

# THE PERMANENCE OF DISTINCTIVENESS: PERFORMANCES AND CHANGING SCHOOLING GOVERNANCE IN THE SOUTHERN EUROPEAN WELFARE STATES

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**Abstract** – *This paper analyses the performance and the emerging forms of governance of schooling in the countries of the southern model of welfare state (Ferrera, 1996, 2000). Four countries – Spain, Portugal, Greece and Italy – will be analysed in the context of the ‘lifelong learning policy’ and the wider Lisbon strategy. The common belonging of these countries to the Southern European model of welfare is linked to their ‘difficulty’ (and the relative ‘distance’ from the European standards) in the alignment with the policy technologies of the EU. The paper describes the performances together with some of the differences in translating the logic of decentralisation. It then aims at discussing different lines of interpretations (macro-social, institutional, cultural) for these enduring ‘difficulties’.*

## Introduction

**T**his paper analyses the performances and the emergence of new forms of governance of schooling systems of the countries of the Southern European model of welfare (Ferrera, 1996, 2000). We will see how the process of fabrication of the European space has the effect of pressing isomorphic changes on the patterns of governance of national policies and schooling performances. In some way, this homogenisation can be interpreted as the implementation of the discourse of the knowledge (or the learning) society which seems to diminish the ‘force’ of national policies within the policies of education. However, a look at the performances of those countries as well as at the attempts to implement new forms of regulation and governance in schooling highlights the *permanence of distinctiveness* in spite of their notable improvements in fulfilling standards, and attempts at reforming their system of schooling. The distinctiveness regards the position of ‘low performers’ according to European benchmarking of the wider Lisbon strategy and the endurance of the state tradition in schooling which influences the trajectory of decentralisation (Green, 2002; Prokou, 2008). The paradox of the convergence *and* divergence reveals the complexities of the alignment where the growing relevance of a transnational force (in this case,

the EU) develops within the ‘light’ of the national schooling tradition and leads to an hybridisation of global pressures and tradition of local schooling systems.

The paper unfolds as follows: it first focuses on two homogenising forces in the fabrication of the European education space: performativity and decentralisation. It then will describe how it is possible through these policy technologies to read the common condition of these countries (their condition of ‘low-achieving’), and their difficulties in the degree of centralisation-decentralisation in the area of the governance of their school systems. It then aims at discussing the *permanence of distinctiveness* in terms of a *macro-social narrative*, an *institutional perspective* and a *cultural view*.

## **Performativity and decentralisation in the Europeanisation of schooling**

Europeanisation, particularly by means of communitarian politics, activates some trajectories of transformation in the school systems of the member countries, in such a way that, as has been observed by Dale (2000), Europe is increasingly acting as the *agenda-setter* in the field of education. It is notable to consider how this occurs despite the fact that education, and in particular schooling, remains a domain of responsibility of national policies. In this sense, Europeanisation and globalisation converge in a discourse and a common EU engagement to make Europe a ‘society of knowledge’ and/or learning, capable of increasing its potential of competitiveness in comparison with the USA and Japan<sup>1</sup>. This aim, presented in many European documents (in particular, in the European Commission [1995] White Paper), has then been translated into a series of common targets, explicitly formulated by the documents of Lisbon, Barcelona and Stockholm, which engage the various member states. This common strategy, by showing some elements of the *neo-liberal agenda in the field of education* (‘free choice’, managerialism, the market) – however mitigated by the inclusion of the criterion of social equity – accentuates the instrumental value of *acquirable school competences* (the link with the labour market). While this implies a strong emphasis on vocational education and training, it affects as a global discourse the differentiation between the areas of education and acts upon these boundaries by diminishing their relevance through the powerful ‘umbrella’ notion of ‘lifelong learning’, ‘knowledge or learning society’ which have a wider currency inside transnational policy discourses and policy educational elites (Lawn & Lindgard, 2002). In that respect, particularly relevant as policy technologies of translation of this strategy are: the market, managerialism and performativity (Ball, 1998). These policy technologies overlap and tend to activate a process of restructuring

schooling and practices by affecting subjectivities, identities and practices in the field of education. Here, I would like to draw attention to the principle of *performativity*, that is, the measurability of the results as a discrimination among school performances, and ‘good’ or ‘bad’ schools, and the process of *decentralisation* that tends to overcome the bureaucratic government of schools, in favour of a mode of steering educational organisational fields drawing more (at least in principle) on horizontal links among various institutions (what is sometimes called, with some emphasis, ‘governance’) (Ball, 1998; Magalhaes & Stoer, 2003).

Performativity is a ‘technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)’ (Ball, 1998, p. 45). It implies the setting up of monitoring systems and the production of information in such a way as to produce an ongoing struggle for visualising activities and outcomes, while engaged in the direct practices of teaching and learning, since it supports a view that only what can be measurable and visible is ‘good’, or worth to consider (the ‘terror of performativity’ described by Lyotard [1979]). The principle is applied to individuals, organisations as well as to countries, so that European statistics on education and large investigations become increasingly important as a tool to promote competitive performativities among western countries, or if we look at the European Lisbon strategy, among European countries.

Decentralisation accompanies this principle, since it comes through like ‘winds of change’ across all the educational systems by signalling the demise of state and the role of the state inside the welfare system in favour of greater ‘flexibility’ and, as suggested in a document of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (1997), a ‘devolved environment’. This seems to produce in some way an ‘eclipse of the educational bureaucracy’ (Benadusi & Landri, 2002), as the dominant mode of organisation of the public provision and regulation of the field of education in nation-states, and the emergence of new mode of governance, where it is possible to experiment, at least in principle, many forms of partnership among the many elements of the organisation field of education.

While these two homogenising forces, and the related elements of the market and managerialism, are well visible in many global discourses and documents of transnational education organisation (OECD and, in particular, European writings and reports since the approval of the Lisbon strategy and the reference to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) as a tool for reaching European benchmarks on education), these principles and technologies do not translate into policy texts and national practices in a direct or automatic way. A useful notion, in this case, is

to conceive the re-contextualisation as a translation (not as diffusion) which implies to consider the complex transformation of what is to be displaced and the site where the translation concretely occurs (Czarniawska-Joerges & Sevón, 1996; Ball, 1998). In order to understand how the re-contextualisation occurs and how the alignment develops empirically, I developed here an analysis of performances and of the decentralisation of a selected sample of countries drawing on Eurostat and OECD data as well as on a second-order reflection on the publications derived from Education Governance and Social Integration and Exclusion in Europe (EGSIE) (one of the most relevant European research on the new forms of governance), and the research I am involved in Italy. The cases I will consider are usually classified as belonging to the *Southern European Welfare Model*.

Comparative analysis of the forms of social policies distinguishes different modalities of *welfare capitalism* (Heidenheimer, 1986; Esping-Andersen, 1990). The most successful typology points out three models: (i) the *Scandinavian model*, that includes the North European countries with wider universalistic principles and insurances; (ii) the *Anglo-Saxon model*, drawing on individuals and on capabilities of autonomy, and that comprises the European countries English-speakers; and (iii) the *corporatist model*, where the social inclusion and social assistance are granted *via* work-related schemes and regard European countries of Central Europe. Further analysis led to distinguish the *Southern European Model* (Ferrera, 1996; 2000; Katrougalos & Lazaridis, 2002) by including the countries of then South Europe (Portugal, Spain, Italia, Greece) previously considered a variation of the corporatist model. The presentation of the Southern model was intended to draw attention on the uniqueness of those countries with respect to the other welfare models, and to reduce the possibility of interpretation that considers the difference in terms of backwardness. The debate and the research around the southern difference fed interesting discussions about how to consider the diversity of South Europe and the reason for this distinctiveness. I will explore if this difference applies also to the ways these countries align with the policy technologies of performativity and the process of decentralisation in the field of education. Elsewhere, it has been noted how the dominant mode of state architecture is a relevant aspect in the process of re-contextualisation, so that we have a path dependency from the prevailing institutionalised mode of regulation (Prokou, 2008).

## **Low performing systems of education?**

The countries of the Southern European model of welfare appear to be 'low performing' with regard to European benchmarks. Eurostat data induce us to underline the similarity of characteristics in the four countries with reference to

five key-indicators: (i) the level of achievement among the youth of the secondary degree of instruction; (ii) the percentage of young people leaving early the education and training system; (iii) the rate of adult population (between 24 and 61 years) who own an upper secondary school leaving certificate; (iv) the percentage of public education expense in reference to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP); and (v) the rate of adult population participating in education and training activities (the rate of participation in *lifelong learning* systems).

With reference to the first indicator (see Table 1), the EU (27)<sup>2</sup> average is that 77.4% of young people aged between 20 and 24 years own at least the school leaving certificate of upper secondary school. In the countries of the Southern European model – with the exception of Greece, which presents a higher percentage (more than 80%) – the number of young people who own this certificate is inferior (the lowest share refers to Portugal, with a percentage lower than 50%). Throughout the decennium (1995-2005), however, these percentages have been in constant growth, underlining the efforts operated by the countries in raising the degree of completion of upper secondary school for an always-wider quota of young people.

*TABLE 1: Population aged 20-24 years with at least upper secondary school level education*

<b>EU/Country</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>
EU		76.6%	77.4%
Greece	73.8%	79.2%	84.1%
Spain	59.0%	66.0%	61.8%
Portugal	45.1%	43.2%	49.0%
Italy	58.9%	69.4%	73.6%

Source: Eurostat

The data concerning early school leavers (see Table 2) confirm that there is a high level of school drop-outs in the Southern European model. It means that a high rate of young people, for different reasons, leave education and training opportunities permanently, and, consequently, seem to display a less than sufficient repertoire of competence/knowledge. Here, as before, the best

performance is given by Greece, with a portion slightly better than the EU(27) average of 15.6%. Portugal, Spain and Italy, instead, register a very high percentage: almost 22% in Italy, almost 31% in Spain and almost 39% in Portugal. These figures indicate that, notwithstanding the efforts carried out in recent years to reduce the phenomenon, there is a range of young people aged between 18 and 24 who, after having reached the end of compulsory schooling, are not involved in any educational and training activity.

*TABLE 2: Population aged 18-24 with at most compulsory school level of education and not involved in any education and training*

<b>EU/Country</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>
EU		17.6%	15.6%
Greece	22.4%	18.2%	13.3%
Spain	33.8%	29.1%	30.8%
Portugal	41.4%	42.6%	38.6%
Italy	32.8%	25.3%	21.9%

Source: Eurostat

The data concerning the school leaving certifications in the adult population (see Table 3) confirm that, in the Southern European model of welfare, there is neither an orientation toward the attainment of high school certificates nor a particular interest in formal activities of education and training. In these countries, the range of adult population (25-64 years) with at least the upper secondary school certification is considerably inferior to the EU average (slightly more than 69% in 2005): the lowest result refers to Portugal (26.5%), but low values also concern Spain (48.5%), Italy (50.4%) and Greece (60.0%) – which, although decidedly the highest figure, is still inferior to the EU(27) average.

In a similar way, in these countries, the percentage of the adult population, aged between 25 and 64 years, who participate to *lifelong learning* initiatives (see Table 4) is quite modest. With the exception of Spain which, in 2005, presented a rather odd figure compared to the decennium trend, we note a percentage oscillating around 5% in Italy and Portugal, and an even lower percentage (around 2%) in Greece.

*TABLE 3: Adult population (25-64 years) with at least upper secondary level certification*

<b>EU/Country</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>
EU		64.4%	69.3%
Greece	42.6%	51.6%	60.0%
Spain	29.5%	38.6%	48.5%
Portugal	21.9%	19.4%	26.5%
Italy	36.3%	45.2%	50.4%

Source: Eurostat

*TABLE 4: Adult population (25-64 years) engaged in lifelong learning*

<b>EU/Country</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>
EU		7.1%	9.7%
Greece	0.9%	1.0%	1.9%
Spain	4.3%	4.1%	10.5%
Portugal	3.3%	3.4%	4.1%
Italy	3.8%	4.8%	5.8%

Source: Eurostat

Moreover, the lack of attractiveness of the school leaving certificate and the functioning difficulties of schools go together with low investments in education as a percentage of public expenditure (see Table 5). Among the countries of the Southern European model, Portugal (5.61%) spends more than the EU average on education as a percentage of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Comparable figures for Italy and Spain are respectively 4.74% and 4.28%. Finally, Greece (3.94%) invests the least in education among the countries of the Southern European model.

TABLE 5: Spending on education as a percentage of GDP

EU/Country	1995	2000	2003
EU			5.17%
Greece	2.87%	3.71%	3.94%
Spain	4.66%	4.28%	4.28%
Portugal	5.37%	5.42%	5.61%
Italy	4.85%	4.47%	4.74%

Source: Eurostat

A further signal of the ‘weakness’ of these school systems comes from the PISA 2003 survey, which assessed the competences of students aged 15 at the end of the compulsory school, by focusing on a whole frame of skills (literacy, mathematics and science) considered to be central under the profile of employability and social inclusion. In this survey (see Table 6), students from countries of the Southern European model reached average scores that were decidedly inferior to the average score of the other countries participating in the assessment exercise (conventionally fixed at 500)<sup>3</sup>. This concerned all three competencies; in this sense, we can say that the performances in Greece, Portugal, Spain and Italy were constantly below average.

In addition, a detailed look at the degrees of achievement of competence indicates that there is a small area of excellent competences (percentages of responses more than 7) and a relatively large area of very low competences (percentages of responses less than 1). If we follow this logic, we deal with responses showing the presence of a *relatively extended area of school weakness* and, at the same time, a *rather reduced area of school top performances*. These findings probably suggest a still high degree of *elitism* informing these schooling systems.

At the same time, however, we need to consider the differences and the specificities of the performances. In some cases, the *territorial inequalities* can play an important role in explaining the pattern of data. In the Italian and Spanish cases, they have a valuable relevance; they seem to be less important in the Greek and Portuguese cases, where the signalled characteristics present greater uniformity. The Spanish institutional structure which considers the presence of a vast pluralisation of its autonomies also implies a differentiation in the education



TABLE 6: Average scores on the PISA 2003 survey (average ACDE = 500)

Country	Literacy	Mathematics	Science
Greece	472	445	481
Spain	481	485	487
Portugal	478	466	468
Italy	476	466	486

Source: OECD PISA 2003

levels, with a concentration of educational poverty and of functioning difficulties of the school system in specific areas of the country. In the Italian case, in a similar way, the difference between the North and the South implies a concentration of problematic aspects in the South.

Finally, the performances of the single countries depend also on *different starting conditions*. Among the Southern European countries, Portugal is characterised by very high figures of *early school leavers* (almost 40%), the lowest percentage of young people with an upper secondary school title, and the highest percentage of public spending on education in terms of GDP. Spain and Italy reveal, instead, percentages that place them in a relatively middle situation. But while Greece registers the most positive figure in terms of young people with an upper secondary school title, its percentage of public expenditure on education is the lowest among these countries (the estimate is almost 3.5 %) and is considerably inferior to the EU average (superior to 5%).

## The ‘statist’ legacy

The dynamism of the alignment, in the last ten years, of the countries of the Southern European model with respect to the drive to decentralisation reveals the importance of the architecture of the state in the process of re-regulation. In the following paragraphs, the analysis of the national strategies of each country will allow us to point out, when focusing in greater depth, the *nuances* of this displacement.

## The enduring centralisation in Greece

The case of Greece indicates that the tendency toward the decentralisation of school systems is not a taken for granted end-result of the translation in practice of the knowledge society. We can say that in the European landscape and in the context of the Southern European model, it rather represents a case of persistent *bureaucratic centralism*, still resisting in the face of the considerable expansion of the educational provision and of the efforts carried out during the last 25 years in the democratisation and modernisation of the educational system (Zambeta, 2002; Gouvias, 2007).

An important turning point in the educational policies took place at the end of the 1990s. In the new climate of the 1990s, there was a decisive move toward the keywords of the market and of globalisation: ‘flexibility’, ‘competence’, and ‘decentralisation’. The reform of 1997, with the approval of Law 2525 and the related decrees of implementation, marked an important step in the restructuring of the Greek school system: the proposal of the institution of the ‘integrated lyceum’, that is, a form of secondary school aimed at giving the students those abilities which will help the Greek students to gain an easier access, after further training and educational paths, to the job market (Gouvias, 2007). This reform was accompanied, through the communitarian funding in the period 2000-2006 (OPEIVT), by a considerable impulse of financial resources (10 million euro) toward the schools and the universities of the country, multiplying both the private and the public formative provision, and translating itself into schools and courses in the first and second level sectors of Vocational Education and Training (VET), and in the development of a permanent e-learning education.

These fundings tended to create a system of VET. In the emerging system, however, the participation of other *stakeholders* still seemed weak, while the role of central bureaucracies was overrepresented (Gouvias, 2007). As far as decentralisation goes, the 1997-1998 reforms seem not to have produced the effective devolution of powers and competences. Bureaucratic government still prescribes in detail the school timetables, the proceedings of certification and evaluation, salary levels and the mechanisms of the professional careers of the teachers.

## Decentralisation through school autonomy

### *The case of Portugal*

Portugal, instead, represents a case of *decentralisation through school autonomy*. In the last 15 years, according to the results of the research on school governance in Portugal, the most meaningful changes have concerned: (i) the extension of compulsory instruction; (ii) the increase in the rates of participation

to the various levels of the school system; and (iii) the programme of education reforms in the 1990s (Alves & Canario, 2002). The democratisation of access to the various levels of instruction has meant an increase in the demand for education and training. The boom started at the primary level with the extension of compulsory schooling to nine years (the compulsory period is now from 6 to 15 years in the *ensino básico*), but it also concerned the various segments of the school system up to the upper secondary school. The opening of the system to mass schooling also produced some difficulties due to the deep change of the school audience, now characterised by an heterogeneity of families and by a mixture of social classes, so that, as it has been noted, the advent and the consolidation of mass schooling has also meant, at the same time, its crisis and the need for reforms (Magalhaes & Stoer, 2003). These reforms were, however, developed very late, and meant, according to some scholars, the import of policies already realised elsewhere ten years earlier (Alves & Canario, 2002). Particularly relevant was the intervention to produce changes in the education governance, which focused attention on the schools, and its organisation arrangements.

In this sense, the key-concepts of the reforms have been the autonomy and the *self management* of schools, the participation of social actors, identified as the *stakeholders* of the school service, and the necessity to redefine the role of the state toward the competences of regulation, *mentoring*, monitoring and financing. In Portugal, the school autonomy intersects, at the local level, with the competences attributed to the municipalities<sup>4</sup>. They actually intervene in the institutions of pre-compulsory schools, in the area of *ensino básico* (financial investments), in school transportation, in student residencies, and in the sector of adult education. On the efficacy of such a choice of decentering, the positions are diversified: there are some who appreciate the enlargement of the margins for manoeuvre; there are also those who observe that it has not affected the everyday practices of the school service, and that it has translated into an increase in the organisation of work and committees (Alves & Canario, 2002).

### *The case of Italy*

In the second half of the 1990s, after a long period of normative stability and of practices of *non-decision making*, the Italian education system lived a phase of intense transformation which deeply changed, at least in normative terms, its institutional structure. Probably the development and intensity of such changes originated in the alignment of more *action nets* (Landri, 2002): the process of change in public administration, that is, the reformulation of the role of the state, and the changes in the relationship between public administrations and citizens (Benadusi & Consoli, 2004); the influence of EU policies; and a period of strong

government (Ventura, 1998), when the government was able to carry out fundamental political choices in the field of education and training.

In Italy, three are the trajectories along which the process of *policy* change takes place: (i) the attribution of autonomy to the school establishments; (ii) administrative decentralisation; and (iii) the re-shaping of the education curriculum. The discourses supporting school autonomy are similar to those accompanying the decentring route in the other countries of the Southern European model. Therefore, in the frame of a more general process of reform in public administration, single school establishments were attributed financial, organisational and didactic autonomy.

The school autonomy and the re-shaping of the school curricula are accompanied by a reconfiguration of the governance system of education, which redefines the competences of the different institutional involved actors (state, regions, local autonomies, and autonomous institutes) while delineating a new organisational field (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991), the system of education and training, characterised, in comparison with the formula of the preceding government, by a tendency to the pluralisation of its actors (Benadusi & Landri, 2002; Grimaldi & Landri, 2006).

In this case, as in Portugal, the institutional strategy developed in a top-down direction, in the first instance privileging the autonomy of the single school establishment, and only later starting the process of redefining the organisation field with the participation of the other institutional actors. Even more complex seems to be the re-shaping of the curricula. Here, two reforms – the first one promoted by the then minister, Enrico Berlinguer, and a second one by the subsequent centre-right minister, Letizia Moratti, known as *Riforma Moratti* – have not been implemented (Landri, 2002).

## **Decentralisation: the role of autonomous communities in Spain**

In Spain, decentralisation follows the constitutive elements of the state (the local communities). Actually, the Spanish constitution recognises the role of the autonomous communities; they have a considerable say in different *policies* which they govern with the central state. Here, decentralisation develops in a bottom-up way, since it has been sustained by the different political and cultural components of the diverse communities. Moreover, we can observe that it coincides with the transition to the democratic regime during the 1970s (after Franco's death), and involved the setting up and implementation of mass schooling. In 1990, however, a new act on education (LOGSE) started the democratisation of the system in a decisive manner, through the accentuation of

the relevance of compulsory education and the extension of the period of obligatory schooling (up to 16 years). Its rooting in the autonomous communities (and in other fields of *policy-making*) mirrors a linguistic differentiation which is entirely recognised in the school field. This is to say that the institutional field of school in Spain is characterised by a model of governance that considers the distribution of powers and of competences among the state, the autonomous communities, the local administrations and schools. This model of governance has effects on the curriculum content, which can be diversified in the compulsory and post-compulsory schools, in accordance with the autonomous communities. In the case of compulsory schools, for instance, the state determines 55% (in the Spanish-speaking communities) and 65% (in the communities of other recognised languages) of the contents of the central curriculum; the autonomous communities decide on their own the content and curricula of the remaining quota (between 45% and 35%, the first level of responsibility); the schools develop such curricula on the local plane (the second level of responsibility); and, finally, the single classes and the teachers implement and adapt the curriculum to the need of the students. The diversification of the institutional model on the territory produces, in some cases, an excessive emphasis of what is 'unique' in each community, albeit, in a certain sense, counterbalanced by agencies tending the co-ordination, co-operation and collaboration. There are, in this sense, some organisations which are responsible for this task: the *Conferencia de los Consejeros de Educación*; the *Instituto de la Calidad y Evaluación* (INCE), and the *Consejo Escolar del Estado*. This complex design of governance, however, does not seem sufficient to contrast the social differences in Spain. The presence of a dual system within the compulsory school (a strong sector of private instruction), further reinforces the phenomena of school segregation, while producing vicious circles of 'impoverishment' of the quality of the public service (Pereyra, 2002).

## Discussion

The analysis of the performances of these countries and of the process of changing governance in schooling indicates the *permanence of distinctiveness*, that is, a 'fatigue' in the re-contextualisation of policy technologies of the Europeanisation of schooling. This has been mainly interpreted along two main lines: a former focusing on *macro-social aspects* and a latter drawing on the conditions of *organisational fields of those countries*. One could add to these reflections the interesting anthropological view which could draw attention on the cultural construction of 'distinctiveness'. These perspectives represent and

account for what is occurring while they provide different enactments of the social (Law & Urry, 2004), that is, they are intellectual technologies treating 'distinctiveness' differently (Edwards, 2004).

### *Macro-social aspects*

A large amount of literature tackles this issue with regard to these countries' difference in terms of the *regime of social protection* and *welfare state* (Liebfred, 1992; Ferrera, 1996; Katrougalos & Lazaridis, 2002), and extends the debate by including the *family models* and the *care regimes* (Jurado Guerrero & Naldini, 1997; Saraceno, 2000). Other research highlights identity in terms of a 'Southern European social model' (Karamessini, 2007) which refers to a specific mode of social reproduction in a particular national/cross-national/regional context in a given period, which basically includes an employment and a welfare regime. Similarly, Mingione (2002) suggests that South-European countries – notwithstanding national, regional and local differences – belong to the *same model of capitalist development* which gives rise to a labour-market structure whose main characteristics are the strong economic role of the family and a not fully proletarianised condition of workers. These features tend to endure and to create *path-dependency*. If we followed this line of interpretation, the commonalities of the countries in terms of indicators of performance and organisation of school systems, at least in the basic characteristics, should be interpreted as a (natural?) *consequence* (almost a reflection) of this history and common development. Here, the 'low educational orientation' of the population, the underdevelopment of vocational education and training, the elitism of the structures and practices, the attainment of 'on the job' labour market skills, the centralised bureaucracy of the educational system, etc. seem to be characteristic of the capitalist development model or the social model of reproduction of this group of countries.

### *The institutional conditions*

This latter interpretation should also be complemented by considering the results of a new institutionalism in education (Meyer & Scott, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 2006). This tradition of inquiry has identified the dynamics of educational organisations and, in particular, has framed within the context of 'loose coupling' most of the contribution to education research frequently invoked to explain the weak ties in case of the links between the structure and the practice of schooling, and the not-so-strong relationship between policy and administration. While sometimes the notion of 'loose coupling' has been misused, and is being considered in a

reflexive way within the same new institutionalism because of the recent trend in institutional change (Meyer & Rowan, 2006), in our case it draws attention to the conditions which favour the (re)production of the permanence of the distinctiveness, and those dynamics which can alter the *punctuated equilibrium* of an institutional setting. Here, the distinctiveness loses the sense of uniqueness and comes to be interpreted as *institutional inertia*, that is, as a ‘difficulty’ in abandoning the centralised legacy which is revealed in the fragmentation of the organisational fields disabling school performances and organisations.

Here, the different strategies of decentralisation are affected by the legacy of the state-form: Greece maintains and defends its mainly bureaucratic and centralistic model of organisation, and resists, in a decisive way, what is considered the neo-liberal agenda in the field of educational policies; Portugal and Italy follow the path of autonomy of their school institutes, which can be considered as a strategy maintaining a certain centralisation but which opens up opportunities for co-participation in the sector’s *policy-making* process; Spain orientates toward a decentred model of governance, where the local communities play the decisive role in the determination of the educational policies. Such strategies reflect diversity in the more or less decentred and plural *state models* of the different countries; in this sense, the redefinition of the role of the state and of its competences has considerable relevance, because the decentring strategies imply the development of different capacities/competences of governance. In particular, the passage to decentred governance may entail the shrinking of the public sphere (and of the role of the state) with negative effects in the field of social inequalities, which are already well represented in the ordinary performances of the social systems of the Southern European model.

### *The cultural construction of ‘distinctiveness’*

The anthropological view focuses the reflection on the ‘distinctiveness’ of the system, and about the practical purposes of the reciprocal positionings which lead to the attribution of identity and difference (Varenne & McDermott, 1995). In a *cultural view*, in particular, the focus is on the cultural construction of ‘distinctiveness’. The difference of the Southern European countries can be considered in a deficit manner, that is, as a deprivation by assuming European standards and the entire set of benchmarks as ‘objective’ measures of the imagined European education welfare system. More or less explicitly, the ‘deprivation approach’ assumes that it is possible to define what a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ educational performance is and an ideal organisation of school governance; this lack is also more or less associated with the idea of an impoverished experience in these countries with regard to the education-work realms. However, the distinctiveness

can be regarded simply as a *difference*, and the uniqueness as an expression of cultural diversity: here, we have many cultures of education and learning, and not a dominant European educational culture that defines what a good performance is and what is not. Still, in adopting a cultural approach we draw attention to the *action-nets* which produce situated conditions of assessment where Southern European countries can display their distinctiveness. In other words, we pay attention to how they are made 'distinctive' through a set of arrangements. And this leads us to reflect on the dominant logics of performativity and accountability which emphasises what can be measured and applied to discriminate between 'good' or 'bad' performance of educational systems. In this way, it is possible to analyse the role of transnational actor systems in education, and in particular in what supports the construction of supranational educational space at the European level. This line of inquiry reveals the socio-technical networks attached to the performance of a distinctive Southern European system.

## Concluding remarks

The article has analysed the performances and the strategies of decentralisation of governance of schooling in the countries of the so-called Southern Welfare State Model. This reveals a *permanence of distinctiveness*, that is an improvement, yet a persistent gap in aligning with European standards and benchmarks of the Lisbon strategy and a complex drift in moving toward the decentralisation of the schooling systems. Three complementary lines of interpretation (a macro-social, an institutionalist and a cultural approach) may be helpful in understanding and making this difference. Further research is needed to deepen our understanding of the effects of the Europeanisation of schooling in those countries and, particularly, on the influence of the entire 'reform package' for those systems of instruction.

## Notes

1. Kuhn (2007) offers a vast ranging analysis of *learning society* politics. For the Italian case, see Landri & Maddaloni (2007) in the same volume.
2. The EU expanded to 27 countries in 2004. Consequently, for EU(27) data refer to the 2005 entries in the data tables.
3. This paper was completed before the publication of the results of the PISA study of 2006. However, the analysis of these recent results does not modify the main arguments presented here in a substantial way (see [www.pisa.oecd.org](http://www.pisa.oecd.org)).
4. In Portugal there are two autonomous regions: Madeira and the Azores Isles, which enjoy a considerable autonomy in the organisation also on the level of school and education politics.



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