

Negotiation and Officialisation: How commissions and task forces contribute to adult education policy in Italy and Denmark

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Abstract

In this article we examine and contrast how the work of commissions and task forces, assembled to negotiate consensus on important policy issues, contributed to reforms affecting adult education in Italy and Denmark over the period 2000-2016. First, we conceptualise the work of commissions and task forces as a key, yet underexplored, element in national policy reforms, then outline the methodology employed. Following is our comparative analysis. Our discussion highlights that commissions and task forces have been an important element in both countries, and at least three dimensions help explain their country-specific functions: 1) the type of the national political system; 2) its ideological strength over time; and, 3) the nature of its relation to the European Union (EU). We suggest that these dimensions should be adequately considered in further studies.

Keywords: adult education; adult learning; commission; Denmark; education policy; Italy; task force

Introduction

Public policy researchers have always been concerned with understanding how different governments pursue specific courses of action (Bemelmans-Videc, Rist, & Vedung, 2007). Such interest is reflected also in the work of education policy researchers, where a flourishing literature devotes attention to the mechanisms through which global governance in education occurs, under the influence of international organisations (among others, Martens & Jakobi, 2010; Lingard & Sellar, 2016). But, as Mundy, Green, Lingard, and Verger (2016) properly note, the influence of global education policy processes and discourses still depends on the local contests (especially local institutions), and how they respond to and engage with global politics.



Against this background, we pay attention to one aspect that has been given comparatively little attention in education policy research: the role that nationally established commissions and task forces (C&TFs) play in the political and administrative processes related to country-specific adult education reforms. We do so by examining and contrasting the presence, character and contribution of such temporary groups, where representatives of different elite positions (i.e., political decision-makers, other stakeholders, experts) are assembled to negotiate consensus on important policy issues, in processes of adult education reform in Italy and Denmark.

First, we conceptualise the work of C&TFs as a key, yet underexplored, element in national policy reforms, then outline the methodology employed in our comparative analysis. We start with an account of the political systems of Italy and Denmark, their national governance structures, and how their education systems are organised. Then, we illustrate the main strands of reforms that have impacted on adult education since 2000, before we examine the role that selected C&TFs have played in Italy and Denmark. Finally, our discussion highlights how C&TFs have contributed to adult education policy developments in both countries, and at least three dimensions help explain their country-specific functions: 1) the type of the national political system; 2) its ideological strength over time; and, 3) the nature of its relation to the European Union (EU). We suggest that these dimensions should be adequately considered in further studies.

Conceptualising the role of commissions and task forces

Analyses and discussions of specific commissions and their reports can be found in the education policy literature, but more general conceptualisations are sparse. For instance the book Commissions, Reports, Reforms, and Educational Policy (Ginsberg & Plank, 1995), devoted to discuss the work and results of commissions in the field of education, mostly limits itself to presenting individual case studies. For our analysis we draw on contributions from the general social and political science literature.

A government commission may be defined as a group established by a government body (most often a ministry) in which the majority of members are not government officials (Christensen, Mouritzen, & Nørgaard, 2009). There are two basic types of commissions, the political-strategic, which represents attempts to control political processes related to specific political issues, and the technical, which adjusts policy or develops policy instruments. Technical groups are often called working groups, but this is not a consistent practice. Among strategic commissions, some may be called depoliticising because their purpose it to remove issues from the political agenda, while others may be called mobilising, intended to emphasize the necessity of a specific policy (Christensen et al, 2009).

In a comment on the work of a US national commission on technology, Daniel Bell discusses advantages and disadvantages of government commissions and argues that: ‘The distinct virtue of the Government Commission arrangement is that there is a specific effort to involve the full range of elite or organized opinion in order to see if a real consensus can be achieved’ (Bell, 1966, p. 7). For instance the work of strategic commissions has a strong element of negotiation, where areas of agreement can be found and disagreements can be encapsulated and set aside. If a reasonable degree of consensus can be achieved in the commission, the recommendations stand a much better chance of being accepted in broader political and public forums. This of course applies to both mobilising and depoliticising commissions work.

A more general social science approach to the character and role of C&TFs is found in Pierre Bourdieu's (2014) theoretical and historical work on the state in modern society. In his discussion of the role of government commissions, he draws on a study of the French housing market.

Bourdieu describes the emergence of the modern state as a concentration and monopolisation of symbolic power. In this he differs from other approaches (e.g. the traditional Marxist approach) focused on the state's monopolisation of physical power through, for instance, the military and the police. Bourdieu recognises that the state represents a concentration of physical as well as of economic power (established through the formalisation of taxation), but sees the concentration of symbolic capital as its core element (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 207). The concentration of symbolic capital takes place through long-term processes through which the state gradually becomes the centre for determining the principles of social order. The state becomes the producer of classifications, the symbolic and cognitive structures that are embedded in everyday life, which establish order and predictability in how people relate to each other, institutions, and authorities (e.g. the state's structuring of time through implementation of calendars) (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 168).

The concentration of symbolic capital in and around the state is also a process of universalisation. The classifications and cultures produced and reproduced by the state are presented as generally valid, common for, and available to, all members of society. But in fact they represent a monopolisation of symbolic power. These cultures appear to unite but in reality divide, and since they cannot be criticized as being particular, symbolic capital is one of the great instruments of domination (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 99).

To Bourdieu, government commissions are one way in which the state extends its meta-capital into different societal fields, introducing and reproducing classifications. They are 'organisational invention' developed and used by the state (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 26) to help constructing public problems and their solutions. By being placed in commissions policy issues get public attention, and are generalised, as discussed by 'wise men' elevated above contingencies, interests, and conflicts. Bourdieu characterizes the work of a French commission on housing as

(...) an extremely complex operation of officialization, which consists in theatricalizing a political action involving the creation of imperative rules imposed on the whole of society
(...) This is an operation that can succeed or fail. (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 31)

As we shall see later, commissions may sometimes also be established by other actors than the state, for instance through initiatives from civil society organisations. State agencies may tacitly accept or actively collaborate in such commissions, but in any case the meta-capital of the state will be present in the classifications and cultures that such commissions have to navigate in.

In Bourdieu's approach, both mobilising and depoliticising commissions in the end serve to impose imperative rules on society. The concluding words in the above quote indicate that officialization and universalisation are objectives that the state pursues; but they may encounter deeply embedded social and cultural forces or active resistance, so the state does not always succeed. Resistance may also manifest itself in the work of government commissions, but as both Bell and Bourdieu indicate the result will most often be that it is either included in an officialising elite consensus or encapsulated and set aside.

Even though Bourdieu does not provide more specific concepts for analysing C&TFs and his theoretical approach tends to exaggerate the universal presence of state power, his

focus on symbolic capital and classifications add an important dimension to the understanding of how C&TFs are involved in policy processes.

Methodology

For the comparative empirical analysis we have selected Italy and Denmark as representing different historical trajectories of state formation and welfare regimes (Rubenson & Dejardins, 2009), and illustrative of a persistent North-South divide within Europe, in terms of participation rates in adult education, social (in)equalities, and standards of living (see also Rasmussen, 2014). Moreover, both countries are members of the European Union (EU) (Italy since 1958, Denmark since 1973), thus equally subject to the Union's macro-political pressures and prescriptions, affecting also areas that falls under the subsidiarity principle, like education.

Our empirical data consists of written sources, mainly official information about policy reforms and reports from C&TFs. We are natives of Italy and Denmark and through previous research; we have versatile knowledge about adult education as well as the broader political contexts in the two countries. This helps us interpret sources, which are almost exclusively available in the national languages. However, locating sources has involved difficulties because there is little systematic registration of C&TF documents and reports and because not all are electronically available.

In the comparative analysis, we have juxtaposed the two national cases as regards macro-social contexts (political systems and education systems) and the elements we focus on (C&TFs, adult education policy and reforms). This is a well-known procedure in comparative education (cf. Bereday, 1964), and although it may seem schematic, it allows a relatively systematic presentation of a complex field of contexts and processes.

Political systems, governance and public education

Politics governs public policy through a political system, or set of principles and procedures (Easton, 1953), that captures who, how and what contribute to public policy developments. The political systems that operate in different countries represent different types of material and symbolic state power and different relations between state and society.

During the Cold War, a bipolar world, represented by the political system of the URSS (the 'socialist' system), and of the USA (the 'capitalist' system), functioned as a 'coordinator of actions within its sphere of influence', defining the internal and foreign policy of various states (Ilyin & Sergeevich Rozanov, 2013, p. 343). In the post-Cold War era, political evolution at the global level has complicated the picture by creating multiple poles and global stratifications of political systems, and their networks of interactions (Modelska & Devezas, 2007). So national political systems got embedded in a complex governance structure and are thus subject to different powers and influences from within and outside the state (Weiss, 2013). Moreover, EU member states grant part of their 'de jure' sovereignty (a state's supreme legal power) and de facto sovereignty (a state's capacity to control its own affairs) to supranational European institutions.

Although we acknowledge global and European governance, in this contribution we are primarily concerned with the infrastructural power of the state or 'a government's ability to make and enforce rules, and to deliver services' (Fukuyama, 2013, p. 3), chiefly adult education, in the territories of own jurisdiction. This clarified we now turn attention on

the political systems of Italy and Denmark, the countries' public education systems, and their national governance.

Italy is a regional state with legislative power in the hands of both national and regional parliaments, much like in federal systems, but under the supremacy of the central state, and with administrative functions distributed among national, regional and local governments. The 2001 constitutional reform expanded the legal powers of the country's twenty regions and the two autonomous provinces of Trento and Bolzano, strengthened financial autonomy of regional and local governments, and, administratively, introduced the principle of subsidiarity, inspired by the law of the EU (Groppi & Scattone, 2006). Accordingly, the levels of government collect taxes, and public expenditure requires coordination. Traditionally, public policy has resulted in fragmented social protection programs (e.g. pensions, unemployment benefits, family allowances) that reproduced status differentials (e.g. male vs. female) (Lynch, 2004), and dependence on conventional family structures and forms of welfare provision (Green & Janmaat, 2011). In the conceptualisation of Esping-Andersen (1990) this is a conservative-corporatist welfare state regime. The early 1990s marked a substantial shift in the Italian political system: the two parties in power in post-World War II (Christian Democracy and Italian Social Party) faded, and new political parties (Northern League and Forza Italia Political Movement) with federalist, liberal-conservative and populist tendencies entered power. Ever since, facilitated by a substantive reform of the electorate system, coalition governments and political change have become the norm.

Denmark, in contrast, is a small nation-state with legislative power located at the national level (Kaspersen, 2013), legislation is decided by the parliament and implemented by governments and public institutions. The local political and administrative level consists mainly of municipalities. Both state and municipalities collect taxes, but public expenditure usually follows guidelines by the state. Traditionally public policy has had a strong emphasis on welfare policies, especially in the form of universal provision of benefits and services. This is a Social-democratic type of welfare state regime (Esping-Andersen, 1990). During the 20th century coalition government was the rule rather than the exception, and in the post-war period most governments were formed by the Social Democratic party in combination with different liberal partners (Christensen & Klemmensen, 2015). The last three decades have seen an increased polarization between right-wing populist forces (especially the Danish People's Party) and social and socialist left liberals. The biggest liberal party has headed most government coalitions, with the support of the right.

When it comes to public education, Italy has a unified public system, compulsory for all people aged 6–16, that covers: five years of primary school, three years of lower secondary school, and the first two (out of five) years of upper secondary school or, alternatively, three- and four year vocational education and training courses under the regional training system. Public adult education may encompass a number of activities, including programs held in centres for adult instruction, upper secondary schools, and vocational and training centres under the aegis of the state or the regions.

Also Denmark has a unified public education system. Schooling is compulsory for all citizens aged 6-16. Upper secondary education is organised in two sectors, one (by far the largest) consists of general programmes preparing for higher education, the other consists of vocational programmes combining school education with training in companies.

The country has a long tradition of co-operation between the social partners and the state, which has been an important feature in the development of vocational education.

Public adult education includes different types of programmes, some general and some strongly vocational, including part-time higher education (Rasmussen & Werler, 2015).

Finally, education governance (including vocational training) in Italy requires coordination among different levels of government. Under the principle of cooperative regionalism', since the 1980s, the State-Region Conference functions as the main institutional link on national policy likely to affect regional matters. In the mid-1990s it was supplemented by the State-Cities and local autonomies Conference, and by the Unified Conference, an additional liaison body where state, regions, cities and local autonomies meet on matters of interest for all levels of government. In addition to the above liaison bodies, since the 1980s the Conference of Regions and Autonomous Provinces coordinates the actions of the Presidents of such local governments to increase their role and voice in the State-Region, and in the Unified conferences.

At state level, responsibility for education (from elementary to higher education) is under one ministry, which oversees regional and provincial school offices across the country, whereas the councils of the regions and autonomous provinces are responsible for vocational training. All schools and universities are funded and controlled by the state, while vocational training centres are financed and governed by the regions and the autonomous provinces. At certain conditions also non-state schools and universities are recognised by the state, but not funded. All education institutions are thus exposed to control by the ministry or the local councils, and stricter monitoring and evaluation systems have been introduced in recent years.

In Denmark the governance of education reflects the character of the Danish state and the fact that most education is public and funded over taxes. The state responsibility for education is divided between two ministers, one responsible for primary, secondary and adult education, and one responsible for higher education (including part-time higher education). Schools for primary and lower secondary education are funded and controlled by municipalities, but follows guidelines from the state. Most institutions for upper secondary education (including vocational education) and higher education have a semi-independent status, as they are led by boards often involving the social partners, but funded by, and work according, to guidelines from the state. Since the 1990s the public sector (including education) has been much influenced by new public management, bringing about activity-based funding, semi-markets for public services, strong institutional management, and ex-post governance via evaluation and monitoring.

Summarising, Italy and Denmark are both governed through democratic political systems, but showcase different political traditions and specific features. Italy distributes legal and administrative power between the state and the local governments, and much policy requires coordination between these levels. In comparison Denmark has a relatively centralised political system, with only some administrative power left for municipalities. An obvious difference affecting policy implementation is that the population of Italy (60 million in 2017) is roughly ten times that of Denmark (less than 6 million in 2017). Moreover, both countries have unified public education systems catering for the same age groups. An important difference, however, concerns the responsibility and control over adult education. In Italy general adult education - or education up to secondary school levels for out-of-school youth and adults, is under state control (through its regional agencies), vocational adult education is a responsibility of regional authorities, and continuing education is under the control of the social partners. In Denmark, even though the social partners are strongly involved in governing vocational education, all types of adult education is essentially a state responsibility.

Main policy developments (2000-2016)

Nationwide policy developments are intrinsically intertwined with both changes in national political systems and developments at transnational and global levels that impinge (although in diverse ways) on the political economies of individual countries. The most important influences in the two countries considered here come from (or are mediated through) the EU.

Table 1: Historical timeline of policy developments in Italy and Denmark

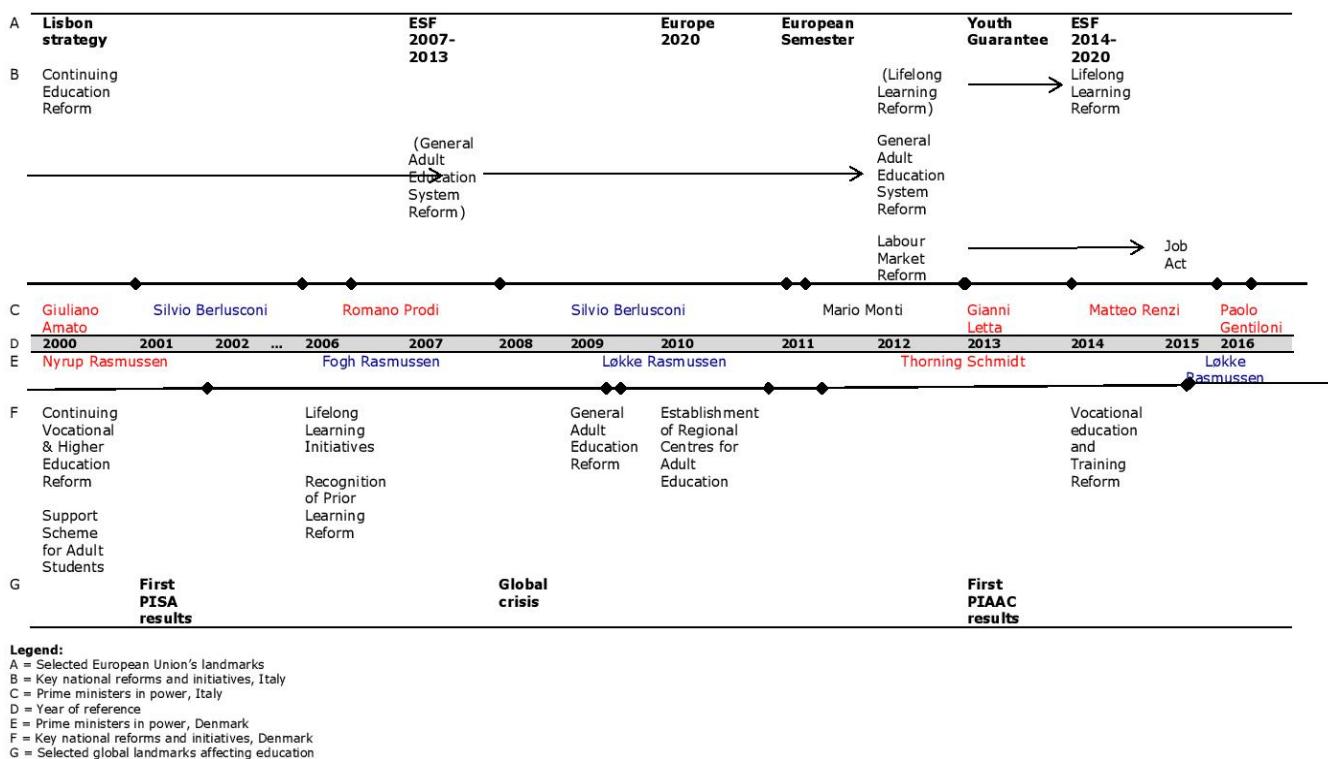


Table 1 reports the main changes in the national political systems of Italy (C) and Denmark (F) over the period spanning from 2000 to 2016 (D), by means of indicating the Prime ministers in power, and whether the governments they led represented mainly left-wing/social democratic (in red) or right-wing/liberal-conservative (in blue) ideologies. Further, the table indicates a few reforms affecting adult education at the time they entered into force in Italy (B) and Denmark (F), and related initiatives. A national reform is what provokes a substantial modification (reflected in the legal and financial orders) of the state of affairs in an area of life, due to the legitimate and regular action of the constituted powers. As such a reform includes not only changes in educational structures, institutional organisation and curricula, but also allocation of public funds and grants to improve their activity. Finally, the table signposts selected landmark events that occurred either within the EU (A) or at global level (G), which epitomise international prescriptions that have had effects on the political economies of education, and adult education specifically, yet at different degrees, in the two countries under consideration.

In Italy four major strands of policy reform have impinged on adult education. The first relates to the continuing education of workers, and focuses on the conditions for

employed people to obtain paid leaves to (re)enter education and/or continuing vocational training. It involved the state, its agencies, and the social partners. The second strand relates to general adult education, focuses on its organization, delivery and targets, and involved decision-makers across all governmental levels. The third strand relates to the labour market and focuses on work flexibility, worker protection and social shock absorbers for unemployed people and youth not in education, employment or training (NEET). It involved all governmental levels and the social partners. Each strand involved different kinds of C&TFs in its preparation and/or implementation. Finally, a fourth strand blurs the traditional boundaries between education and labour market policy, as it relates to lifelong learning, with a focus on the architecture of a national system that, building on territorial networks, links education, training and employment services.

In Denmark three strands of reform affected adult education, each with certain characteristic problem definitions and networks. One strand relates to labour market training and vocational education, focuses on the access of workers to education and the relevance of education to work and employment, and involves the social partners. A second strand concerns adult education as part of higher education. It also relates to the labour market but is governed through another ministry without significant involvement of the social partners. The third strand relates mainly to general and popular adult education, focuses on access of all to literacy skills and the relevance of education for citizenship and to further education, and involves different parts and levels of the state. The three strands are not clearly distinguished, and there are many transversal elements, but there are clear differences in the character of the C&TFs they involved.

Both Italy and Denmark thus show multiple strands of policy reform affecting adult education. In Italy the turning point is 2012, when the reform of general adult education was agreed on across all governmental levels, the labour market reform was codified and the lifelong learning reform was initiated. In Denmark the turning point is 2000, when the reform of continuing vocational and higher education was first introduced, alongside with a new support scheme for adult students.

In Italy, it is no coincidence that the turning point fell under the interim government of Mario Monti, an economist and former European Commissioner for Competition (1999-2004), appointed by the President of the Republic to lead a technocratic government (composed solely of unelected experts) in the wake of the Italian debt crisis. The Monti government was to take responsibility for substantial reforms and deficit-cutting measures, as demanded of Italy by the EU and the European Central Bank. Further influences of global and European landmarks events in almost all strands of reform can be found in a number of facts such as: the identification of the European Social Funds as the only extraordinary resources to reform general adult education, the constant reference to Youth Guarantee (the European initiative with earmarked funds targeting NEET) in the labour market reform, the adoption of the EU's definition in the lifelong learning reform, and the establishment of an inter-ministerial Commission of experts in the wake of the results of the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competences (PIAAC) (see below), among others.

By contrast, in Denmark the reforms show no clear connections to the landmarks at global or European levels. Yet, events like the Lisbon strategy or the global crisis have brought about adjustments in administrative practices (for instance through cutting funds or adapting development projects to new European Social Funds criteria), within the existing legislative framework.

Commissions and task forces in national reform processes

In this section we provide a detailed account of the different strands of reform identified in Italy and Denmark, and pay special attention to the role and work of C&TFs. Different types of C&TFs were found. Some have a high political profile and include top politicians and stakeholders, while others are composed of administrative officials from different organisations; at times the members are appointed by a head of state in their personal capacity, in others different organisations have the right to appoint members. We do not work with a strict typology but will highlight in the proceedings the character of each of the C&TFs under consideration.

The Italian reforms

In 2000 Italy reformed the continuing education of workers, thanks to the establishment of the leave for continuing education, the extension of the leave for education (first introduced in 1970 through collective bargaining), and the institution of the Inter-professional Equity Funds for Continuing Education (institute by law in 1997). Based on horizontal subsidiarity principles, these funds are jointly promoted and managed by the social partners, and financed by the companies. For the scope of this article, this is assumed as a point of departure to analyse the three strands of reforms that followed.

The reform strand of general adult education began in 2007 when the national financial law foresaw the re-organisation of adult education centres (established in 1997) in centres for adult instruction with own teaching staff and administrative autonomy at no additional cost to the state. Rather, such re-organization was to contribute to an overall downsizing of primary and secondary state-funded schools with administrative, organisational and didactic autonomy. Albeit the Ministry of Education defined the criteria for granting autonomy to the new centres, no further action by the constituted powers occurred until 2012. This stall was caused by the opposition of technical and vocational upper secondary institutions to the merging of primary and secondary education provisions for adults under a single autonomous centre inasmuch as by the political instability that followed the formation of a new government in 2008.

The reform strand of lifelong learning initiated in 2006, when a civil society organization, EdaForum, called an informal Panel for adult education to draft a proposal for a law of popular initiative¹, which comprised stakeholders dealing with the promotion of lifelong education in diverse capacities, like the Adult Education Union (UNIEDA), the National Association of Italian Municipalities, and the Union of Italian Provinces (Scicione, 2007). Such proposal was to introduce and secure the right to lifelong learning, encompassing the rights: to be informed about existing opportunities, to freely choose what most suitable, and to have recognised and certified prior competences acquired in life, at work experience or via lifelong learning activities.

Introduced to the House of Representatives on 29 March 2007 by an ex-communist and a socialist party's deputies, it was soon abandoned. But it raised public attention on the subject matter, leading to a second proposal (also of popular initiative) on the right to lifelong learning, advanced in 2009 by the Italian General Confederation of Labour, the greatest and at times most powerful employer organization, and the Association for Active Aging, a nongovernmental organisation. Also this proposal soon felt into oblivion. Yet, it sparked a lively debate between civil society, social partners and, to a limited extent, local governments, on the role of the state in the promotion of the schooling of adults, and of lifelong learning (Milana, 2017).

In the meantime, the reform strand on adult education progressed. Following a Presidential Decree (n. 263/2012) laying down the general rules for the system re-organization, the Ministry of Education established a National Technical Commission on the Instruction of Adults to support the transition, the evaluation and certification of individual competences, and the realization of nationally-assisted projects (in nine regions) to support the systemic transition from the school year 2013-2014.

Led by the Ministry of Education, the commission comprised members from two other ministries (i.e., Labour and Economy), regional and local governments, social partners, and a few experts. Some members reported difficulties and delays in sustaining, while monitoring, a complex systemic re-organisation, and a lack of up-to-date information on progress with the nationally assisted projects. However, the Ministry produced several guidelines that were good valued in principles, yet criticised for their practical implications in the daily management of the centres (Milana, 2017).

Over the same period, the Ministry of Education also chaired a National Working Group (P.A.I.D.E.I.A.), aimed at developing a concerted Activity Plan for the Innovation of Adult Education. PA.I.D.E.I.A included representatives from the National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research (INDIRE), supporting the ministry in monitoring activities, the National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System (INVALSI), which carries out evaluations of students' knowledge and skills, and of the quality of education and vocational training, and seven Regional School Offices. Such Offices were then partnered with a few others across six Inter-regional Working Groups. PA.I.D.E.I.A was re-constituted in 2016, and integrated with representatives of the additional Regional School Offices, the school super intendencies of the autonomous provinces, and the head masters of the centres for adult instruction. Chaired by the Ministry of Education, it prepared operational guidelines for planning educational activities, and supporting and monitoring the centres.

The reform strand on the labour market started with a national law on contractual typologies, flexible labour market exit, worker protection, and social shock absorbers. Passed on 28 June 2012 in response to the job losses and increased inactivity rates that had followed the 2009 global financial crisis (Di Quirico, 2010), Law n. 92/2012 sanctions lifelong learning as:

...any activity people undertakes in formal, non-formal and informal contexts, at all life stages, with the scope of improving own knowledge, capacities and competencies, in a personal, civic, social and occupational perspective. (Law n. 92 of 28 June 2012, art. 4, par. 51; own translation)

Further, it clarifies that lifelong learning policies are to be nationally defined upon inputs from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour, but in agreement between all levels of government; the same political actors should also agree on how to promote the institution of territorial network systems connecting all education, training and labour services, thus linking strategies for economic growth, youth employment, welfare reform, active aging and active citizenship, also of immigrants.

Following the Law, all levels of governments first reached a mutual understanding (2012), and then agreed on the actual strategy to intervene in these areas (2014), yet clarifying that reform interventions were to be dependent on the European Social Fund for 2014-2020, and additional resources from Youth Guarantee.

The Toscana Region was the first to convene a National Panel for Lifelong Learning (following the 2012 mutual understanding agreement) to reflect and agree on common priorities, thus actively promoting and participating in the definition of the 2014 strategy.

The Panel included the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour, the National Association of Italian Municipalities, employer and employee organizations, the Third Sector Forum, the largest umbrella organisation for the non-profit and voluntary sector, the Network of Italian Universities for Lifelong Learning (RUIAP), and the Italian Network for the Instruction of Adults and Lifelong Learning (RIDAP).

After a period of inactivity, the Panel re-constituted itself in November 2016 upon the initiative of civil society and employees' organizations (thus ahead of any official convocation of the Panel in its full representation by the Conference of Regions and Autonomous Provinces), to reaffirm the need for an effective national skill strategy to overcome the Italian cognitive deficit, yet with adequate public investment and coherent policies.

In fact, publication of both the Italian and comparative results of PIAAC had attracted public attention, alarming both the Ministry of Education and of Labour, who established an inter-ministerial Commission of Experts tasked to identify further actions beyond those undertaken through the strands of reform of general adult education, the labour market and lifelong learning, and to recommend further specific measures, also taking into account the imminent launch in Italy of Youth Guarantee (Milana, 2017).

Established in November 2013 the Commission of Experts was led by an ex-Minister of Education, and included university professors (for the most part specialising in economics), representatives of upper secondary education institutions, the President of the Italian Association for Informatics and Automatic Calculation, the Deputy Director of the Directorate of Employment, Labour and Social Affairs of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and one expert from the Institute for the Development of Vocational Training for Workers (ISFOL), who sat also in the OECD's Advisory group for the Skills Strategy, and had been a previous Director of the Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP).

In its report, the Commission identifies a number of 'incapacitating factors' that can explain low skills performance rates among the Italian population (e.g. a general low level of formal education, high numbers of unemployed, pensioners, and domestic workers, a substantial social immobility, and limited learning provisions for the adult population). Accordingly, it recommends various strategic actions such as to pay higher attention to the EU and the European Council's recommendations, to strengthen sandwich education and training programs, and to reinforce a test-based evaluation culture across the entire education system. On this basis, it proposes targeting: 1) the NEET population through Youth Guarantee; 2) adults not in employment, and pensioners, through publicly-sponsored organisations and civil society; 3) and adults, unemployed or at risk of losing their jobs. The suggested instruments are stronger links between technical education and the labour market, the recognition, validation and certification of individual competences, and the use of the education and skills online self-assessment tool developed by the OECD, available also in Italian language (Ministry of Labour [MLPS] & Ministry of Education [MIUR], 2014).

But, a change of government meant also a change of public officials within the two ministries. So while a few proposals by the Commission were incorporated in the above mentioned 2014 agreement on lifelong learning, only actions under Youth Guarantee under the Ministry of Labour could be implemented.

The Danish reforms

The reforms introduced in 2000 were a watershed in Danish adult education, especially because they established a new system of part-time vocational and professional education

with programmes at all levels of education, including for the first time higher education. Many already existing programmes were streamlined into the new system, which supplemented the existing three sectors of adult education: popular education, general adult education, and labour market training. The system also introduced the principle of recognition of prior learning so that admission to higher levels of education required not only a certain level of previous education but also two years of relevant work experience. Further reforms introduced a new system for funding vocational adult education and training, and a new type of public economic support for adult education students. Students in vocational adult education were already entitled to benefits equivalent to at least the level of unemployment benefit, but the new system also provided benefits for students in general adult education. A follow-up reform transferred the Labour Market Training Centres from the Ministry of Labour to the Ministry of Education, where many of them were merged with vocational schools to create larger, centralised institutions.

The above-mentioned reforms were prepared in a government commission established in response to the increasing complexity of Danish adult education provision, as testified by its mission statement:

The contemporary system appears as confusing and incoherent for the individual student and for companies. Considerable simplification and more coordination and targeting in order to increase the effect of the resources invested. (Finansministeriet, 1999, p. 9)

The system of part-time vocational and professional education had been under preparation in the Ministry of Education for some years, and the ministry had launched a proposal for a system of ‘parallel competence’ in 1996. The government commission was led by the Ministry of Finance and included officials from the Ministries of Education and of Labour. Among its ten members were the vice-director of the Labour Market Agency, which had responsibility for labour market training, and the Director from the Students’ Grants Agency, indicating the emphasis on economic support for adult students.

When the government commission’s work was nearing completion, it was linked to on-going tripartite negotiations, as the commission wanted the social partners to take over a greater share of the funding of vocational adult education. Agreement was reached, the social partners came to share the responsibility for a major educational reform for the first time (Mailand, 2011, p. 8). This inspired several tripartite initiatives in education ever since.

The next major adult education initiative also involved the social partners as policy entrepreneurs. In 2006 the Danish Government published the report *Lifelong up-skilling and education for all at the labour market*, based on work in a commission (the tripartite commission), consisting of representatives mainly from the government, and the social partners. In contrast to the situation in 1999, this initiative had a tripartite character from the outset (Mailand, 2011, p. 10), but its work must be seen on the background of the Globalisation Council, active in the years 2005-06. This was a high-level task force established by the Prime Minister and including other ministers, chairmen of the key social partners, other stakeholders and experts. The task force focused on education and research and its recommendations led to major government grants being reserved over the next years to boost activity in these fields. The Globalisation Council paid little attention to adult education, but a major special grant was still allocated to boosting activity in this sector. In the tripartite commission the social partners also committed themselves to establish funds for continuing education as part of collective negotiations. This system of labour market education funds has since been continued and expanded, so in a certain sector employers pay a percentage of wages (decided through nationally

collective negotiation) to a fund, where companies and employees can then apply for support to education initiatives.

The commission behind the 2006 report was a technical task force. Among its 25 members were no chairmen from the social partners. Its mission was to come up with suggestions on how to develop Danish adult education and training in order to promote lifelong learning for all. Interestingly in the title of its report ‘all’ was reduced to ‘all at the labour market’. In fact, although the introduction said that both economy and personal development should be targeted by education and training, the report had a focus on education and training for the labour market.

This report did not lead to significant reforms. However, the introduction in 2007 of an Act on the recognition of prior learning in adult education, which made it more widely available in the education system, was no doubt inspired by the work of the commission as well as by EU policy.

The following years saw just minor reforms. In 2009 the system of general adult education was revised so as to improve its teaching and programme for adults to better qualify for exams equivalent to those of lower secondary education, and thus to contribute to the objective of having 95 pct. of a youth cohort complete an upper secondary education degree. This is important for preventing youth unemployment, but has been notoriously difficult to achieve. Preparation of the reform did not involve formalised commission work; it was handled internally in the Ministry of Education.

Another reform was the introduction of regional centres of adult and continuing education in 2010. These are not new institutions but organisational structures intended to increase collaboration and partnership between the institutions of general adult education and those of vocational adult education. The aims is to provide a more coherent provision, easier to access for users, and to intensify active work on involving companies in planning of education for their employees (Danmarks Evalueringssinstitut, 2012). Part of the inspiration for the reform came from the 2006 report above-mentioned, and from follow-up talks on adult education with the social partners (Danmarks Evalueringssinstitut, 2012, p. 11). The reform was passed under a liberal-conservative government, but supported also by the Social Democrats and the Social Liberals.

The general trend in the reforms and initiatives described so far show a focus on vocational and work-related adult education, also visible in recent attempts to boost adult education and training. In the spring of 2014, the then government (a coalition of Social Democrats and Social Liberals) worked on a comprehensive ‘growth plan’ for the Danish economy and as part of this it held negotiations with the social partners. It should be noted that two years earlier the government had attempted to establish a more ambitious plan for up-skilling through tripartite negotiations, but this had failed because the government insisted that more funds for education should have been linked to an increase in the supply of labour, for instance through a reduction of holidays. The 2014-growth plan was less demanding, and the social partners participated. The plan came to include a grant of one billion Danish kroners (135 million Euros) to be used to increase adult education and training activity over the following six years.

The latest significant adult education reform that has been implemented concerns part-time vocational education. This is part of a comprehensive reform of vocational education decided in 2014, and it lays out a framework for enrolment (and teaching) of adults at vocational schools in order to obtain an upper secondary vocational diploma. Recognition of prior learning is a mandatory part of this, and teaching can be conducted differently according to the character and amount of work experience that adults have. The reform has encountered considerable difficulties, not least because it has emphasised that a main purpose of the initial assessment of prior learning is to make the duration of

study as short as possible for the individual student. This tends to give the adult students (and their employers) too narrow frameworks for the learning situation. The result has been a fall in the enrolment rate (Danmarks Evalueringssinstitut, 2016).

Neither the general reform of vocational education nor the sub-reform of adult vocational education were prepared in a special commission or task force. It was rather the result of a process where important stakeholders converged in their perceptions of the problems and initiated informally coordinated work to develop policy solutions. The director of one stakeholder, the association of Danish vocational colleges, has put it like this:

This is a long process where you discuss, continues working, improve a long chain of proposals and working papers, meet with different stakeholders and write stuff for the press. And at a certain point – at least in this case – the politicians take up the matter and start developing a reform proposal. (Kunov, 2014)

The most recent reform initiative also involves C&TF work as well as the social partners. In 2016, the Danish Government set up an expert group to come up with suggestions for a reform of the adult education system, again after consultations with the labour market organisations. The group was tasked to ‘analyse and present possible solutions for adjustments and improvements, focusing especially on companies’ and adults’ needs for competence and on quality and efficiency in provision’ (Ekspertgruppen for Voksen, Efter og Videreuddannelse, 2017, p. 10, own translation). The group’s report and recommendations from June 2017 follow earlier policy, with a focus on coherence and partnership in the system, more recognition of prior learning, and flexible and efficient institutional management. One novelty is the recommendation of establishing an individual voucher system, where employees can spare resources (obtained through individual negotiation with employers) for funding continuing education. This recommendation was not adopted in the tripartite agreement reached in October the same year (Danish Government et al, 2017). Otherwise, the agreement included many initiatives aimed at making it more economically attractive for mainly the employers to make use of the adult education and training provision.

This expert group was different from earlier C&TFs. Only one member was a government official (a director from the Ministry of Employment), the other four were independent experts. Two were economists and professors; two are directors from think tanks or consultancy firms. Interestingly the original chairman (also an economist) withdrew in protest, because the labour market organisations would not provide sufficient information about the amount of funding accumulated in the competence funds that were established by collective agreement.

Conclusions

Our analysis shows how C&TFs have been present in and contributed to policy processes leading to adult education reforms in both Italy and Denmark. We have found both political-strategic and technical C&TFs, but their work has generally been mobilising rather than de-politicising. A reason for this can be that adult education is not a field where strong political interests may clash.

In the Italian context, the temporary grouping of representatives of different elite positions is crucial to coordinating central, regional and local responsibilities and interests. For instance the National Technical Commission for the Instruction of Adults was led by the Ministry of Education and included members from two other ministries as

well as from regional and local governments, social partners, and experts. Further, given the ‘cooperative regionalism’ principle in national governance, the initiative to convene a government task force in Italy does not necessarily come from the central authorities; for example the National Panel for Lifelong Learning was convened upon on the initiative of the Toscana Region.

In Denmark we find fewer examples of C&TFs, when compared to Italy, in the period studied. Yet, all those established have had three main functions: to signal the political importance of the adult education (or the lifelong learning) agenda; to coordinate policy development between difference sectors in central government, and to involve the labour market partners in policy development. The last function has been linked to the tripartite negotiations between the state, employers and trade unions, which have frequently taken place, although with varying success. This configuration has dominated commission work in Denmark, even in C&TFs with technical mandates.

Another distinctive feature is that in Italy the establishment of C&TFs is also a way for civil society organisations to get directly involved in the process of policy-making. The informal Panel on adult education was convened, for instance, on the initiative of a civil society organisation, and commissions initiated by the government, like the National Technical Commission on the Instruction of Adults, also include members from civil society organisations. In Denmark labour market organisations have been strongly involved, while other civil society organisations have generally not been allowed access to national policy bodies.

Education experts have been included in most of the Italian C&TFs, whereas in Denmark ministries and social partners seem to have preferred using their in-house expertise. This reflects the historical strength of these partners in Denmark. However, the most recent commission established in 2016 as follow-up to tripartite agreements has a majority of independent experts.

In sum the character of C&TFs in Italy and Denmark reflect in many ways the political systems and the governance of education of the two countries. In Italy, the development and implementation of adult education policy needs to include decision-makers and officials from central, regional and local governments, and this makes reform processes complex and relatively slow. In Denmark reform processes can happen faster, and implementation is facilitated by a relatively efficient public sector, and the smaller size of the country.

Moreover, in the period under consideration there have been political changes in both countries. In Denmark, the strong parliamentary of the populist Danish People’s Party has displaced established patterns of collaboration, but this has had little impact on education policy. In Italy there has been considerable higher political instability, which has no doubt hampered reform activity in many fields, including adult education.

In presenting the national policy developments, we have paid less attention to the influences of global or European strategies and initiatives. As noted earlier, however, both countries are EU members, and the EU’s influence, even when not accounted for it may well have been in the background of reform or commission work; for instance in Denmark the part-time higher education introduced in 2000 adhered closely to EU recommendations, but this was not used as an argument in the decision-making process (cf. Rasmussen, 2006). Global influences also differed; for instance, in Denmark publication of the PIAAC results passed almost unnoticed in the policy circle (Cort & Larson, 2015), while in Italy, as noted, prompted the establishment of a Commission of experts in 2013, led by an ex-Minister of Education.

According to Bourdieu’s approach that we introduced earlier in this article commissions are an innovation introduced by the state in order to extents its symbolic

meta-capital into different societal fields. Through commissions, social problems are constructed and given public attention, and solutions are constructed to reproduce seemingly universal (but in reality monopolistic) cognitive and cultural classifications. This applies to both strategic and technical C&TFs. Our study does not allow us to confirm or disprove this general theory, but the differences between C&TFs work in Italy and Denmark show how the symbolic hegemony depends on the character of the state. In the centralised Danish system it can be argued that negotiating adult education policy with the labour market partners does in fact help ‘taming’ the social partners, making them accept the basic logic and rules of state power. But it can also be argued that this constellation influences the character of state power, introducing collective relations between state and citizens as supplement to the individual relations. In the more diversified Italian system the universalising function of C&TFs must be seen as weaker, because they have a primary function of establishing coherence within the state.

To conclude, more work is needed to further conceptualise and research the role of C&TFs in the development of adult education policy. However, our results point at three dimensions that could shed lights on country-specific functions, and hence may be considered in further comparative investigations. These are: 1) the type of political system in place in one country (e.g. the Italian federalist system vs. the Danish centralised systems); 2) the ideological strength of a national political system over time (e.g. the Danish government stability vs. the Italian government instability); and, in the case of EU members’ states: 3) the nature of the relation a national political system holds with the EU (e.g. the Italian closer relation to the EU vs. the Danish looser relation). Adequate consideration of these (among others) dimensions may also shed light on the effectiveness (or lack of it) of the negotiation of standpoints for collective action through C&TFs, for the state to accomplish definite objectives in adult education policy.

Notes

¹ A law of popular initiative is a legal institution for direct democracy, through which Italian citizens can present a law proposal for discussion and/or approval to the Parliament or a different local administration. For law proposals with a national breath to be considered by the Parliament, citizens shall gather and submit to the highest instance court at least 50,000 signatures

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