



WHAT WORKS IN INNOVATION IN EDUCATION

ITALY: A SYSTEM IN TRANSITION CASE STUDIES FROM TWO SCHOOLS

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Background and Context

The Italian school system: A brief background

The 1962 unification of the lower secondary schools and the extension of compulsory schooling through the age of 14 are perhaps the most significant innovations of Italian school policy in the post-World War II period. Work, including apprenticeship, was made illegal for children under the age of 15. Between 1962 and the early 1980s upper secondary school attendance tripled as an indirect consequence of the law, as well as the post-War baby boom in Italy.

Yet, the development of a single path for lower secondary school students has long been viewed as incomplete: while more students have had access to higher levels of education, schools have not provided the support necessary for students to succeed. Secondary schools have become a kind of “passing channel” between compulsory school and university. The rate of school failure also increased after 1962.

In 1976, several Italian scholars succeeded in calling attention to the need for better assessment instruments as a way to fight school failure and to strengthen pedagogy, citing positive empirical results. [see for example, Calonghi, (1976); Vertecchi, (1976)] These researchers share a common conception of the school as a promoter of democracy and participation, and therefore advocated the development of assessment systems that avoid the selection and early exclusion of students, particularly students from the lower socio-economic classes. In 1977, the Italian parliament authorized legislation for the creation of a national “valuation form” as a way to track individual student progress and address school failure.

The valuation form was a key catalyst in influencing changes at the case study schools explored below. Nevertheless, Ministry officials note that teaching remains fairly traditional in the majority of schools, reporting that “Active didactics, group work, *cooperative learning* are forms that are beginning to be more frequent in nursery and primary school, while they are still rare experiences in the secondary school....” (MIUR, 2003, p. 109)

The Italian parliament authorised a series of major reforms to the school system between 1997 and 2003. As a result of these reforms, the Ministry of Instruction and University Research (MIUR) is now in the process of developing new systems for school and teacher evaluation, testing, sharing of best practices, the establishment of standards, greater emphasis on tailoring of curriculum to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body, and the establishment of class co-ordinators to help meet individual student needs.

Reforms authorised in March 2003 incorporate the principle of “personalizzazione” (personalisation) as a way to reinforce formative assessment in more Italian classrooms at the lower secondary level, as well as differentiation of curricular content and tasks to address learning and cultural differences and special educational needs. The bill emphasises the “laboratorio didattico” (learning laboratory) as a way to tailor teaching methods and to provide students with the chance to integrate learning from different classes. The bill also introduces the position of tutor/coordinator for each class. The co-ordinator is to be responsible for gathering information on students, talking with families, and lining up resources for students. This new role, which will be filled by individuals with teaching qualifications, may prove an important resource for helping create the conditions amenable to greater use of formative assessment teaching methods in more Italian classrooms.

Assessment in Italian Schools

In 1976, several Italian scholars succeeded in calling attention to the need for better assessment instruments as a way to fight school failure and to strengthen pedagogy. They demonstrated the value of new approaches with positive empirical evidence [see for example, Calonghi, (1976); Vertecchi, (1976)]. A number of other scholars have contributed to the understanding of individual student assessment, and actively promoting the use of better tools and methods for student assessment in schools [see, for example, G. Domenici (2000); Guasti (1998); Laneve (2003)]. These researchers share a common conception of the school as a promoter of democracy and participation. They encourage the development of evaluation systems that avoid selection and early exclusion of students, particularly students from the lower classes and the development of shared, scientifically based, rational, and to the degree possible – objective – evaluation to as a tool to promote learning, rather than to sort students.

In 1977, the Italian parliament authorized legislation for the creation of a national “valuation form” as a way to track individual student progress and addressing school failure. The valuation form (which has been revised for the lower secondary schools three times since 1980) requires teachers to compile data on their students, including information on the teaching, discipline, and results of evaluation (including social, behavioural, cognitive and meta-cognitive). The form is intended to serve as a means of facilitating communication between school leaders, teachers and students. Students are to be kept informed of the preliminary planning of the subjects and of implementation plans, and of marks (which for primary and lower secondary students, are qualitative rather than quantitative) when they are reported in the register.

This form was a key catalyst in influencing changes at the case study schools explored below. Nevertheless, Ministry officials note that teaching remains fairly traditional in the majority of schools. As a report on teacher status in Italy notes:

Active didactics, group work, cooperative learning are forms that are beginning to be more frequent in nursery and primary school, while they are still rare experiences in the secondary school. Teachers complain about a remarkable increase in work not directly carried out in classes (i.e. planning with colleagues) and a considerable open-mindedness regarding new information technologies and communication. From this point of view the impression is that teachers are aware of the need of innovation and, at the same time, they resist in front of tasks for which they do not feel professionally prepared. (MIUR, 2003, p. 107)

Reforms authorized in March 2003 incorporate the principle of *personalizzazione* as a way to reinforce formative assessment in more Italian classrooms at the lower secondary level. The reforms emphasise the importance of differentiation of curricular content and tasks to address learning and cultural differences and special or different educational needs of them. The reforms also encourage teachers by pitching classes to different levels, and/or by creating special elective projects. The reforms emphasise the importance of the *laboratorio didattico* (learning laboratory) as a way to tailor teaching methods. The learning laboratory is intended to provide students with the chance to integrate learning from different classes, and to study subjects in greater depth. In addition, the reform introduces the position of tutor/coordinator for each class. The co-ordinator is to gather data from students, talk with families, and line up resources for students. This new role, which will be filled by individuals with teaching qualifications, may prove an important resource for helping create the conditions amenable to greater use of formative assessment teaching methods in more Italian classrooms.

Evaluation and secondary levels of assessment in Italian schools

Recent reforms to the Italian school system also encourage greater school and teacher self-evaluation, emphasising interactive monitoring and targeted support of school-level improvement programmes.

Since 1974, secondary schools have been required to develop a class council, composed of teachers of the same class and four elected parents' representatives. The class council formulates educational and teaching plans, follows the progress of teaching and discipline, develops supplementary activities and carries out the periodical and final assessment of pupils. Teachers are responsible for development of the plan of formative offer (the POF) – which is to include a description of: the organisation of classes and teaching time, school-based research and development and teaching methodologies to be used in meeting educational objectives. The POF is formally approved by two parent and two student representatives. While data on student learning gathered over the year for the POF could also be used to inform and adjust teaching methods in the subsequent year, at this point it is not a common practice.

More recent reforms – still under development – are intended to encourage the development of new approaches to school and teacher self-evaluation as a form of professional learning and improvement in teaching. There is some concern, however, that these reforms are under-funded, and do not provide teachers with adequate time to adapt new practices (for example, teachers now have less time for research and co-operative teaching). These reforms are explored in greater depth in section three, following presentation of the case studies.

The Case Studies

Bari – Michelangelo School

La scuola media statale Michelangelo, located in the City of Bari in southern Italy, is attended by children from high and middle class families. There are 684 students at the school, and no more than twenty-six students in each class (this is the legal limit for class size in Italy). The school is highly rated in the area and attracts students not only from the city, but also from nearby local government areas.

The school provides core classes as required by the national curriculum, and offers several optional classes where students can pursue particular interests more deeply, such as journalism, health education, music, animation-dramatisation, chemistry, and so on. In Italy, students stay in the same classes together for the three years that they are in the lower secondary school. Incoming students are placed in heterogeneous groups, so that each class includes students of varied abilities, personalities, and backgrounds. Students with disabilities are integrated into core classes, a common practice in Italy since the 1980's, and also have additional special education classes. There is a support teacher if there are students with disabilities in the core class.

The Michelangelo School is known in the region for its varied approaches to student assessment. Parents in the study focus group mentioned that this was one of the reasons they chose to send their children to this school. The school head and teachers stress that they are concerned with the “whole formative process – curriculum, children's personal enrichment, the building of children's abilities through interdisciplinary activities...,” and so on. The following sections explore teaching repertoires and assessment practices at the school.

Multiple Forms of Assessment

Like other schools in Italy, teachers at the Michelangelo School have been using the national valuation form since 1977. Between 1985 and 1995, the Michelangelo School was among a small number of schools selected by the Italian Ministry of Education to participate in a project to revise the national valuation form. Several of the teachers who participated in the demonstration project are still at the school. They recall that the experience of working on this project helped to shape a strong working relationship among them. In 1995, the current valuation form became a part of regular practice in Italian schools. Teachers at the Michelangelo School have continued to discuss and revise their approaches as a group, and

have taken the assessment process much further than required. They have created their own forms to gather additional data on student learning, and use these data to inform their teaching.

Diagnostic assessment

Students are assessed when they first enter the Michelangelo School. Assessment tests are used to gauge students' abilities, acquired knowledge, and learning styles. Teachers use this information to shape their initial lesson plans, and to ensure that they have the right kinds of resources on hand to satisfy the variety of learning needs in the class.

Scheduled observations

Teachers also schedule structured and semi-structured observations to gauge students' competence at specific stages of the learning process. Teachers at this school told us that they plan feedback activities so that they can create the time and space for interaction, and better diagnose students' learning needs and shape feedback. Formative assessments are intended to assist students in the learning process and at the end of paths to review and revise, to reinforce what they have studied previously, to help students apply previous learning in new situations, or to deepen and enrich their knowledge. Teachers at the Michelangelo School judge student performance in the formative process according to criteria they established through their own research and study on pedagogy and didactics and in departmental work groups. Teachers note that they are always revising the criteria they use in order to refine their techniques and to keep their work fresh.

Teachers have developed the habit of asking students open-ended questions so that they can make better informal assessments of students' understanding, and encourage students to develop the skills of self-evaluation and self-correction. By helping students to diagnose the initial source of a misunderstanding, they guide them toward the habit of self-correction.

Teachers at Michelangelo gave described how they might use ongoing classroom assessment to expose and address learning needs. For example, students are often asked to read aloud in a class. During such exercises, the teacher is able to assess the student's attention and comprehension to the passage he is reading. If the reading is slow or syllabic, the student has made technical mistakes or reads mechanically, the teacher might ask the student if he knows the meaning of a mispronounced word (which might also help the teacher to assess whether the student has a physical, visual or phonetic disability, or a problem of attention). After the teacher has dealt with any technical, psychological or emotional difficulties, the next step is to ask the student to read for general understanding, and to analyse the meaning of the text. At this point, the student should be ready to synthesize answers to factual questions, and to offer solutions to problems raised in the text. Throughout this interaction, the teacher is able to get an idea as to whether the student might benefit from extra resources.

In addition, teachers encourage "assisted revisions" in which the student is asked to give his own assessment of his performance, and to explain how he has arrived at an answer. In this way, the teacher helps students to develop problem-solving skills, such as breaking problems into parts in order to better understand, and then to reconstructing the problem, recognising and breaking flawed or unhelpful patterns and repeating the whole process independently.

The teachers review homework with students, correcting mistakes and guiding them toward the practice of self-correction, reflection on the work process, and review of sources. Students then have the opportunity to revise homework. Teachers also use test results to determine what interventions would be appropriate to meet students' learning needs.

Summative evaluations

Schools are required to evaluate students with reference to the Ministerial schemes and objectives in each of the disciplinary branches. The summative, or “global” evaluation occurs only after the “intermediate” process of teaching and learning. Teachers use oral and written tests, graphics (e.g., technical or artistic drawings, histograms, ideograms, aerograms, diagrams and conceptual maps to verify the acquisition of a system of interrelated body of knowledge through various modalities).

Students are evaluated and receive both “structural and semi-structural” written results every three to four months. They are assessed according to what they have learnt and their ability to integrate and use the learning more broadly. Students are also evaluated at the end of teaching modules. These more “summative” assessments focus on what competences the students have acquired.

Tracking student progress

Because there are not yet any nationally-defined learning standards, the class council develops objectives for the whole school, defines standards they want to meet, and the kind of teaching approach they will take to meet these standards and objectives. Teachers at the school have a policy of making the standards and evaluation criteria and how they relate to the learning objectives as clear as possible to students before they start a new assignment. Students receive feedback on their performance in relation to learning objectives. This practice is followed throughout the school, so students are quite used to this process. Teachers tend to follow a similar format for classes – a starter activity, discussion of lesson objectives, and sharing of criteria for good work.

Teachers track the performance of individual students over time, and share their assessment of students’ progress, or lack of progress, with them in the form of a graph. The graph is intended to make the assessment process transparent for teachers, and to encourage further student progress. Students interviewed for this study say that this graph helps them stay on track.

Teachers say that they’ve always talked about evaluation of students among themselves and with their students in a transparent way. If they give a student a bad assessment, they will discuss why they have made that decision. If some students receive a low mark, they are also asked to reflect on why they did not perform as well as they would have liked, and are given an opportunity to revise their work. (Note that in Italy, students don’t receive official marks until they are in upper secondary school. Instead, they receive qualitative marks as part of a more formal assessment every three to four months.)

The chance to revise work is an important feature of formative assessment. Students who receive average grades are asked to apply the principles and procedures they are learning in a variety of contexts. The teacher may also repeat various procedures, requiring students to use procedures and rules they are learning to their work. The students are considered “protagonists” in the learning process, and transparent evaluation is intended to enrich their own ability to revise and improve their work.

The classroom culture

Creating an environment where students feel safe to take risks

Teachers try to create an environment where students feel safe to take risks. They are careful to stress students’ positive qualities, not to discuss personal problems within the classroom, and in their interaction with parents, to deal only with the problems and potential capacities of their own children. They also comment that by focusing on students’ positive qualities, they hope to instil a certain resiliency in students.

The students themselves say they feel safe to make mistakes in the classroom – this is just part of the learning process. The students comment that they think it is important that their teachers are kind; this sometimes helps them to develop a greater interest in a subject than they might have in a stricter environment. They also say that since they have to come to school anyway, they appreciate when the teachers make it all a little lighter and more fun. More important, students comment, is the teacher's knowledge of the subject and ability to explain things to student and to understand the learners' perspective.

The learning and assessment process

Teachers comment that they are more concerned about enhancing the students' learning *process* than they are about the result. They feel it is essential to have some kind of instrument to gather information about how students are learning. For example, several of the teachers have developed "personalised booklets" on students' progress. In this way they can get to know each student better and can pass on a portrait of the student to other teachers. Teachers also keep graphs and tables tracking students' acquisition of knowledge, ability to comprehend, analyse, synthesise, and use various ways of expressing themselves. In this way they can compare their assessments of how students are doing with other teachers during the class council discussions. The discussions among teachers and the use of tracking tools also help to ensure that they are treating students equitably.

Teachers claim that formative assessment has changed their approach to teaching. They "lose" the leadership of the class, and become participants in discussions with the students. They may activate classroom discussion with techniques such as brainstorming, games, simulation, and other activities, and engaging students in a way that encourages spontaneous responses and creates a positive classroom climate. The teachers can also learn more about individual student's personalities and draw them into co-operative construction of knowledge.

In order to meet the needs of the individual students, teachers work hard to tailor interventions. Teachers draw from a variety of learning theories as they develop their teaching plans. However, the teachers say that they do not assume that the teaching methods are correct until they have seen that the methods and theories actually make an impact on student learning.

The students comment that the teachers often given them ideas on how to improve their own work – or may ask students who are participating in "empowered" groups (e.g., an optional advanced class on chemistry), with students in the mainstream class. Their peers serve as an important source of help. Students often ask each other questions. Students in a focus group organised for this study commented that often their peers are more direct, so it is easier to understand their explanations. Teachers also encourage peer interaction, believing that it is vital for students to develop empathy, to co-operate in their learning, and to make use of the resources that they can offer each other. They also believe that it is essential to ensure that no student is marginalised in class. They see group acceptance as essential for students if they are to overcome learning difficulties. Because the groups are heterogeneous, there is less chance that weak students will be left out. Teachers also ensure that peers are providing each other with good quality guidance by revising answers with the whole class.

Aiming toward student autonomy

Teachers observe that using formative assessment in their classrooms takes more time, but they also emphasise that by the students' third year, they recuperate much of this time because the students are much more autonomous. By year three, students are expected to have developed a relatively high level of

autonomy, the ability to “learn to learn,” and to make decisions for their own development.¹ This is the teachers’ ultimate goal in using formative assessment.

The students provided us with some evidence that they are indeed learning to be autonomous. As one year three student told us, if she doesn’t understand a new concept, she often tries to relate it to another subject, to understand the context better, or its relation to other ideas. In other words, she develops her own learning scheme. Ultimately, this student commented, it is up to us to learn. This sentiment was widely echoed across the classroom.

The Expansion of Teacher Repertoires: Integrated Approaches to Learning

An array of teaching practices

The teachers at Michelangelo School weave a variety of teaching approaches into their daily practice. A typical class might look at overall understanding of the subject and the context of the particular learning objective, the students’ ability to analyse significant parts of a text or subject, to interpret meanings, or to apply learning in other situations. Such checks on student comprehension might be adjusted according to the teaching method and goals.

Teaching methods include coaching, instruction, tutoring. The students say that the teachers use models as tools to help students understand problems, and that they are always concerned about cause and effect and how things relate to each other.

Gradual and cyclical learning paths

At the Michelangelo School, subjects are organised as triennial “paths”. In other words, the curriculum is developed for the full three years. At each year-level, students cover particular subjects, developing specific knowledge, concepts and abilities as appropriate for their age and prior knowledge and abilities. In the second and third years, teachers will re-address subjects already learnt, covering the subject in greater depth and breadth, building new data, concepts, abilities, skills and information. This “gradual” approach to learning allows students to cover subjects from their most simple to most complex level – for example, moving from consideration of the space around them (the school, the street) to the abstract concept of infinity. Students in a literature class may move from study of the fable in the first year, to (sometimes autonomous) study of novels, poetry, or epics by the third year.

Teachers have developed a variety of models for helping students to learn new concepts. These models may be textual, descriptive, analytical, or rhetorical. Teacher and students discuss the model thoroughly before students start to work on their own. Students say that they don’t study in a linear way – instead, they progress through concepts using models. Students often develop conceptual maps in order to see where a subject fits into the larger scheme. At the beginning of a new unit, they are likely to brainstorm about what they already know about a particular subject and how it relates to other subjects they have studied.

There are a variety of optional classes for students who would like to study a subject further, providing more individually tailored activities. Gifted and talented students might be steered toward these classes. Several of the classes are team taught. During one or two hours in the week, students will have two different teachers for Italian, science, math, and English. Two hours a week students have a laboratory. In

¹ The teachers at Michelangelo School talk about the need for students to develop an awareness and confidence in their abilities, knowledge, capabilities, and skills that can be applied to other contexts – referred to here as “learning to learn.”

the laboratory, they may have a chance to integrate what they are learning in different classes. The laboratories allow students, in heterogeneous groups, to study subjects over a longer period of time. Students rotate every trimester, and follow different subjects as part of an “operational package” addressing a specific theme. For example, in a mathematics laboratory, students examine elements of measurement in biology, chemistry, topology, and in logical games. In a language laboratory (covering both Italian and foreign languages), students put their language learning to use in creative writing and theatre. The laboratories are intended to highlight or draw out student interests, likes and dislikes.

The Michelangelo School takes its namesake seriously. There is student art on almost every wall in the school and the hallways and classrooms are bright and colourful. Students have painted the walls of the auditorium in the manner of Michelangelo’s murals in the Sistine Chapel. Art also serves as a medium for students to demonstrate what they are learning in other subjects, such as science. A current art display on walls throughout the school demonstrates what students have learnt about water, as part of a UNESCO sponsored project for 2003, the Year of Water.

The UNESCO project on the Year of Water, typifies the school’s interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning. Students have studied the environmental, political and social aspects of water on a global basis. The Michelangelo School is currently involved in several additional extra-curricular projects, including projects with a regional network of schools, and an exchange project with a lower secondary school in Oxford, England. In addition, the school has grants from the European Union Comenius programme (Comenius is a grant-making education programme of the European Union. The Comenius programme supports European co-operation on a range of educational projects, initiatives and professional development, for students of all ages). The Comenius projects include: evolution and revolution (the individuation of changes in the development of sciences and arts); magic in everyday life (for learning about popular traditions); equal opportunities (addressing the identity and role of women in social life). The school is also part of a regional network of schools, and has a partnership with a lower secondary school in Oxford, England. The interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning means that students are challenged to use their knowledge in a variety of contexts and ways.

Time to get to know students

Having the same class for three years means that the teachers have more opportunities to get to know their students, find out what works for them, and tailor their teaching more carefully. As teachers comment, “we know (our students) very well.” However, they also note that they “...don’t think they have sure and absolute recipes” and are “humbly aware in every moment of the complexity in working with human subjects whose answers are not always foreseeable.” They try to be creative, flexible, and self-critical in their work. Teachers engage in ongoing psycho-pedagogical and didactic action research, and construct and update a variety of teaching tools according to experiences and new needs.

Teachers teach classes as part of a team. Team teaching means that there are opportunities for some teachers to pay individual attention to students who need more help. Support teachers have the time and training to help adjust to the needs of the individual students.

The importance of school leadership

Italian school heads tend to fill more of an administrative role than an instructional leadership role. Nevertheless, teachers and observers of this school attribute the school’s success, in large part, to a series of strong school heads over the past twelve years (there have been three school heads in twelve years). Researchers had the opportunity to meet one of the heads who had been at the school twelve years ago. She recounted that the school was already participating in the demonstration project to revise the national valuation form when she arrived. Teachers had started to work as a group in order to figure out how to use

the form better, and develop their tools and materials to take student evaluation even further. The school head's role was important in helping to maintain a high level of collegiality – dealing with conflicts among teachers, and keeping the focus on the work.

At Michelangelo School, the recent school heads have also fostered an environment that has helped to maintain the school's focus on integrated learning and multi-faceted assessment. The current head teacher of the school started a year ago. He gets high ratings from parents, who praise his availability to parents, and the efforts he has made to maintain an environment where a lot of innovation and good practice can take place at the school. He brings strong experience with him, having helped to turn around a low-performing school in another area of Italy where he had been the school leader for six years. He has had the experience of seeing the evolution of a school – what it takes to make change happen over time, and to maintain a positive focus. He notes that at the previous school, one of his strategies had been to “to provide serenity during work, meaning to try and facilitate work.” He sees himself as a group leader, but not as a boss. The teachers make the decisions, he says, and he puts his energy into supporting those decisions that he also sees as priorities. He also works to smooth relationships and to promote worthwhile projects. He comments that because the teachers want their students to do well, particularly in the special projects when classes are competing for prizes, there is often a lot of rivalry and competition among them. This can be a good thing, but also has its negative aspects.

How teachers work together and learn from each other – knowledge management in the school

The teaching staff is at the school is very stable. Many of the teachers have been at the school for more than 20 years, and have spent most of their careers at this school. Several of the teachers are able to recount how they started working together on evaluation due to introduction of the valuation form in 1977, and later, as one of the vanguard schools implementing the revised valuation form. They told us that it was quite difficult to work as a team, at first, because they were not used to working in this manner, and because their involvement in the demonstration project involved extra “homework” for the teachers, as well as internal training.

Teachers continue to put in a lot of extra work. Usually, they arrive two to three weeks ahead of the students to prepare for the new school year. They describe this as quite an intensive period. At the end of the school year, teachers also stay later to reflect on work over the past year – and what they have learnt from the application of theory and research. During the year, the teachers have regular meetings in which they discuss the needs of the individual students. Teachers place a high value on the suggestions that emerge during discussions between colleagues and say that this kind of interaction leads directly to improved practice.

End of year activities highlight weak points of the school system where an intervention would be helpful in the next year. For example, the parents and students have expressed preference for school-wide projects as opposed to class projects, so the class council has adjusted planning accordingly. In addition, parents and students have requested greater transparency and communication in ongoing formative assessment. The class council has therefore published evaluation criteria and teachers make annotations in student diaries, and require parent signatures to ensure that they are also up to date on their child's progress.

Approximately ten per cent of the teaching staff will retire each year over the next five years. The school believes that the turnover will be gradual enough that they will be able to integrate new teachers and pass on knowledge fairly smoothly. They also feel confident that they will have highly qualified teachers coming into the school, as it is a school of choice for most teachers in the region.

Bridging theory and practice

During a focus group, one teacher noted, "...theory and practice basically are mixed and they help each other." Careful analysis of what is going on in classrooms, along with emphasis on teaching theory, has helped them to modify how they teach. They have used their analyses to develop interactive techniques, for example, spending more time on activities such as brainstorming and dialogue that places the student at the centre of the learning process. As a group, teachers have analysed issues related to the quality and quantity of feedback, levels of attention they give to individual students, student motivation, how to make group activities work (e.g., whether homogeneous groups work better), and the role of tutoring. The teachers have received training in cognitive psychology, and this has been very helpful in interactive lessons.

Teachers note that they had a "great theoretical impact on practical experience" during the time they were designated as a pilot school for revision of the national valuation form. They describe the process of the project as having included development of a hypothesis on assessment, verification of the hypothesis, and communication of the results.

As mentioned above, teachers at the school participate in action research. Teachers at the school are always in contact with the University of Bari – for their own research and professional development, and during student-teacher internships at the school and support teachers who complete apprenticeship hours at the school. The relationship with the University has been quite fruitful. They have been able to test the validity of various didactic innovations in history and science, for example. However, as the University-based expert notes, professors of education are not taught how to teach, so they are learning along the way, as well, about some of the more practical aspects of teaching and learning.

Professional Development

Teachers in the school are very involved many networks, including support for teachers of ICT, foreign languages and classroom support teachers. The teachers at this school train teachers and staff for a group of schools in the region. Other teachers in the region also come to the school to help run the training.

Teachers at the Michelangelo School also observe each other in the classroom setting – this is a rare exception in the Italian school system, where classroom observations by either fellow teachers or the school head are not part of the tradition. At the Michelangelo School, teachers usually observe colleagues working within their own subject area (e.g., mathematics teachers observe other mathematics teachers, literature teachers observe other literature teachers). Teachers say that classroom observations have been very helpful to them in diversifying their own repertoire of teaching techniques, in studying how such aspects as tone of voice, gestures, listening and flexibility affect interactions between the teacher and students. Teachers also learn from each other through their team teaching activities.

Several of the teachers participate in some kind of professional development every year and the teachers' training program is updated on an annual basis. Professional development activities may include refresher courses, or specially designed courses to meet particular needs of the school (this year teachers at the school have chosen to focus on science; last year, they chose to focus on history). During the year 2002- 03 academic year teachers were able to choose from a variety of training packages, such as: the use of new technological assets in the didactic processes; didactic organization for teaching "citizenship education and solidarity culture and human rights"; management and /administration of scientific laboratories; the implementation of intercultural education; evaluation and assessment for history classes. These training packages help teachers to incorporate the Ministry's goals for specific fields, such as environmental education, health, citizenship and intercultural relations, with the school's goals and objectives. In-service training involves external experts, and action research (including continuous study,

planning, experimentation and verification). Integrated training involves teachers in all the subjects taught at the school, which helps to reinforce changes and adjustment of teaching methods.

Relationships with parents

The school has a weekly “receiving hour” when parents can come to the school to meet with teachers. Once every four months, teachers schedule individual meetings with parents. There is also a schedule to talk with the school leader. Parents can also schedule meetings with the teacher or the school head. Parents note that the teachers and school head are always very available. Many of the parents at this school are quite involved, and make time to talk with teachers about how their children are doing in the classes, how they mature, their ability to grow, their relationships, respect for rules, and school and class project plans.

Strategic Planning at the School

Each year, the school develops a Plan of Formative Offer (POF). The POF is constructed around Ministerial curriculum requirements, but is strictly school-based. The POF is developed by teachers and parent representatives and includes overall learning objectives for course offerings. Teachers at Michelangelo take the POF seriously, and the parents participating in a focus group for this study say that the school’s careful attention to the POF is one of the things that they particularly appreciate about this school. The POF is based on prior year successes as well as lessons learnt.

Teachers and parents also try to keep the POF fresh. For example, at the beginning of the school year they decided together to focus on health and human rights. Teachers will all work to include something related to this focus in their class, or they might decide to co-teach for some activities (for example, science and geography teachers developed some units on health and human rights together).

During the school year, teachers report to the teachers’ council on their progress toward meeting objectives of the POF. Teachers and parents may also modify the POF. For example, during the 2002-03 school year, they felt it was important to address issues related to the war in Iraq, and modified the POF to include a school-wide unit (and to enter a region-wide competition) addressing the war begun during the 2002-03 school year.

The School has also made efforts to gather more data on parent expectations and student performance. In 1995, for example, the school implemented an evaluation on the “efficacy of the scholastic system” and also developed its own questionnaire on the efficacy of assessment at the school. Teachers, students and parents filled out the questionnaire. The teachers note that they were expecting a more “problematic” response from students and parents, but received generally good reviews. For those families and students that did note problems (e.g., students developing stereotypes about children), the council of teachers discussed approaches to solving those problems.

The questionnaire was very effective because it highlighted some motivations or some behaviours of students which otherwise would be bypassed or lost. Based on the information gathered in the survey, teachers developed indicators, and used these indicators to help them change their own behaviour toward students. For example, some teachers decided to approach a subject in a different way, to pay more attention to how students learn differently, and so on. The teachers at the school have worked for nearly ten years to deepen these strategies.

How do we know it's working?

Teachers note that several of their students have visited the school after they have moved on to upper secondary school. The students tell their former teachers that the learning and assessment techniques they acquired at the Michelangelo School have made them better students and provided them with an advantage in secondary school. They miss the type of interaction they had with their teachers at the Michelangelo School, finding their classes in upper secondary school to be very traditional.

Parents in the focus group organised for this study were quite positive about the school. They say that one of the reasons they send their children here is that they noticed that children that came here are now successful students. While this is hearsay evidence, it is nevertheless important.

Summary of Formative Assessment at the Michelangelo School

Several conditions have facilitated innovation at the Michelangelo School. These include the creation of the national valuation form, the school's participation in a 10-year national programme aimed at revising and refining the form, and national policy measures granting school self-governance [including the creation of a "board of teachers" (Collegio docenti) systematically focused on student needs have all been important at this school]. However, a number of school level factors have also been important to this school's progress. The school has benefited from a series of strong school leaders and strong staff leadership, low teacher mobility, a school culture that promotes learner-centred teaching and ongoing assessment as the most efficient approach to learning, openness to parent participation and criticism, and, a whole school approach to innovation have been vital to this school's evolution. The school has reaped many benefits as a result of their hard work and openness to new learning.

La scuola media unificata Testoni-Fioravanti, Bologna

The *Scuola media unificata Testoni-Fioravanti* in Bologna serves students in the neighbourhood of Bolognina. The area was revitalized in the 1960's, attracting new residents from the regional hinterland and from the south of Italy. It is now residential, semi-central, and is very well served by public transportation. Commerce and entrepreneurial activities are vibrant.

Residents in this area are socially diverse. The area, which was formerly the regional residential nucleus for blue-collar workers and farmers, has also recently attracted a middle class base – modifying the character of the area. At the beginning of the 1990's, the area became the home for a large community of Chinese, as well as Maghrabine, Romanian, Indian and Pakistani immigrants (the composition of this immigration follows the general wave in Italy). The school has developed programmes to meet the needs of the local population, including specific initiatives for immigrant children and their parents.

The lower secondary school is part of a comprehensive institute – and includes a pre-school, primary school and lower secondary school. The school head oversees both the primary and the lower secondary schools, and had a second primary school added to her charge in Autumn 2003. The current school head has been at the school for three years. The school hosts apprenticeship teachers of the *Scuola di Specializzazione per Insegnanti Secondari (SSIS)*² and the University of Bologna.

The majority of the teachers in the school are certified. In the last three years, only a handful of teachers have requested transfers – a very good indicator of the school's quality. An additional indicator of quality is the enrolment and distribution of these children, following completion of lower secondary

² Since 1999, the SSIS has been the only academic post-graduate school for pre-service teacher training in Italy. The SSIS provides academic training, and requires students participate in secondary school.

school. According to school administrators, approximately 30 per cent of the students go on to Liceo (high school), 30 per cent go on to an Istituto Tecnico (technical institutes – 5 year schools that may be followed by further university-level study over two years), and 30 per cent choose to go to Istituti Professionali (vocational training – 5 year terminal degrees).

The following sections explore assessment at the school, and examine teaching repertoires, which shape the context for formative assessment at the school.

Assessment at the School

The teachers at this school first developed a “whole-school” approach to change in 1980, following introduction of the national valuation system. In response to the new national assessment forms, teachers worked together to develop a valuation instrument that would meet their own needs within the school. The school’s valuation form ranks student performance in subject areas as “optimum, distinct, good, sufficient, or insufficient.” Teachers also track each student’s overall level of maturation, including their ability to respect rules, establish good relationships with peers and teachers, and to engage in learning and contribute to the class. Teachers also follow the development of students’ autonomy (including their ability to organise themselves and develop good work habits), attention in class, ability to comprehend and analyse information, and to make links between subject areas.

Diagnostic and ongoing assessment

Welcoming of new students is very caring and individualized. In December and January, before enrolment, parents can attend an assembly with the head of the school and with teachers who will explain the school’s plan of formative offer (the POF). The incoming students who are in the last year of primary school in the territorial area are also invited to visit this lower secondary school before and after enrolment to learn about the organization of the school. Usually teachers hold individual meetings with the parents of each incoming student starting February of the year that precedes the beginning of the new school year. This colloquium helps families to decide whether they are comfortable with their choice of school.

The school administers some disciplinary/subject area entrance tests following the school’s POF. The entrance tests help teachers to evaluate the starting point of the students as they enter the school. Teachers in the lower secondary and primary schools have also developed a grid to guide student transition. The grid is a descriptive instrument and includes indicators on the child’s situation as they enter the lower secondary school. The teachers usually use this grid to guide their discussions with parents. The grid includes information about the student’s prior scholastic success, attitudes, aspirations, and habits. This information helps teachers to form classes that are heterogeneous in terms of students’ abilities and personalities, and also helps the student to choose the optional curriculum activities they prefer.

Teachers carefully track student progress after they have entered the school, as well. The school has computerized the system of paper evaluation and standardized forms so they can be shared by all teachers.

The teachers find that classroom-based formative assessments help them to better tailor learning for an increasingly diverse set of students (diverse with regard to knowledge and competencies, cultural and ethnic identities and other subjective variables). The teachers also aim to help students develop self-assessment skills over their three years at the school – including their ability to assess their learning progress, and to understand if and why they make mistakes.

Heterogeneous classes

The school has developed a special commission to place incoming students in one of four levels (A, B, C or D). Members of the commission bring together all the information that they have gathered on each

student. The students are then distributed in the new first classes in a way that generates classes of relatively similar composition – that is, each of the classes includes a similar mix of competences, levels of attainment, and behaviour styles. The commission also takes into account where possible, the specific requests the student and his family may make in regard to class placement.

Summative tests

Teachers also use periodic tests to supplement their classroom-based assessments, to validate their own judgements of student progress, and to inform parents about how well their children are doing in school. The teachers make clear that the summative evaluations occur only after “the formative assessment is carried out daily”. These summative tests are anticipated and students are prepared so they don’t get nervous about having to take a test.

A safe environment for learning

Teachers at the school believe that assessment needs to support all students psychologically. They believe that assessment can create many problems, particularly with respect to the more fragile and less self-confident students. They see the system of daily assessment as supporting the individual identity of these children and helping to increase their self-confidence.

Encouragement of student autonomy

Teachers emphasise that the evaluative process – facilitated by the national form and the grid that the school has developed to better adapt valuation to the needs of the school and students – tends to encourage student self-evaluation. They observe that students, over the course of their three years at the school, start to adopt the methods the teachers have been modelling in classes, such as restating what students have said, helping students to think about subjects in a new way, and analysing performances with the students. The formative process also stimulates student engagement and responsibility for their work.

Expanded Teacher Repertoires: Partially differentiated paths

In 1996, the school introduced a new, experimental curriculum. The new curriculum takes advantage of a national law that allows schools to increase teaching from thirty to thirty-three hours per week, and creates some flexibility for teachers within that time period. Teachers at the Testoni-Fioravanti School chose to develop three partially differentiated paths for students. The three paths include: advanced studies in math and science, advanced studies in language, and recuperation activities. Currently fifty-five per cent of the students in the school are enrolled in advanced, or empowerment, classes.

At the Testoni-Fioravanti School, the three extra hours are mandatory for all students. Initially, the extra courses were offered to only some students at the school, but the options were then extended to students throughout the school in order to avoid “ghettoization” of classes. School hours are distributed over six mornings of five hours plus one afternoon of three hours – adding up to thirty-three hours each week. Students may also participate in additional extra-curricular activities, such as art, music, information technology, gymnastics, or more academically oriented programmes, such as German or Latin for two hours a week (only available to third year students at the school). The school thus provides curricula that are partially but nevertheless significantly differentiated and tailored to student interests and needs. Seventy per cent of the students follow at least one additional activity during the afternoon.

Teachers have continued to revise the programme according to general observations of results in the school. Teachers new to the school have also introduced modifications to the programme, and have thereby taken ownership. There is no summative assessment in the optional laboratories – only formative assessment.

Leadership, Co-operation and Planning at the School

Plan of formative offer

The school develops a plan of formative offer each year (POF). Teachers describe formative assessment as indispensable to the process of planning and setting overall school objectives. The school council also makes adjustments to research and didactic planning on an ongoing basis.

School leadership

The current school head has been at the Testoni-Fioravanti School for three years. She has charge of the lower secondary school and beginning in Autumn 2003, two primary schools. While the school head describes her work as primarily administrative, teachers note that she is also the recognized leader of the school. She backs the teachers and mediates occasional differences and clashes among teachers. She is also respectful of people – teachers, parents and students. The school head has a management team (the members of which she selects) to support her in her various functions.

Teacher Co-operation

Teachers emphasize the importance of developing mutual respect and trust, and dynamic leadership among themselves when developing school innovations. They describe the school as having a positive climate that emphasizes respect for the different backgrounds and approaches of teachers on the staff (differences which may be based on age, experience, ideas about teaching, or points of view based on their subject area specialty). They also note other elements have contributed to the collegial culture of the school, including their participation in development of the national valuation form, enrolment in training and refresher courses, and the work they have done as a group to develop a shared language and understanding of the elements and most important to formative assessment.

Teachers are able to continue professional development through training and refresher courses and sabbaticals (important for professional development, and the personal maturation of each of these teachers).

How do we know it's working?

The Testoni-Fioravanti School measures its performance primarily through an annual parent survey. The survey asks whether: parents are happy with the availability of teachers, staff and the school head, parents believe that their children have established good personal relationships with their peers and adults in the school, their children appear to be engaged in their classes and are satisfied with the empowerment classes, communications with the school are clear, and parents are engaged with their child's learning (e.g., they regularly check the child's school diary). Parents' satisfaction indices, as measured by the annual survey, are high. For example, 89 per cent of parents express support for the school's "didactic offer."

Teachers point to additional indicators of success. They say that there is also a high rate of parent participation and engagement in council meetings. Teachers track student progress from the initial diagnostic test through the exit exam, and they claim that a higher percentage of children at the school are attaining well than in the past. Moreover, a very low percentage of students repeat classes (repeating classes is not preferred in the Italian system - the worst that a school can do is to fail children).

Italian School System Reforms: Ensuring School Quality

Recent school reforms aim to help more schools develop practices similar to those in the two case study schools, including ongoing classroom assessment. To achieve this goal, the Italian parliament has, on the one hand, granted schools greater autonomy over pedagogical, organisational and financial decisions, and on the other hand, reformed national level school-monitoring and support systems. The Ministry retains control over teacher certification, placement, and salary levels, and local authorities are responsible for the physical maintenance of schools. Many of the new systems are still in the development phases.

The 1997 law granting financial and functional school autonomy, in fact, was more of a recognition of the fact that schools had been functionally autonomous for some time. Today all Italian schools have legal status, are in charge of their own organisation and administration, and have freedom regarding choice of teaching methods within the general frame of reference established by the State. The State continues to define the curriculum and amount of time to be devoted to specific subjects. Currently, approximately 15 per cent of the curriculum is left to schools to develop as they wish, although there are proposals to move decisions as to how to use this time to the regional governments.

In 1999, the legislature restructured the Ministry of Education as the Ministry of Instruction, University and Research (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca (MIUR). MIUR is responsible for distribution of funding to schools, the definition of programmes and curricula, the administration and management of all school staff, including teachers and administrative, technical and auxiliary staff. MIUR is also responsible for ratification of diplomas and certificates at the European and international level, identification of the training objectives and standards, and, provision of advice and assistance to schools.

MIUR is currently developing standards for all subjects required in the national curriculum. Specific learning objectives have been drafted by a pool of teachers and inspectors and circulated in the Ministry and are being tested in pilot schools throughout the country. Based on these pilot projects, the Ministry will issue regulations on standards and a new legislative decree will be issued.

School evaluation

In 1999, MIUR transformed the Centro europeo dell'educazione (CEDE), operating under its umbrella, into the Istituto nazionale per la valutazione del sistema di istruzione (INValSI – the National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education System). INValSI is charged with developing a new system of school evaluation and gathering of data on school and student performance. In addition, the Ministry is attempting to provide better support to teachers and schools through research and sharing of best practice, although at this point there is little money for research.

National evaluation of schools, school leaders and teachers has been weak to non-existent in some areas for some time. For example, the Ministry has never had a system for teacher evaluation. Before 1974, individual school leaders conducted teacher evaluations, but did not have transparent criteria for these reviews. Teacher unions protested this approach as being arbitrary and authoritarian, and it was abolished. While the previous government proposed a national evaluation for teachers along with a career progression path to take the place of the earlier evaluation system, unions did not accept the proposed approach. INValSI is now charged with development of a comprehensive system of school and teacher evaluation, as well as development and implementation of a national testing system

In fulfilment this charge, INValSI created the VIVES workgroup in 1999 to examine alternative approaches to measuring the extent to which individual schools are meeting national objectives, and rapidly identifying schools in need of corrective action or resources. The workgroup has emphasised an

interactive approach to evaluation – including teacher and school self-evaluation and external evaluation – in order to encourage and build:

- Teachers' competencies in design, organisational development, teamwork, school and self-evaluation
- Approaches to teaching students who are in transition from one school level to another
- Methodological capacity to create and properly use analytical, observational, diagnostic and evaluation tools
- Interaction between schools and territorial institutions.

In addition, INValSI launched a pilot project in 2002 to evaluate student competencies. The pilot project is being repeated in subsequent years in order to gather longitudinal data, although it should be noted that schools have volunteered to participate in the project and were not chosen at random.

Dissemination of best-practice

The Ministry views the gathering of good practices and exemplars as essential to a system where schools are autonomous. These exemplars can create dialogue and influence learning between schools. Ministry officials note that some schools have organised networks to share projects, ideas, and so on.

Ministry officials say, however, that they are not themselves interested in influencing teaching methods – the Ministry's interest is merely in seeing whether school examination results are good. They say that those schools with good examination results will be looked at more closely to see what they are doing right. In other words, they will be considered examples of best practice. INDIRE will build a data bank on best practices in schools, which will be available on the Internet. Teachers will be able to search the website according to topics they are particularly interested in, and then look at good practices related to that particular area.

As mentioned above, INValSI is responsible for developing and implementing tests. Ministry officials are not concerned that tests will drive assessment in Italian classrooms. They say that tests in Italian culture are just one element, but that the more holistic teacher judgment of students' performance is more important. They will nevertheless be on the lookout for any unintended consequences.

Schools that do not do well on exams will not be sanctioned. Instead, the Ministry will try to provide advice and support. Ministry officials, do note, however, that at this point, the national inspectors don't have that much power – it's up to the regions to deal with underperforming schools, and that the regions do not have a strong evaluative role. INValSI has recently sponsored a pilot project, sampling school results in various subjects, in order to create a reference point against which schools can measure their own results, and identify their strengths and weaknesses. While schools involved in the project have volunteered, INValSI has also gathered evidence from a random sample of schools in order to develop results that are statistically significant.

Research Partnerships

Two national laws have been important to encouraging links between researchers and practitioners. The first law, authorized in 1974 (see 419 DPR/1974), promotes testing of theoretical developments through experimentation. The law also promotes the experimentation in schools through the introduction of new subjects. A 1977 law (see 517/7 and 348/77) requires schools to individualize teaching through careful

attention to didactic planning. The Ministry also provides tools for teachers in the form of pedagogical guidelines.

In 2000, the Ministry transformed the library of “pedagogic documentation” to the Istituto nazionale di documentazione per l’innovazione e la ricerca educativa (INDIRE – the National documentation institute for innovation and educational research); and, The Istituti regionali di ricerca, sperimentazione e aggiornamento educativi (IRRSAE – the Regional institute for research, experimentation, and educational development) to the Istituti regionali di ricerca educativa (IRRE – the Regional institute for educational research). IRRE branches are charged with collection, processing and diffusion of the pedagogic-didactic documentation, research, promotion and technical advice on demonstration projects and support for the teacher professional development, cultural and professional updating of teachers. Finally, the Ministry is promoting improvements in teacher training and ongoing professional development.

Ministry officials hope that since schools have freedom of didactics, organisation, and research, they will experiment with new methods, techniques and approaches to assessment. However, it is up to the schools to take the initiative to engage in such research, and to seek out advice on research methods. This may prove challenging for many schools as teachers have little time to engage in research and innovation, and there are no financial incentives to encourage or reward teachers to engage in extra work. Moreover, the majority of teachers do not have any training in the use of research methodology. While recent graduates of teacher training programmes are more likely to have participated in research projects while in university, this exposure may not translate so easily to the actual practice of action research.

INDIRE and INValSI will serve as the two primary bodies for connecting research and policy developments in Italy. For example, last year the Ministry implemented a pilot project concerning the school reform in some primary schools, and INDIRE worked quite closely with these schools. The Ministry will also develop guidelines for the two agencies on research priorities. Both INDIRE and INValSI interact with university research departments on a regular basis.

Additional support for formative assessment

As noted earlier in the case study, the 2003 reform also introduced the idea of having a tutor/co-ordinator for each class. The Ministry has experimented with this model in elementary schools and, with the new law, will bring the model to lower and upper secondary schools.

The role of parents

It is worth noting that Italian parents play a strong role in their children’s education – either through involvement in school affairs, or in home life. More than 70 per cent of Italian students report that their parents discuss how well they are doing at school or spend time ‘just talking’ with them about social and cultural issues (such as films, books, and so on) several times a week. (OECD, 2001, P. 147-149)

Teacher training and professional development

Recent reforms to teacher training and ongoing professional development respond to a number of problems regarding the quality of teacher training. For example, there has also been a problem of “double track recruitment.” While many teachers entering the school system through official recruitment channels have been required to take a series of challenging examinations in their speciality area (although not on their knowledge of teaching methods), another group of teachers obtained appointments after having entered the system as a temporary or supply teacher. These teachers have not necessarily had any kind of teaching training.

According to one research report, about 80 per cent of teachers attended one or more training initiatives last year (although they are not required to do so). There is an impressive array of professional development courses, but these courses tend to be fragmented and haphazard. INDIRE is charged with creating guidelines and bringing greater shape to professional development programmes.

MIUR has also developed recommendations for new models for ongoing professional development, and encourages “reflective” practice. In the new model currently under development, training is to take place within the school, “...together with the more traditional components such as disciplinary research and science of education.”

MIUR has developed a number of systems to provide information on training available to teachers, to help schools identify their training needs, and to ensure the quality of the educational offer.

Teachers can now refer to a specific General Directorate for Training and Updating created through the DPR 347, 2000. The creation of an ad hoc Directorate, within the Dipartimento per lo sviluppo dell'Istruzione (Department for the development of education), signals interest in placing greater emphasis on teachers' professionalism.

Since the year 2000, MIUR has required teachers to have a university degree in their subject speciality, including the two-year basic degree, followed by a three-year university course in the subject speciality, and at least one-year of in-service training. Teachers are also required to participate in a biennial specialisation course focusing on didactics for teaching various subjects. (Many see these new requirements as excessive.) Teacher training at universities and in schools of specialisation (SSIS) is also now monitored by a number of expert school teachers, on a part time basis.

MIUR recognizes the need to provide more advanced training, noting in a recent report that “...it is...true that science of education is not sufficiently developed in our country and therefore it is difficult to find somebody who is really able to teach to teachers.” MIUR believes that universities are responsible for refining their own approaches to teacher training, and that, in order to do this, they will need to bridge the “psycho-pedagogic and social theories” with observation of what's going on in classrooms, and consultation with school supervisors and teaching staff.

According to MIUR, initial teacher training and ongoing professional development should prepare expert teachers who are capable of mediating their own professional practice “...in order to carry out the changes needed to attain the expected goals.” MIUR also thinks it is important to identify high-quality teachers currently in the school system. They see expert teachers as an important resource. Their ability to influence the practice of other teachers is enhanced when they are publicly recognised. INValSI's efforts to track best-practices in schools will also serve to identify high quality teachers and teaching.

MIUR recommends a number of different approaches to teacher training. These include short-term courses, didactic laboratories (also important to didactic research through the creation of controlled research trials), teacher networks, school-university cooperation, research scholarships, master-level training and scholarships, and, training stages for intensive and focused professional training development in business, social science, research and cultural settings..

Implementation Opportunities and Challenges

The MIUR will face a number of implementation challenges as elements of recent reforms are put into place. First, several stakeholders were not involved in the initial design of school reforms. The Ministry has only recently brought on trade unions, school heads, and other stakeholders. Second, Ministry officials note, is the natural resistance to change. The Ministry has built good relationships with the pilot schools, and recognises the need to build interest among those schools coming on later, noting that it will

be natural for the second tier of schools not to be as enthusiastic as the pilot schools. Third, the reform is quite expensive, and money for the reform will not be available for at least a year. Fourth, implementation plans, as of yet, lack a few important elements. For example, while the Ministry has encouraged research on best practice through the formation of INDIRE, there may be an overly optimistic reliance on teachers' curiosity and willingness to spend time looking at the new database, and whether the database will be well-designed enough to help teachers sort through the array of practices and what is most relevant to their own concerns.

In spite of these challenges, the serious overhaul of the school system represents a major opportunity for bringing good teaching and assessment practices to the majority of schools in the country. It will be worth tracking the implementation process to learn more about how policy-makers and practitioners have adapted the new system, how they have addressed barriers, and what lessons have been learnt.

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