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Newsletter 11 | Febbraio 2020
Codice ISSN 2532-8794



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Valu.E for Schools: a new proposal for schools, education, and research

Action 2 of the Valu.E PON Project aims to "test and evaluate the effectiveness of different training models to support the self-evaluation activities of schools in the context of the National Evaluation System". The primary actors of this research activity are those who work in the training of education professionals: primarily Universities, research institutes, school networks, training institutions, associations, etc. which, on the basis of a call for tenders published by INVALSI in recent months, have been selected to collaborate with INVALSI on the Valu.E Project in the design and implementation of supporting activities for schools' self-evaluation. These research and training activities will be aimed at improving the skills of Italian school professionals in self-diagnosis through the use of dedicated innovative methods, with particular regard to the development of specialist skills for school personnel.



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Main objectives of the three Lines of Formative Action (LFA). When INVALSI commissioned me to contribute to writing a scientific framework that could guide those people potentially interested in taking part in the call for tenders aimed at supporting schools' self-evaluation, I understood the meaning and value of this need, and shared the idea of drawing up scientific guidelines. Reflecting with colleagues from the research group of the Valu.E Project, I considered it important to set up a theoretical framework within which the participants could intervene autonomously in the field of training education professionals interested in supporting schools' self-evaluation, starting from the undisputed postulate that their scientific and professional contribution represents added-value for the school community at large. This is how the three Lines of Formative Action (LFA) that we present here were born.

But let's try to understand some elements of these three paths which, following the selection of projects at national level, will have to be implemented. First of all the meaning of the Lines of Formative Action, then the features of the various proposals and the reason for these choices and, finally, the impact that it is hoped to achieve.

In recent years, the scientific as well as the professional community involved in various fields of education have made relevant steps forward. There are many schools of thought that recognize education in schools as an indispensable scientific and cultural drive in allowing teachers and school managers to modulate and reshape their educational and managerial actions. This is a necessary mandate for contemporary education systems that is not only satisfied with updating schools' scientific and cultural content, but also it is oriented today to take into account the awareness of the needs, the subjective meanings attributable to experience (not only from the professional point of view but also from the personal point of view), and the enhancement of the aptitudes necessary to professionally interact in a constructive and fruitful way. It is a bit like finally recognizing that, in addition to education's main task, there is also a need to work specifically on the educational and schools' professionals, and not solely on the pupils to be educated.

Many ways may lead to operate in this direction, but it is not obvious that all of them can actually lead to significant and useful goals for the school community.

As a researcher and an educational specialist I have therefore helped to outline three LFAs that reflect on some of the different ways in which intervention is possible. Each of these LFAs calls into consideration some specific pedagogical theories resulting from national and international studies: these theories are recognized as reliable and have acquired scientific validity thanks to previous research and already completed projects.

Let's now briefly deepen the description of the three LFAs, starting from the perspective of the educational trainee, rather than from the scientific paradigms that underlie them. From this point of view we need to ask ourselves: what does it mean for the teacher and the head teacher to deal with a specific approach?

The first LFA: a case study. Let's start with the first LFA, the so-called *case study*: without wanting to go into too much detail, this is a training intervention aimed at raising awareness of the complex causal and correlative connections that exist between some factors that describe the very "specific intrinsic nature" of the cases studied. A way, in practice, to get inside the complex dynamics of schools' self-evaluation activities and to accompany the actors in these processes to consciously qualify their actions and effects. The objective that this LFA 1 should pursue is the construction of a qualitative training model through interventions, based on a holistic approach, and which aim to consider the case in its unique and unrepeatable complexity. The keyword that could represent the aforementioned LFA is 'immersion'.

The second LFA: Peer Learning. The second LFA, on the other hand, operates according to an interesting logic of complementarity and multiplicity of comparisons and experiential meanings. This is the principle of Peer Learning, whose advantages are now almost unanimously recognized by the scientific community. A peer learning process is one that promotes, with a high likelihood of success, the development of the skills and abilities of all the subjects called together to cooperate, by starting from the mutual recognition of the added value given by the synergistic action of all the protagonists of a certain process. But what are the structural requirements that we intend to underlie this Peer Learning process? Cooperation between different subjects; questioning different issues; identification; mental divergence; recognition of one's own limits, power and opportunities: these are just some of the concepts that guide this way of working. With these bases, Peer Learning, which involves actors from multiple schools – both horizontally (teachers with other teachers, as well as head teachers with other head teachers), and vertically (head teachers with teachers, as well as teachers with head teachers) – looks like a functional and valid approach for those subjects interested in working on the development of a capital gain that can come from community-based work and mutual exchange for professional growth. We could say that this is an approach that is summarised by the key-phrase: 'The whole is greater than the sum of the parts'.

The third LFA: situated and enactive training. The third LFA, despite having specific features that may seem classic and traditional in the context of educational work, is maybe the most difficult to carry out, but, at the same time, it is the one that – if well understood and managed – could produce more readily evident and tangible effects. In fact, the principles of situated training are justified when we start from the idea that teaching should have an enactive value, that is, being oriented to pursue an educational model that allows the context to be enhanced, through which processes acquire meaning. Enactivity, now recognized and valued on a theoretical level, still remains, as already anticipated, difficult to implement: in fact, focusing on the social conditions of knowledge construction processes does not represent a simple methodological transformation, but rather involves an improvement of educational skills formation and the attempt to overcome the separation/opposition between theory and practice, by interpreting education as an eminently social activity and, therefore, more or less implicitly connoted by emotional and cultural elements. It is, then, a matter of first rethinking and recognizing the mechanisms that underlie the learning processes in order to allow educators to be part of these very processes, just like students themselves, by conceiving the school as a single context for the educational community as a whole. The teachers and school administrators who will live this experience will expect to be considered as protagonists in the creation and construction of knowledge and new skills. From this point of view, knowledge and new skills will therefore acquire a psycho-social connotation where body, mind and context will act as a methodological glue. The keyword of LFA 3 could be 'interaction'.

Defining the LFA, however, is certainly not enough: once the stakeholders involved start their own research activities, INVALSI will still have the task of monitoring progress and effects achieved, by trying mainly to understand which processes will be activated, as well as identifying concrete progress in planning and designing significant professional skills in the field of schools' self-evaluation.

Valu.E for Schools: a great team game. This Valu.E Project task solicits in me a great scientific curiosity, in order to understand how these three LFAs can effectively be translated into training models to be capitalized upon by the Italian school system in the future. This is in fact the primary objective of Action 2 of the PON Valu.E. Project: supporting schools' self-evaluation. In fact, fully conceiving school evaluation and self-evaluation as formative and guiding tools for the entire educational community – and not just formal fulfilments – means that we are ready to appreciate the benefits of school evaluation processes; it means, again, that we as members of the scientific community have to develop and systematize a very new line of research and action. Today both the world of educational research and that of the school itself are well aware that in order to train competent personnel in the field of evaluation and self-evaluation a great team game is needed, by directly gathering together all the stakeholders of the school environment. All this confirms that both educational *object* and *subject*, while retaining their ontological autonomy, remain two sides of the same coin and, therefore, are part of the same teaching and learning process. This is why, through Action 2 of the Valu.E Project, i.e. supporting schools' self-evaluation, which we have renamed 'Valu.E for Schools', we want to provide space for real and meaningful dialogue between educational research and schooling institutions, in which both evaluation and self-evaluation may become fertile ground for the professional growth of all the protagonists of the school world.

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