes on school evaluation

The issue of the evaluation of students, teachers, school managers, schools themselves and entire education systems has begun to attract particular attention among governments and policy-makers, both internationally and, increasingly, at national levels (Meyer, Benavot, 2013; Scott, 2016). School evaluation is used as a tool to improve understanding of how students progress in their learning, to provide information to parents and indeed society at large about performance, and to improve schools in terms of their leadership and teaching practices (Eurydice, 2016). In terms of students' assessment, many countries set educational standards indicating what students should know or be able to do at different stages of the learning process. This simplifies the evaluation of students' levels of learning, and also provides an ongoing review of the indicators used to measure the achievements of different countries in different areas (OECD, 2018).

Good student performance is linked to the success of teaching practices within schools, to teachers' professionalism, and to schools having good organizational structures, including in aspects related to the headteacher's management of the school. Specific indicators are used to evaluate different aspects of a school. The results are used to identify both schools that are successful in evaluating their work and making it effective as well as those that require improvement. The various indicators are also used by policy-makers to provide a transparent assessment of the work of headteachers and teachers. The evaluation of educational systems has changed in character over time, increasingly becoming more comprehensive. Today evaluation focuses not only on students' results, but also on wider aspects including the external evaluation of schools, teachers and management, and makes extensive use of student performance data, including in relation to new outcomes, such as the so-called "Key European competences" (Nutti, Ghio, 2016).

Schools have progressively acquired greater autonomy in their decision making and organisation. However, alongside this, the nature of external evaluation itself has clearly changed. In external evaluation, in fact, elements such as accountability (monitoring various functions) and improvement (development and new functions) now co-exist and interrelate to varying degrees in different countries. The monitoring of functions which focus on the degree of compliance with state directives in regulatory and administrative terms, is increasingly accompanied by the

development of new functions that address the school's and its operators' sense of responsibility, as well as improvement in its teaching practices and management. Autonomy, in the sense of the capacity for 'good' governance, implies for schools a commitment to a series of self-diagnosis actions (self-assessment and monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning) as well as the ability to put in place improvement measures. The importance of self-assessment consequently increases, raising new questions about what constitutes 'good' evaluation. This implies, at the national level, the need to provide support for schools' evaluation, such as through written guidelines, as well as by providing tools for self-evaluation and systems for data return.

In Italy, specifically, the National Evaluation System (Decree of the President of the Republic n. 80, 2013) has been in operation since the 2014-2015 school year.

2. Structural and descriptive notes on the National Evaluation System

The essential elements relating to the structure and program of the National Evaluation System (henceforth the SNV) are set out below, in shortened form for the purposes of this paper.

The SNV comprises three operational aspects: INVALSI, INDIRE and the Inspectors of the Ministry of Education.

INVALSI (Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema educativo di Istruzione e di Formazione) is the National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education System. Its main tasks are: organizing national and international surveys; coordinating the evaluation of school management and defining the indicators for evaluation; and conducting the program for schools' self-evaluation and evaluation. For this element, it defines the tools used for analyzing data and surveys, specifies the framework used by schools in their self-evaluation reports, develops the protocols for the external evaluation, and issues the training plans for inspectors and the expert evaluation teams.

INDIRE (Istituto Nazionale di Documentazione, Innovazione e Ricerca Educativa) is the National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research. It provides support for innovation, consultancy and staff training.

The Inspectors of the Ministry of Education coordinate the External Evaluation Teams (henceforth NEV).

The SNV conducts evaluation across four main areas: evaluation of learning, evaluation of educational institutions, evaluation of school management, and evaluation of teachers.

At the national level, assessment of school learning is carried out every year on the basis of a series of tests that are given to primary and secondary school students across the country. A program that covers early years settings is also being tested.

INVALSI also promotes certain International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) investigations in Italian schools: TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), TIMSS Advanced, PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), and ICCS (International Civic and Citizenship Education Study). It also manages the implementation of the OECD PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) survey in Italy.

The evaluation of educational institutions takes place in four phases: self-evaluation, external evaluation, improvement actions, and social reporting; the first entire four-phase cycle, which started in 2014, is expected to end in 2019. In the 2014/2015 school year, schools started their self-assessment using indicators and comparative data provided by the ministry. In 2015/2016 the external evaluation phase began, with the External Evaluation Units (NEV, consisting of an Inspector and two experts) conducting school visits; this procedure follows a national protocol with common methods and tools. In the same year, schools planned and started improvement actions, based on their self-evaluation reports, in some cases with the support of INDIRE or other public and private partners (universities, professional associations, etc.). In 2018/2019 schools are requested to publish their first social accountability reports (using a common model at national level) and to promote public information initiatives.

It should be noted that the introduction of the SNV followed on from a series of important experimental projects (“the prototypal projects” V&M – Evaluation & Improvement, VSQ – Evaluation of Schools Quality, and VALES – Evaluation and Development of Schools), which were conducted by INVALSI and realized with the help of the 2007-2013 European PON Funds, which enabled different instruments and evaluation procedures for Italian schools to be tested. The current national roll-out of the set of evaluation tools and practices is an important step forward, and requires careful analysis of the following aspects: how the procedures are put into practice; the adequacy of the assessment

tools; and the skills required, as identified by the experts responsible for school evaluation.

According to the Ministry of Education “The procedure for the evaluation of headteachers is designed to enhance and improve the professional leaders themselves, in view of the gradual increase in the quality of the educational service”.

The purpose of evaluating school management is to improve the professionalism of managers and educational institutions in line with the SNV. The frames of reference within which management actions and their contribution to the improvement of the service are placed are: the objectives of the self-assessment report (school level), the regional objectives (regional level), and the national policy objectives (national level). The methodology adopted for the assessment is intended to be easily incorporated into the work already being undertaken daily, using mostly tools and documents already in use, without the need for new or particular documents that increase the workload of school managers.

The starting point is the self-assessment conducted by the manager, using a national common reference model with data and verifiable evidence. This is also the case for the evaluation procedure for educational institutions (Article 6 of Presidential Decree 80/2013). The final reference for the evaluation is the annual feedback on the achievement of objectives for both processes (“specificity of the functions”) and results (“the manager’s contribution to the achievement of the results for the improvement of the educational service provided for in the self-assessment report”). School managers contribute to the pursuit of objectives through “the specific nature of their functions”, therefore the evaluation cannot be based exclusively on the achievement of the goals but must first consider the specifics of the managerial action taken in pursuit of them. With this in mind, the assessment of the school manager covers six main professional domains: management and organizational skills (achieving results, fairness, transparency, efficiency and effectiveness); enhancement of the commitment and professional abilities of the institute’s staff; appreciation of the manager’s work among the professional and wider community; contribution to improvements in student success and improvements in organizational and didactic processes; and individual school management, promotion of collaboration between the various components of the school community, and relationships with the wider social context and within the school sector.

The evaluation process is divided into six main phases: definition of

the objectives by the regional school authority (in accordance with the priorities established by the institute's self-assessment report / the Ministry of Education / regional objectives); formulation of the evaluation plan by the methodological coordinator of the evaluation system (the Inspector); annual self-assessment by the manager using a specific prescribed format, providing documentation of any actions taken and the outcomes achieved, along with progress data and evidence of responses to any other requests made by the NEV; preliminary evaluation by the NEV and possible visit to the school (every manager is subject to a visit within their three-year period of office); final evaluation by the regional school authority, with reference to the NEV's evaluation; feedback on the assessment by the regional education authority and / or the NEV.

Moving on to the evaluation of teachers, to date this process has not been launched and pilot projects are yet to be implemented.

The European Commission's "Rethinking Education" announcement (European Commission, 2012) underlined, as early as 2012, that adequate professional development of teachers should include regular feedback and support; this, according to the Commission, increases teachers' self-esteem, allowing them to feel valued within a community and to become aware of the importance of their role. The Eurydice report "The Teaching Profession in Europe: Practices, Perceptions" (2015) shows that some form of centrally regulated teacher assessment exists in almost all European countries. A very small number of countries, including Italy until 2015, proved an exception to this. However, in accordance with law 107, assessment was introduced in the 2015/2016 school year on an annual basis, along with evaluation and a bonus system awarded on the basis of professional merit. The specific criteria for awarding bonuses to teachers must be drawn up by an Evaluation Committee (whose composition is defined in paragraph 129 of the law) while the sums allocated are decided by the school manager, using an evidence-based assessment. The Evaluation Committee therefore simply has the task of identifying the criteria as precisely as possible, so as to limit the manager's discretionary powers. In reality, law 107 has not been acted upon; for complex reasons that will be partly discussed in the following pages, teacher evaluation in Italy is still not practiced.

3. Critical notes

There has certainly been no lack of debate or polemic around the theme of school evaluation; a wide variety of voices have been raised on this topic, using arguments that are scientific and professional but very often also ideological and corporate (Viganò, 2017). Below, we seek to address, as far as possible within the confines of this contribution, some of the many points worthy of attention and some of the numerous open questions, with particular reference to their implications for pedagogical and educational research.

The title of this paper defines the SNV as a “quasi-project”. Almost thirty years have passed since the National Conference on schools in 1990, with a series of ministers, reforms, counter-reforms, adjustments, and re-orientations having taken place around schools. In fact, tracing a logical path that describes the development of the SNV as a whole would be impossible: in reality it has been a journey full of diversions and stumbling blocks. Thirty years of major changes in direction that, at times, have seen the school as a battlefield cannot be presented as a rational, jointly-owned design. And yet the periodic resurgence of the theme leads to questions about what lies at the root of this fluctuating attitude.

On the one hand, at both the national and international level, scholastic and social developments have led to certain inescapable requirements, including: the development of international and national comparative evaluation systems; the recognition of school autonomy; the need to combat the discrepancies between individual schools and territories in terms of the service they provide and the results they obtain; the duty to guarantee essential levels and uniform learning goals nationally; stakeholders’ desire for reliable and publicly available data on the quality of the service provided; and schools’ capacity to initiate and promote the evaluation system.

On the other hand, the institutional design of the SNV is not the result of rational planning (optimal institutional design) but of a gradual accumulation of more or less successful attempts.

There is no certainty that any trace of an innovation will remain once it is exposed to the judgment of history: if a novelty is consolidated into the behavior of social participants, it becomes a constituent part of the system. Alternatively it will fall into oblivion. The introduction of the evaluation system into schools is complex and involves all parties, and the role each carries out. Complexity is, in fact, an element of structural

fragility; the synergy between the component parts is the *conditio sine qua non* for supporting the whole evaluation system (Benadusi, Gianicola, 2016).

With regard to the evaluation of learning, it is necessary to reflect on what contribution constructing a culture of formative evaluation is meant to make. Some elements of crucial importance, which form part of the structure of the Italian school system, appear difficult to overcome (Meloni, 2018).

First of all, the practice of assigning a numbered grade to a student's performance. On the one hand, teachers suffer from having less opportunity to exercise their own judgment (for example during meetings with other teachers to assign grades at the end of the school year) and the loss of their judging authority; on the other, the inadequacy of a judgment that appears to classify and make a definitive assessment in the face of the complexity and richness of the learning process is becoming more and more evident. All other available tools for detection and narration would also be required to accompany the student on their path through formal education, from one school level to the next.

The second critical issue concerns the relationship between school and family, between teachers and parents. The tendency of families to reduce the evaluation process to a simplistic grade leads to schools adapting their offer to meet parents' demands, at the expense of focusing on the student's whole learning journey and committing to an improvement in teachers' evaluative skills; "What grade did my son get?" is the key question, the only information that seems to count.

Another problem arises from the contradictions inherent in the guidelines. To give an example: the certification models for skills are completely different in the first and second cycles, although both refer to European Commission recommendations. In fact, the current system does not seem to have managed to go beyond the INVALSI tests as a measure of results, just as it failed to focus on the teaching process as a jointly-owned team effort, rather than an individual activity.

It should be acknowledged however that the idea of a formative evaluation of the work of schools is, in reality, a major innovation. The implementation of the SNV has obviously met with resistance and obstacles, but inviting schools to reflect on their actions is a lever for fundamental and cultural change that may determine the consolidation of a practice of evaluation that analyzes issues of quality; that knows how to measure the impact of didactic and organizational action; that is en-

dowed with reliable instruments for assessing outcomes and processes, and that ultimately triggers meta cognitive processes in all parties in the teaching/learning process: teaching staff, managers and students (Bonaiuti, 2015).

This leads us to focus on another critical aspect, namely schools' reactions to the introduction of innovations in evaluation and the SNV.

Despite good intentions and long-established regulatory arrangements, the response from schools to procedures for verifying and assessing their work has been slow and resistant. No external verification has been well received and accepted; no quality control procedure welcomed or permitted. The teaching body has for some time adopted a critical stance in response to the whole evaluation project, above all with regard to the competitive, economic and even punitive implications that were initially conceived by the legislator and rejected by teachers. In recent years, the sometimes strong reaction to the SNV has actually slowed down the introduction of any evaluation tool.

Today, however, the push towards an evaluation of schools' work has grown and diversified, for example through the requests for reporting on the abandonment of a centralized model in favor of greater autonomy or on the social control that the families exhibit that arises from the breakdown of the educational trust that once existed and of the founding social consensus on the role of the school. The school itself and those working in it feel, in a sense, overwhelmed by the requests for evaluation, not recognizing it as an opportunity for growth, improvement, and enhancement. It is therefore primarily a cultural problem (Birman, 2010), that can only be tackled by overcoming the perception of being mere objects of evaluation to become instead active protagonists in a systemic logic (Viganò, 2017).

In the SNV program, the initial self-assessment approach undoubtedly mitigated the resistance, even if previously RAV (self-assessment report) drafts were written by the school manager with input from only a few select colleagues; the whole teaching team rarely collaborated in the process of self-evaluation. One element of weakness is certainly teachers' scant knowledge of the legislation, to which can be added a kind of superficiality on the part of many in their interpretation of the regulations on the evaluation of learning (consider that there is no particular tradition of giving students formative feedback on their progress). This superficiality also exists in the practice of system evaluation.

In recent years, however, the procedure for drawing up the RAV and

the PTOF (three-year plan of the training offer) was shared more within the school; moreover, whole schools have painstakingly conducted practices of observation and self-assessment.

The process designed to define improvement objectives and the indicators to measure their results appears more complex. Teachers' widespread unfamiliarity with teaching practices that measure the impact of one's teaching does not facilitate the introduction of these methods. Teachers who are not organized or are unaccustomed to measuring the effectiveness of their teaching activities (Vivanet, 2015) other than through assigning a numerical grade, cannot measure the effectiveness of a systemic action, not possessing the shared tools and practices that examine the action of the school as a whole. It is a clear problem of terminologies, practices, and the sharing of a common project that can only be dealt with appropriately through ongoing training.

A range of causes might explain the difficulties in involving teachers in this process: the undervaluing of the teaching profession, the rigid contracts, non-existent career progression, the growing loss of social recognition, decreased motivation, an educational practice that is resistant to change, the weakening of the role of collegiate bodies in the governance process, training that is not fit for purpose. These critical elements, endured by the teaching body with resignation and disenchantment, have caused over time a progressive retreat into a professional life characterized by solitude and self-sufficiency. This feature of being forced into individual solitude appears to be the main hindrance to a collective rewriting of the teacher profile in which evaluation is experienced in non-punitive and growth-oriented terms.

The crisis in the teaching profession is further heightened by the perception that the knowledge transmitted is obsolete and useless. Additionally, methodological and didactic innovations are often assumed to be, and experienced more as, requirements that teachers are forced to fulfil rather than the keys that open the doors to knowledge. Unsurprisingly, a teaching staff whose average age is the highest in OECD countries, that is in large part disillusioned and worn down by difficult and conflicting internal dynamics, defends its core self, i.e. the educational relationship with students, the defensive bulwark to be protected. The question of "what" to evaluate becomes "who" can evaluate, delegitimizing the role of evaluation. These reactions defend and protect the ways in which one implements one's own educational and organizational practice, in the face of a normative action that "attacks" the residual living space of one's work.

As stated previously, the question has the breadth and complexity of a cultural challenge.

It is necessary to ask first of all what is the relationship between evaluation in the school system and the general purpose of Italian schooling; what is the horizon towards which one moves and how much is this shared by all school operators; what is the answer to the question “what school is for, today?”. This question, which is far from secondary, can instead be regarded as the foundation of daily professional practice, which allows teachers to overcome the perception of their own marginal position within the educational system (Viganò, 2017).

If the school mission in its entirety is not shared in substance, if everyone does not grasp his/her specific contribution within a common framework, there is a risk of living one’s profession in isolation and being always resistant to evaluation, interpreting it as interference in one’s personal work and never as part of a logic of overall improvement, both individually and collectively. Today, teachers barely display any ownership of this systemic vision.

4. Open questions and areas for development

A quasi-project. Necessarily ambitious – to set up and implement an evaluation process for a country’s entire education and training system requires a complex and somewhat optimistic plan – but equally inevitably full of difficulties, road blocks, standstills, changes in direction, and reconfigurations. The realities of the political landscape, and the contradictions, uncertainties and complexities of the school sector have substantially conditioned the SNV’s implementation and continue to exert a major influence on it.

At a fundamental level, it is neither obvious nor rhetorical to recall the need for a serious and authentic reflection on schools. The debate about schools’ objectives and the principles and values that these should guarantee and transmit is often poor and ideologically flawed. However, a good evaluation can only develop from a sufficiently unambiguous and detailed definition of the objectives that should be set and the values that should be guaranteed. We need a public debate that is worthy of the importance that school assumes today with respect to the cohesion and development of Italian society, the needs and expectations of young people and their families, and the international competitiveness that in a glob-

alized society we cannot afford the luxury of ignoring (Scott, 2016; Vergani, 2013).

The idea of evaluation to which the system corresponds requires critical review and consequent adjustments to its implementation. The SNV has a certain technocratic drift, linking improvement to evaluation in a slightly too mechanical way – it is rather standardized and essentially focused only on the INVALSI surveys. Even the plans for improvement, which follow a uniform pattern imposed from above and from the outside, are likely to be experienced as foreign interventions by schools (Jeffery, 2014). The school is a *sui generis* production system, comparable by analogy to a co-operative, and all attempts to reorganize it according to managerial principles will probably be ineffective (Haroche, 2010). A group entity can be evaluated and incentivized only as a group, leaving it to resolve its contradictions internally. The problem of evaluation then becomes that of eliciting this widespread and often intentionally hidden knowledge: only in this way does the improvement process have any hope of effectiveness, because it is not fulfilled through bureaucracy but leaves the decision-making power in the hands of the relevant parties.

It will therefore be important to focus on rapidly expanding the information bases used to carry out evaluations, to avoid referring only to a few disciplinary areas, enhancing instead broader and transversal skills (for example those of citizenship and soft skills). It is also necessary to ensure reasonable flexibility within the improvement plans and high levels of competence in the support available that will help schools to connect the different components of this path to achieve effective improvement (Labaree, 2014).

It is strategic to work to spread the evaluation culture in schools. As Cipollone helps us to understand (2012), evaluation is a continuation of politics by other means and the debate involves students and their families, as well as those who work in schools (and hopefully should also involve other stakeholders). The autonomy-evaluation binomial, considered by Cipollone and Sestito (2010) as the basis for the development of the system, is challenged by forms of evaluation that seem more suited to a technocratic neocentralism rather than to a real decentralization based on a strengthening of the tools of accountability (Viganò, 2017).

At a more specific level, it is possible to identify some points that require guarantees, a shared vision and consistency in the programmatic action if one is to consolidate a practice and culture of evaluation in the Italian school system.

Beyond the needs of control and management, it is necessary to take a formative view of evaluation. Evaluation is either formative or not, for everyone: teachers, managers, administrative staff, students, and schools alike. This cannot be done without adequate investment in training, both in terms of quantity and quality (Morrissette et al., 2012). There is no possibility of the service offered by schools improving without constant support aimed at providing the best professional tools to school staff (Calvani, 2015).

Recruitment and in-service training are also essential. The sensitivity of the question concerning recruitment emerged explicitly in the standard competitions for professorships (with very low pass rates) and in training courses for new teachers. The initial training model has been improving, although this is more debatable in the case of secondary school teachers, often due to prevalent corporate interests; but there is still much to do in terms of in-service training. Obviously, this issue also raises the question of teachers' legal status. The evaluation must be promoted and implemented as a lever for individual improvement in teaching professionalism and not as an administrative practice. The TALIS 2013 survey showed that this approach has a significant impact on teachers' levels of satisfaction with their work: a development hypothesis makes the teaching profession more attractive and generates a positive influence on society's perception of it. The key element is the redefinition of the legal status. The extent of the alterations to the "job" of teaching that have taken place over time require a rewriting of the contractual terms.

In this regard, the reorganization of teachers' school time in a way that facilitates interdisciplinary collaboration is an added bonus. In the contractual rewriting, time and space must be set in physical and organizational spaces, a flexible dimension of common work in which knowledge is treated from the most diverse epistemological points of view. The multidisciplinary teaching organization is related, in a particular way, to a competence approach that is more closely linked to the reality of the construction of knowledge in the cognitive maps of the students.

The creation and substantial use of consultation space must also be supported. Evaluation is a process that involves the school in its entirety and all its stakeholders. The request for social reporting can find meaning and practical fulfilment in a virtuous relationship with all institutional and non-institutional subjects. It is necessary to create opportunities and ways to develop school policies in a stable, formalized and concerted manner but also in a way that responds to differing regional and local cir-

cumstances. This implies the need to make improvement-oriented monitoring and feedback processes possible. The monitoring and control action must generate retroactive feedback for structural improvement (Hadji, 2014). To do this, a culture of evidence must be created, a culture that pursues the reliability of the information collected, enabling processes and outcomes to be compared.

It is therefore necessary to provide adequate training and support for the managerial function. The management of such a complex challenge cannot be undertaken by school management as it is currently configured. The role of the school manager has to be supplemented by qualified human resources to implement more effective school governance. Management skills must be added to the teaching profession which, by now, requires management services, organization and shared guidance of school processes. Training in this regard and the contractual recognition of these resources is an essential condition for managing the complexities of schools better and accommodating evaluation-oriented processes for improvement in a more optimal manner.

In concluding this paper, it is helpful to recall that faced with the contemporary challenge, which features scenarios involving job crises, lack of prospects for the younger generations, epochal crises of resources and migration, and global citizenship, an effective educational system aimed at improving learning outcomes and internal organizational processes can assume a defining role. A culture of evaluation consistent with this perspective becomes an indispensable tool for contributing to the construction of a civil, democratic and inclusive society (Hadji, 2012) that reduces inequalities and gives equal educational opportunities to all.

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