

## Chapter 4

# LEADING A SCHOOL IN ENGLAND, ITALY AND PORTUGALL: THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

### *Concluding remarks*

The concise education system descriptions presented above, attempt to grasp in a socio-political and historical perspective some core elements of the present scenario surrounding headship in England, Italy and Portugal. They are deemed to have relevant implications in the understanding of the relationship between headship and accountability.

In order to derive from them a comparative overview, three aspects are briefly considered:

- i) the structure of school governance*
- ii) the way headship and the headteacher (as an individual professional) are conceived, and*
- iii) the accountability processes concerning the school.*

#### i) the structure of school governance

In the three countries the structure of school governance is based on an executive responsible for the school functioning, the headteacher, who acts together with various collegial bodies. However, the way these bodies are conceived varies dramatically from one country to another and create different kinds of pressure on the headteacher role. These pressures are demanding and the debate is on-going in the three countries, noting in particular the lack of clarity on headteachers' duties and the contradiction between the headteacher's individual overall responsibility and the constraints imposed by the collegial body structures (Artini, 2004; Barroso, 2002; Gibton, 2004; Ribolzi, 2004).

In England the governing body is the sole collegial body. It is the headteacher's employer (on behalf of the LA, in the case of maintained schools) and the legal representative of the school. Officially, it has a main role and represents a strong source of accountability for the headteacher, in that it is responsible for the school strategy, for its budget, the development of its activities and the head's salary. It includes elected members from the school, but also people from LA and the community. Its social visibility is probably higher than in either Italy or Portugal. A lot of care is devoted to attract volunteers from the community, guidelines and training opportunities are implemented to support people who make themselves available for this important social task. In practice however, research shows that very few governing bodies meet the expectation to be able to implement a strategic role, rather sticking to a general support function (Earley, 2003; Stevenson et al. 2005). Here the contradiction appears to be linked to the fact that, while the role of the governor is conceived almost as a real job, in practice governors do not have enough resources (time and financial support) and competences to implement the role effectively. The relational skills of the headteacher thus become crucial to implement a fair and constructive negotiation with the governing body. To a certain extent, from behind the screen, the headteacher leads the governing body too, in a continuous interplay between the requirements of the legal framework and the actual needs of the school.

In Italy and Portugal the governance of schools is enacted through a more complex structure, resulting in several collegial bodies, which hold formal power in decision-making. In Italy the teachers' assembly (composed of all the teaching staff) has major relevance in determining headteachers' agency. It is responsible for the educational aspects of school decision making and is often influenced by the unions' perspectives. When difficult aspects or innovation concerned with reforms are under discussion, even the most skilled heads may find their proposals not approved. It is crucial for Italian heads to be able to plan and organise meetings strategically, taking into account the dynamics between teachers and knowing how to combine their agenda with teachers' opinions and needs.

In Portugal headteachers themselves act from within an elected collegial body, the executive board, which is responsible for school management. Their decision-making is also deeply linked with that of the pedagogical board, which is responsible for

establishing and monitoring school objectives and planning teachers' professional development. The Portuguese governance structure shows an intertwining of bodies representing different professional perspectives, whose effective combination is at the basis of school functioning. In this context, the elected headteacher is the facilitator, the one who assures a balanced and concrete decision-making process.

In the three countries involved in this study, the structure of governance shows how headteachers' agency is formally influenced by the constraints established by the collegial bodies which act together with them. In various ways these bodies constitute a source of accountability, both formal and informal.

ii) The way headship and the headteacher (as an individual professional) are conceived

A major point of difference is the way headteachers are recruited. Here differences are relevant, even if in all three education systems headteachers come from the teaching staff. In England and Italy they are appointed, in Portugal they are elected. Yet, in England and Portugal they become the heads of the specific school for which they are selected. The selection criteria are based on a national professional profile (defined by official national standards in England) but also on the needs of the individual school. Therefore, there is a direct contract of the school with the headteacher, who is expected to meet the specific expectations of its particular situation. In Italy teachers become "heads" participating in an open national competition, before they are assigned to a school following bureaucratic criteria based on the quality of their performance in the open competition, and on the availability of places.

The Italian system seems to be confident that once individuals have proved to possess good professional skills through a test and an interview, they will automatically be able to lead whatever the school, be it in a small parochial village, or in the centre of a city with a broad international intake. To a certain extent, despite recent reforms, the recruitment criteria still reflect the times when schools head were the representatives of the government.

The fact of being elected or appointed, selected by the school or by a higher-level institution can create different patterns of informal and formal accountability. English

and Portuguese heads' experience of working physically close to their employers and dealing with them in the day-to-day practice is different from that of Italian heads, who think of their direct employer in more abstract terms.

The structure of school governance, the way the recruitment is organised and the expected skills of applicants also have an impact on the headteachers' professional profile. In all three countries both teaching experience and ad hoc academic qualifications are required.

In England the emphasis is on a combination of leadership and management skills aimed at supporting learning, assuring the improvement of pupil performance and their well-being as well as the most cost-effective management of resources, including staff, the most expensive resource. English heads, together with their governing bodies, are responsible for school decision-making at all levels.

In the Italian new framework for headship, heads are more managers than leaders. Officially they now have a higher position in the civil servants' rank and they are responsible for the school's results. In practice they act in conjunction with the teachers' assembly and the school board who have decision-making powers. They do not appoint staff, who are assigned to the school by the regional departments of the Ministry. Therefore, school governance implies several contradictions with respect to the responsibilities held by the headteacher.

In Portugal the democratic and collegial governance of school is enacted by a team of three elected teachers, coordinated by a president. This executive board interacts and negotiates its power with other collegial bodies which have decision-making powers. Headteachers are the presidents of complex collegial structures and act from the centre of a network of professionals. Their responsibilities concern school strategy and the educational plan. They have limited power over staff appointments which, as in Italy, staff are assigned to schools by the Ministry and ruled by a very protective career statute.

The number of pupils and teachers for whom headteachers at primary and lower secondary level are responsible for, varies between the systems. What is meant by a

school in Italy and Portugal is a greater entity than it may be in England. In Italy and Portugal “schools” are in fact clusters, often comprising several school sites. In Italy the minimum size of a school is established by law and cannot be smaller than 500 pupils and about 50 teachers. However, many schools, particularly in intensely populated contexts, are much bigger and often include several sites located in different areas or municipalities. Italian heads, particularly at primary level, have a longstanding tradition of leading the network of sites which are included in “the school”. They sometimes have very different histories, cultures and identities. Keeping them together would require sophisticated social and political skills and certainly implies a managerial role. In Portugal the merging of small primary schools and their clustering into larger units (*agrupamentos* of 300-800 pupils) is more recent, but is now the prevalent organisational pattern. In England schools may be quite small in comparison, although the trend of clustering more schools under the same governing body is being piloted (DfES, 2002; NCSL, 2005).

Salary is also an interesting component of headteachers’ profiles. A clear picture is difficult to see, due to the lack of comparable data between systems of payment which are conceived in very different ways across the countries: in England the headteacher’s salary is established through a private negotiation with the governing body but within a national pay scale; in Italy and Portugal it is nationally determined and may vary according to the number of pupils (as it does in England). However, a possible perspective would be to estimate the financial benefit a teacher at a certain stage of their career can gain in each country, when becoming a headteacher. In England an experienced teacher becoming a head may earn about 25% more, in Italy 35%, in Portugal from 20% to 30%, according to the number of pupils in the unit. As compared with the tasks and the responsibilities, in all countries the financial reward of a head cannot be considered very relevant.

iii) the accountability processes concerning the school

Finally, a significant difference between the three systems concerns the accountability framework. The intensive investment in various levels of accountability processes which characterises the English system does not find correspondence in Italy or Portugal. In England targets, testing and inspection are at the centre of the

headteachers' practice. They are recognised tools against which to assess the effectiveness of their action, in the assumption that quality and results may be clearly definable and assessable. In Italy and Portugal the concept of 'results' is more problematic. The most recent developments of these educational systems evidence the interest to pilot accountability frameworks, however, the longstanding tradition of bureaucracy and centralised control makes their implementation complex and vulnerable, due to the pressures from different interest groups. In fact educational accountability continues to be mainly based on compliance to norms and financial accounting.

The overview provided in this chapter has noted the main characteristics of the framework in which educational leadership is enacted in England, Italy and Portugal. It has underlined some key differences and similarities between the three systems, and introduced the context and background for the country case studies which will be presented in the following chapters.