

## **Public or private education? Parents' choices between actual and potential pluralism**

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*Abstract.* School autonomy, educational choices, quality and equity are the watchwords that have guided educational systems changes in many European Countries over the last years towards a pluralistic horizon. Focusing on Italian education system, the article analyzes the mechanisms leading parents to choose children' education paths and investigates the main factors behind the choice between public and private school, exploring how such behavior merely depends on deterministic socioeconomic segmentation or on other cultural variables, such as prestige, ideology, religion, or the status appeal of an education offer. Exploring results of a nationwide Italian PRIN study (consisting in a survey on parents with children at the end of primary and low secondary school and at the beginning of upper secondary schools), the article underlines, besides the influence of parents' education level and socioeconomic status, the importance of other latent variables influencing parents' choice, like family involvement in school system and parents' motivation.

*Keywords:* school choice; family involvement; pluralism in education; public/private school; school autonomy; reference group.

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### **Pluralism in education and school autonomy: the Italian debate**

In the main European Countries the diffusion of pluralistic education systems and the coexistence between public and private schools have led in the last years to a growing debate on how pluralism in education could be perceived and on which could be implications on societies (Dronkers, Felouzis & Van Zanten, 2010). Such issues lead to focus on the relationship between pluralism and linked aspects like school autonomy, educational choices, quality and equity of education systems, as well taking into account different roles and point of views of the many involved education stakeholders (students, parents, teachers and policy makers).

Following the OECD' definitions (2012), a school is classified as public if it is controlled and managed directly or indirectly by a public education authority, a government agency or a governing board appointed by government or elected by public franchise. On the other hand, a school is defined as private when controlled and managed directly or indirectly by a non-government organization (e.g. religious institutes, trade unions, business or other private institution). Private schools can be either government dependent or independent. Government dependent private schools are managed independently but receive more than 50% of their core funding from government agencies. Independent private schools are similarly managed, but less than 50% of their core funding derives from government agencies. In Italy, such aspects have become key issues in the debate on educational policies especially after the Law 62/2000<sup>2</sup> on school equality, which has introduced the formula of "National Education System", including both state and non-state private schools (Bombardelli & Cosulich, 2005; Versari, 2009), acknowledged as "equal", that is to say able to supply a "public" service to all purposes. "Equal" schools are non-state schools, including local authority schools, that match general educational sets of rules, being in coherence with families' educational demands and being characterized by some defined quality and effectiveness criteria<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Law n. 62, March 10, 2000, "Norme per la Parità scolastica e disposizioni sul diritto allo studio e all'istruzione", published in G.U. n. 67, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Among such criteria, have to be mentioned, as stated in the Law n. 62/2000, an educational project harmonized with the Constitutional principles; an educational program compliant with the juridical requirements; the availability of adequate logistic, spatial and functional

A systematic analysis of the law system reveals three main forms in equalizing private to public institutes. The first is a basic *equalization*, limited to primary schools and characterized by the legal recognition of the private educational activities. Such acknowledgment is obtained by schools, necessarily managed by institutions or organizations, through a formal convention with the education agency including the commitment to adopt programs and schedules similar to the public ones. The second form is the *official recognition*, consisting in an administrative provision issued by the Ministry of Education that attributes validity to study programs and exams sustained in a non public secondary school. In this way private schools are allowed to award degrees equivalent to public diplomas since they are subjected to the programs and rules of the Ministry of Education. Lastly, the *alignment*, limited to secondary schools managed by civic or religious institutions, is the most complete form of equalization to public school, because, besides the requirements of the official recognition, it foresees additional conditions (equal to the public standards) regarding the number and kind of teaching posts as well the hiring, the qualification and the economic treatment of the teaching staff.

In Italy around the 20% of schools are managed by private providers (with a very strong prevalence of Catholic inspiration) and, referring to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED, UNESCO, 2011), they are mostly concentrated in the early childhood education (71,5%)<sup>4</sup>.

The relationship between “public” and “private” education is a constant in modern democracies since it deals with the issues of education applying on the principle of freedom derived from the criterion of pluralism “in” and “between” institutions (Colombo, 2009). The matter of pluralism “in” institutions calls into question the very idea of the common school: a single

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tools and equipments according to the kind of school; the insurance of a democratic participation in collegial institutions; the open accessibility to all students, meeting adequate requirements for the inscriptions; the compliance to equal opportunity issues in terms of handicap and disadvantages; the organic constitution of complete courses; the availability of qualified teaching staff, regularly employed in accordance with National collective contracts; the accordance to the evaluation standards regularly planned by the National system.

<sup>4</sup>The private schools distribution within the other educational levels are the following: upper secondary education (12,6%), primary education (11%), lower secondary education (4,9%).

institutional structure, naturally conceived in a pluralistic manner, where social, economic and cultural differences of both teachers and students are included in a common formal and legal order. On the other hand, the pluralism “between” institutions could be seen as a principle of the overall organization of the education system in different types of schools, according to which educational programs are shaped by specific culture, philosophy or religious points of views shared by teachers, students and their families (Fabretti, 2011). Over a long time in Italy the first vision of pluralism (“in” institutions) has been supported by the alliance of secular parties, while the second (“between” institutions) from the Catholic inspired ones. Today, however, the growing market process interesting the education sector has radically changed the meaning of the “private” adjective as referred to school, making it less characterized in a religious sense, due to the increasing number of private secular schools, i.e. religiously and philosophically neutrally conceived, as it happens in public schools (Benadusi, 2011). This has highlighted the need to overcome an old-fashioned and barren comparison between public and private education toward a more fruitful pluralistic vision. In this sense, the Law 62/2000 seems to have created the conditions to orient the Italian school toward an increasing autonomy, addressed in a systemic sense as well at the level of each single school.

In such context, the dilemma public/private comes to a crucial point in the opposition between state monopoly and freedom/right of choice (Ribolzi, 2002): nowadays, such categories interact through complex combinations and other alternatives are emerging, as the active role of families. Thus, if school autonomy is potentially the context of family choice, the Law itself offers a form of institutionalization of the families’ right of choice, as a key-point in any autonomous educational system (Ribolzi & Maccarini, 2003). Therefore, it is necessary to ask whether a real possibility exists, in terms of instrumental conditions so that such a choice can be expressed, making operational the rights of citizenship (including, indeed, the right to choose the school), that often remain just declared. Indeed, it seems clear that if the share of students enrolled in private schools were to be strictly dependent on a deterministic socio-economic segmentation, it would have very little meaning to question the justification underhandedly brought back: if there is a strict ranking in school population basing on status, level of education or religion, it has

little sense to look for an interpretation of the motivations, nor to ask what kind of promotional actions may be tempted to change the *status quo*. Hence, it is crucial to investigate if the public-private school choice is a real “possible” choice, without barriers and providing opportunities among educational options of equal dignity and quality, according to a selection process intended to really change something (Ghirardini, 2004).

Nowadays, in Italy, the choice is possible in relation to each autonomy school, public and private, and the Educational Offer Plan (Piano dell’Offerta Formativa or P.O.F.) is a tool to guide families and children in the decision making process. Such institution contains information on the educational project in form of a contractual agreement with users (Ribolzi, 2002). Thus, the pluralistic school system favored by the Law on school equality refers to the debate on how much these schools can differ one other if they all belong to the same kind (James & Levin, 1983; Woods, Bagley & Glatter, 1998) and brings up the question on parental choice, reflecting the tension between the constitutional right of families to choose the school they consider most suitable for their children and the political need to establish solid common foundations among citizens. The focus of this argumentation stands in the economic facilitations due to public management to potential beneficiaries of non-state schools. This provides the framework to orient educational policies toward the construction of a school system able to identify and meet the educational demand of a radically changed society (Baker, in press).

### **Educational choices: the research design on parents’ educational choice**

Over the past decades, the attention of many social scientists has focused on issues related to school choice, mainly analysing European political programs and addresses aiming to provide families more opportunities in children school choices (Miron, Welner, Hinchey & Mathis, 2013). The main theoretical and empirical studies have concerned with school system reforms and distribution of educational opportunities across geographical contexts (Butler & Van Zanten, 2007), in order to understand the impacts of educational choices in society and focusing, in particular, on the potential development of different forms of inequality and

exclusion (Bottani & Benadusi, 2006; Dronkers & Robert, 2008). Referring to such theoretical framework, the article aims to examine the sociological approach to decision-making in education, analysing the influence of different determinants in school choices, considering structural (family status and background, cultural capital, educational supply, helpful networks) and individual aspects (both personal, such as gender and age, both contextual, such as territory, occupational status and level of education of parents, Colombo, 2011). A similar approach allows to conceive the educational decision-making as a social process, taking into account both macro and micro social determinants, in order to analyze the factors influencing the choice.

Basing on these assumptions, the article presents the main research results of the PRIN study “Regulatory and relationship transformation between social actors in the Italian educational system: households’ attitudes and behaviour”, carried out in three Italian cities (Bologna, Genoa and Turin) and financed by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR). The research has aimed to explore families’ evaluation on National Education System, including both public and private schools, and decision-making process in children education paths through a questionnaire addressed to parents with children attending final year of primary and low secondary school and the second year of upper secondary school.

The article analyzes data referred to the city of Genoa, where private schools represent around less than one third (31,4%) of schools of the territory<sup>5</sup>. The Genoese sample is composed by 380 cases, 200 of public schools (52,6%) and 180 of private schools (47,4%): such difference is due to the impossibility to recover 20 questionnaires from private Technical Institutes because of lack of students locally attending such type of Institute (this confirms the non-random distribution of private schools, that are concentrated, for the secondary school level, in Lyceum Institutes). The majority of parents who has completed the questionnaire consists of

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<sup>5</sup> The proportion of private school in Genoa is higher than in Italy (31,4% vs 19,3%). At the same time, observing the kind of school, the distribution is partially aligned to the National level, concentrating in the early childhood education (63,5%, vs 71,5% of Italy). Considering the other two local contexts involved in the PRIN study, private school rates are even more diffused in Turin (37,1%) and in Bologna (42,1%), still maintaining a greater concentration in the early childhood education (respectively 67,4% in Turin and 69,8% in Bologna).

mothers (75% of the sample) both in the case of public as well in private schools, where, particularly, fathers are even less represented (10,6% vs 14,6 % of public schools). In eight out of ten of interviewed families children are living with both parents (in 44,3% of cases children are attending a public school, while in 37,9% a private one). One-parent families are a little more diffused for children attending a public school (18% vs 16,6%). Anticipating the socio-economic status, that will shortly follow, the working class, compared with other classes, shows a more consistent presence of one-parent families (36,7% vs an average of 15% in other socio-economic conditions). Finally, examining the gender distribution between children, the sample is composed mainly of families with young males (209 vs 169 girls), with a strong overrepresentation in private schools, where they reach the 60.1% of the sample, while in the public school the distribution is substantially equal.

The article explores the influence of different factors in educational choices, like the parents' level of education and their socio-economic status, their educational experiences and the social quality of neighbourhood. Secondly, it shows parents' level of satisfaction regarding the school attended by their children, analysing whether different opinions exist between parents with children attending the two different schools types. Finally, the research results permit to observe their evaluation on the whole Italian education system, by analyzing parents' opinions regarding, on the one hand, the degree of achievement of educational objectives, and, on the other hand, the examination of emerged problems. Besides, it is presented an index of family involvement in school system, combined with other indicators of parents' motivation. Such tool allows to explore both parents' level of participation in school activities as well as other factors influencing educational choices, testing the hypothesis that the choice between public and private school is strictly determined by socio-economic segmentation. Finally, exploring the role of *quasi-market* in education, the article provides some recommendations for politics toward an educational system based on the real parents' right of choice within the pluralism "in" and "between" institutions.

### **The influence of parents level of education and socio-economic status**

The first variables considered in our analysis refer to parents' level of education and socio-economic status<sup>6</sup>. The aim was to verify the influence of both economic status and cultural capital, taking into account a potential greater attention to the issue of choice by more educated parents (Van Ryzin, 2008). On this point, it is not clear how higher parental educational attainment could influence school choice: on the one hand, it could indicate families with a value-oriented vision of education (i.e., families giving higher value to education would be more likely to investigate the educational options and to exercise free choice, Ogawa & Dutton, 1997). On the other hand, parents with higher educational attainment could have greater access to information about the available educational choices, potentially increasing the likelihood that an actual choice would be made (Schneider, Marschall, Teske & Roch, 1998). With regard to educational qualifications, by virtue of the diffusion of mass education processes in recent decades, the Italian population is generally more educated than in the past. However, the development of schooling degree doesn't imply the reduction of social inequalities giving some young people more opportunities to get a better education than other. Thus, it remains crucial the cultural resource level that a family can transmit to children, according to theories of human and cultural capital (Coleman, 1966, 1988; Putnam, 2000; Santagati, 2011), as well as the material resources available to the family of origin.

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<sup>6</sup> Parents level of education has been defined considering the highest qualification held by one of the two partners; similarly, family socio-economic status has been defined assuming the most prestigious professional status between those done by parents (Buzzi, Cavalli and De Lillo, 2002). The answer modalities provided in the questionnaire on levels of education has been re-coded as follows: doesn't indicate/no title = 0; elementary school + junior high school has been grouped together considering the smaller number of the first modality of answer. To define the cultural degree of parents it has been decided to consider the parent with the higher title as well the parent with higher professional status has determined the household socio-economic condition (Buzzi, Cavalli and De Lillo, 2002). For a deeper analysis of alternative methods to observe socioeconomic status see Breen (2005) and Erikson (1984). Another option would have been to use the Economic Social and Cultural Status (ESCS) applied in the PISA model, but it has not been possible due to the lacking of equivalent indicators.

Overall, in relation to educational attainments held by parents, the Genoese sample is composed by slightly more than half of cases by profiles with high school degree or with a professional qualification (54,4%) and by just over one third of cases by parents having an university degree (36,9%, tab. 1). Definitely residual (just 33 cases, less than 10% of the sample) are those who have completed their studies at elementary or middle school. Analyzing the composition by educational level in the two sub-samples based on school type (public/private), we note that parents with children attending a private institution are much more educated: just the 5,5% of them have elementary or middle school qualification, while the 43,9% are graduates (vs 30,7% of public school). Parents with a lower qualification have enrolled their children, in most cases, in a public school (almost two over three of parents with elementary or middle qualification and over half of parents with high school qualification), while more than half of parents with an university degree has enrolled their children in a private schools (tab. 2).

Table 1. Parents' level of education and school type

Parents level of education	School type		Total
	Public	Private	
Elementary-middle	11,6%	5,5%	8,7%
Secondary education	57,8%	50,6%	54,4%
Universitary degree	30,7%	43,9%	36,9%
Total answers	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
Total cases	200	180	380

Pearson chi-square Asymp Sig. (2-sided) = 0,010

Table 2. Parents' level of education and school type

Parents level of education	School type		Total answers	Total cases
	Public	Private		
Elementary-middle	69,7%	30,3%	100,0%	33
Secondary education	55,8%	44,2%	100,0%	206
Universitary degree	43,6%	56,4%	100,0%	140
Total	52,5%	47,5%	100,0%	379

Pearson chi-square Asymp Sig. (2-sided) = 0,010

Level of education and professional position are, as expectable, interconnected. Therefore, in relation to parents profession, we find similar evidences (tab. 3). The public school is mainly chosen by petty bourgeoisie (40,5%, including self employed, traders and craftsmen), while the private school seems to be the choice of the entrepreneurs and higher service class (48,9%, following EGP criteria, typically managers, lawyers, university professors and free professionals). The white collars (representing one fifth of the overall sample) are more equally distributed (18,9% in public and 17,4% in private), while the working class (generally less represented, being only 8,2% of the whole sample) seems to be more oriented to the public option (9,5% vs 6,7%, probably for economic reasons).

Table. 3. Parents' socio-economic status and school type

Parents socio-economic status	School type		Total
	Public	Private	
working class	9,5%	6,7%	8,2%
petty bourgeoisie	40,5%	27,0%	34,0%
white collar middle class	18,9%	17,4%	18,2%
higher service class	31,1%	48,9%	39,7%
Total answers	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
Total cases	190	178	368

*Pearson chi-square Asymp Sig. (2-sided) = 0,004*

Analyzing choice behaviors by professional groups (tab. 4), just representatives of higher service class seem to prevalently orient their choices toward private schools, resulting in a greater number of students from upper-classes, confirming a common sense consideration, since private schools are to be paid and more economic resources are needed. The ratio for the two lower-middle classes, however, is less unbalanced than it could be imagined: among the working class parents, six out of ten enroll child/children in a public school and four out of ten choose a private one. In the case of middle class, values are slightly equivalent: respectively 53,7% and 46,3%, conforming, perhaps, how middle classes still partially look to higher classes in terms of orientation of their behavior.

The outlined above picture is completed with data related to the incidence of school expenditure on family budget with children attending a public or a private school (tab. 5 and tab. 6). It emerges that public school

entails costs implying renounces for other expenses for almost one out of ten families, so that about a quarter of the families, that choose to invest in school sacrificing other consumption, enroll their children in public schools, while the other three-quarters choose private solutions. Families who value expenditures as “generally quite tolerable” are about half in both sub-groups, proportionally a little more in public schools, moreover, being the largest group in both cases.

Table 4. Parents' socio-economic status and school type

Parents socio-economic status	School type		Total answers	Total cases
	Public	Private		
working class	60,0%	40,0%	100,0%	30
petty bourgeoisie	61,6%	38,4%	100,0%	125
white collar middle class	53,7%	46,3%	100,0%	67
higher service class	40,4%	59,6%	100,0%	146
Total	51,6%	48,4%	100,0%	368

Pearson chi-square Asymp Sig. (2-sided) = 0,004

School expenditures don't cause particular problems in four out of ten families in public schools and in less than two out of ten in private schools, where 35,8% of households have expressively stated that the choice for private school requires the renounce to other expenses. The overall amount of expenses is hard to define precisely, considering the difficulties in acquiring exact fees of private schools, varying from school to school as well between local contexts and even between different quarters of a same town, nevertheless it has to be considered that overall costs should not take into account only fees, but also different travel and meal costs for children.

Table 5. Incidence of school expenditure on family budget and school type

How much do the expenses related to children education weight on household budget ?	School type		Total
	Public	Private	
It doesn't cause particular problems	39,7%	18,4%	29,6%
It is generally quite tolerable	49,7%	45,8%	47,9%
I have to renounce to other expenses	10,6%	35,8%	22,5%
Total answers	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
Total cases	199	179	378

Again, being impossible to collect precisely such data, it is only possible to reflect on a proxy variable considering the level of expenses as perceived by parents on household budget.

Table 6. Incidence of school expenditure on family budget and school type

How much does the expenses related to children education weight on household budget ?	School type		Total answers	Total cases
	Public	Private		
It doesn't cause particular problems	70,5%	29,5%	100,0%	112
It is generally quite tolerable	54,7%	45,3%	100,0%	181
I have to renounce to other expenses	24,7%	75,3%	100,0%	85

Besides data collection problems, the results would seem to call into question stereotypes about “rich parents” of private school, as well about free education. By linking the evaluation of school expenditures and parents profession, it emerges that the greatest difficulties are expressed by those with less skilled occupations, in the case of both public and private schools. Families with greatest difficulties belong to working class subgroup with children enrolled in private schools: one out of three of them states to have been compelled to give up other expenses. When the parents' profession is more qualified, the difficulties expressed about school costs decrease: both in the case of “white collar middle class”, both in the case of “service class”, the majority of respondents considers spending “generally quite tolerable” or states that “it doesn't create particular problems”.

### **The influence of neighborhood socio-economic conditions and parents previous educational experience**

An interesting evidence emerging by the research is that, along with the promotion of school autonomy and the consequent coexistence of different school model to choose between, the proximity factor (i.e. the distance of the school from the household living area) doesn't seem to be as determinant as it could have been in the past. In fact, half of the interviewed parents haven't chosen the closest to home school and about one third of children are attending a public school in a different area from the living quarter. This might indicate that school autonomy has triggered choosing mechanisms within public sector leading families to seek more

information and to improve their ability to evaluate different proposals. In this way schools are becoming more heterogeneous among themselves as well increasingly homogeneous right inside. In other words, the increasing marketization of school establishments seems to require more informed users (or consumers) than in the past, more prepared to select among a wide range of concrete alternatives that may even reside far beyond their living areas (Colombo, 2011). However, considering access opportunities, the specific Italian housing and public transport structure makes difficult to choose a school excessively far from the living zone and this produces disadvantages for private schools, which are not uniformly distributed in the territory.

In most cases, the decision to choose a school “away from home” has been taken by a mutual agreement of parents (more often in private schools case than in public ones). Otherwise, when only a single parent has taken the decision, she is almost always the mother. The child’s opinions are determinant in almost one quarter of the cases and this occurs especially in public schools choices (41,4% vs 11,1%). The private option, therefore, seems to be mainly a parental choice: however, this could be explained considering the children composition by age group, composed by two-third of children in compulsory education age<sup>7</sup>.

A further considered aspect has been the possible impact of parents’ previous educational experience. Both in the case of mothers and of fathers, it emerges an educational experience continuity. Parents who have attended a public school have chosen, in most cases, to enroll their children in public school (55,1% for fathers and 56,9% for mothers). A analogous behavior has been retrieved, with a greater intensity, among parents who have attended a private school, since they have chosen the same kind of school for their children (respectively 69,6% for fathers and 68,8% for mothers).

Finally, when in the family there is more than one child, parental school choice leads to the same and equal choice for all of children, both in the case of public and of private schools (about 90% in the public and 98% in the private ones).

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<sup>7</sup> On this point, it seems appropriate to refer to a corollary of the subsidiarity principle, according to which the responsibility of a not independent subject belongs to those who are closest to him/her (AA.VV., 2007).

**The opinions of parents on children schools: lights and shadows of Italian education system**

Taking into account parents' opinions, generally, their level of satisfaction for the school attended by their children is very high, if not almost unanimous. The quota of dissatisfied parents are very low: 7,1% in public schools and 3,4% in private ones. The greater differences between private and public refer to the scaling level of satisfaction. Indeed, parents with children in private schools have declared to be "very satisfied" at the 60,6% and "fairly satisfied" at the 36,1%. The high satisfaction level maintains also in public schools, but with reversed rate of positive answer modality: only the 32,8% are "very satisfied", while the remaining 60,1% are "fairly satisfied". Besides, the majority of respondents (92,5% in public school and 93,8% in private schools) would suggest another family to enroll child/children in the same school attended by their own child/children.

Even parents' evaluation on teachers is quite positive: 85,9% of the sample have stated that "almost all" or "a large number" of teachers have adequate and appropriate professional competences. On the other hand, the 10,3% have stated they could not express a proper evaluation on such point and just the 3,7% has answered that only "a minority" possesses acceptable skills. However, the two sub-samples have outlined different situations. Parents evaluation in private schools is much more positive: the aforesaid answer modalities saturate to the 92,1% of the sample, with a high prevalence of "almost all" (70,8%), leaving the dissatisfied parents at a residual quota of 1,7% and the uncertain respondents at 6,2%. On the other hand, in public school, positive feedbacks saturate to the 80,4% of the sample (the answer modality "almost all" grouping the 53,3% of the respondents), while the dissatisfied cases are 5,5% and the uncertain respondents raises to 14,1%. Although data refer only to school quality as perceived by the parents and not to the actual (or differently evaluated) quality, it's worth underlining that satisfaction is higher in private schools' users.

To verify the influence of personal experience on the assessment of the Italian school on its whole, we have explored parents opinions regarding the perceived level of achievement of school's objectives and asking them a description of eventual school's problems. Comparing the judgments about

at what extend the Italian school achieves specific objectives (tab. 7), in both school types we find the same aspects at the first three placements: firstly, “to teach students how to relate to others”, secondly, “to prepare them to continue studies at Universities” and, thirdly, “to develop students autonomy”. Changes arise in the fourth placements, where we find, in public schools, “to teach students to understand different cultures” (eighth for private schools’ users), while, in private schools, “to teach students to study alone” (sixth in public schools).

*Table 7. At what extend does Italian school truly reach the following objectives? (average value on a scale from 1 = this is an objective that school has not to pursue = to 6 = school fully reaches this objective)*

School' s objectives	School type					
	Public			Private		
	mean	std dev	count	mean	std dev	count
To teach students how to relate to others	4,26	1,01	189	4,25	1,01	174
To prepare to continue studies at Universities	4,19	1,10	183	4,19	0,99	171
To develop students autonomy	4,15	0,98	190	4,08	1,04	175
To teach students to study alone	4,00	1,15	190	4,06	1,05	174
To prepare students to be responsible citizens	4,05	1,09	188	3,96	1,04	174
To teach students to understand different cultures	4,09	1,03	188	3,84	1,01	174
To teach students a balanced lifestyle	3,89	1,16	188	3,97	1,07	173
To develop a critical thinking	3,80	0,93	187	3,82	0,92	175
To prepare students to make choices according to ethical principles	3,67	1,05	182	3,90	1,10	172
To develop creativity	3,59	0,99	189	3,70	0,94	176
To prepare students for labor market	3,65	1,25	183	3,52	1,12	171

Among other variables, the only one occupying different position is “to prepare students to make choices according to ethical principles”, that ranks the seventh position in private schools (with a score of 3,90 on a scale from 1,00 to 6,00), and places in the ninth position in public school (with a score of 3,67). In both sub-samples, we find the lowest values for aspects like “to prepare students for labor market” and “to develop creativity”, both considered of few importance either for public and non public schools’ users.

If, as seen, parents with children attending both school types evaluate students preparation to labor market as one of the less achieved objectives of Italian school, however, significant differences emerge in judgments on the usefulness of educational achievement and of students commitment. About three quarter of the respondents in both sub-samples believe that good educational achievements are essential to obtain a good job: parents with children attending a public school express more agreement on this point, so that they seem to believe more than parents with children in private school in the credential value of the educational attainment. Confidence in school as the main road to labor market, however, seems to be somewhat not related to students' commitment: almost one parent over two in public schools (47,2%) and a less little in private ones (37,5%) believes schooling commitment isn't important to get a well paid job. However, 55,9% of respondents with children in a public school and 63,9% of those with children in a private one argue that the right criterion in choosing a school is that of "a severe school that could compel students to hard work".

Table 8. How much the following problems are serious in Italian schools? (average value on a scale from 1 = not at all to 4 = a lot)

School's problems	School type					
	Public			Private		
	mean	std dev	count	mean	std dev	count
The spread of rudeness	3,54	0,71	194	3,63	0,67	179
The spread of violence and bullying	3,15	0,80	194	3,36	0,75	180
The use and circulation of drugs and alcohol at school	3,16	0,95	193	3,33	0,84	180
The lacking students interest and commitment	2,98	0,79	192	3,09	0,75	180
The classrooms and equipment inappropriateness	3,16	0,89	191	2,87	0,95	180
The lack of discipline and students control	2,87	0,92	190	3,08	0,88	180
The lacking parents interest and commitment	2,90	0,90	194	2,87	0,85	180
The inadequacy of the curriculum	2,68	0,81	191	2,75	0,88	179
The lacking teachers professional competences	2,51	0,94	191	2,62	0,94	180
The inadequacy of textbooks	2,57	0,83	192	2,51	0,86	180
The inadequacy of reception of students of foreign origin	2,49	0,96	192	2,49	0,96	180

In relation to school problems (tab. 8), for all proposed items we find higher average values (equal to 2,00, on a scale from 1,00 to 4,00), indicating that none of the listed problems seems to be completely absent in the Italian school system. Problems judged by parents as most serious, both in the case of public and of private schools, are “the spread of rudeness” (3,58), the diffusion of “violence and bullying” (3,25) and “the use and circulation of drugs and alcohol at school” (3,24). It follows “the lacking students interest and commitment” (3,03), which, in public school, is preceded by “the classrooms and equipment inappropriateness” (3,16). For parents who have children in a private school, on the contrary, the problem related to “the lack of discipline and students control” seems to be more serious (3,08 vs 2,87). Remaining proposed items did not show significant differences in opinions expressed by parents of the two sub-samples.

Thus, data don't show very significant differences among opinions expressed by parents regardless the types of school in relation to the level of achievement of school's objectives as well to the school's problems.

This leads to investigate the reasons of parents' school choice behavior though an additional point of view: the involvement and the motivation of parents toward their children educational experience.

### **The Index of “family involvement” in school life and “parents’ motivation”**

The study has paid much attention on two important dimensions, the parents' involvement in children educational experience and their level of “motivation”, as factors mostly influencing the choice between public and private school. Some items included in the questionnaire were conceived as *proxy* indicators to explore such dimensions.

Following Lazarsfeld approach (Boudon and Lazarsfeld, 1966), it has been realized an index referred to levels and modalities of parents involvement in children's school life<sup>8</sup>. Recently, a growing number of

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<sup>8</sup> Questionnaire variables considered to construct parents involvement index are: a) different level of involvement in management activities of the school of own children; b) different level of involvement in helping own children in doing their homework; c) different level of involvement in following children's school learning; d) different tools to get information to address to matters and topics related to children's educational path. After the attribution of

theoretical and empirical studies have showed interest in analyzing the degree to which parents are involved (or uninvolved) in their children's education and the majority of such researches show a decline in parental involvement in education, due, in particular, to the presence of both parents in the household workforce, the general fast pace of modern society and the substantial declining role of the family (Ferrara, 2009; Jeynes, 2012). Indeed, the issue related to family involvement in school system is a point of great interest to explore whether, and to what extent, parents may represent an opportunity to improve school quality (Ribolzi & Maccarini, 2003)<sup>9</sup>.

Analyzing the two sub-samples, data show a greater involvement of parents with children attending a private school (tab. 9). Within sub-samples, as expectable, involvement reaches an average medium value, interesting the 39,5% of parents with children in public schools and the 37,2% of respondents having chosen private schools for their sons and daughters. Nevertheless, differences between public and private contexts show already at lower involvement degrees<sup>10</sup>, interesting 27,0% of respondents in public versus "only" the 18,9% of cases in private context. Differences emerge even more significantly at higher levels of

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specific weights to different modalities of answer for each item/dimension, the involvement index has been realized through the mean average of the considered dimensions and declined in five increasing levels of involvement of parents in children school life.

<sup>9</sup> In Italy, public institutes have specific laws, applying to all kind of schools and regulating the parental participation to school life (articles 5-11, Testo unico norme sull'istruzione, decreto legislativo 297/1994). It is foreseen the election of parents representatives within collegial commissions (combining all of the different, internal and external, school components) as foreseen at various school levels (class, institute) as well at territorial levels (district, province and National). In such contexts parents are allowed to express opinions on general ongoing of the class or of the institute, providing proposals to the school head in order to improve activities, giving their opinions on eventual experimental projects and presenting proposal to implement the school-families relation. There are also two other institutes of participation, the assembly and the parents' committee, where parents could debate problems concerning general aspects of the institutes or of the classes attended by their children and whose concrete activities are referred to the free initiative of parents. Nevertheless, from the normative dispositions does not emerge a clear indication of roles, competences and participation of parents to overall school planning, but rather a more generic petition in terms of principles on cooperation between school and families, as a tout court value and as a recognized parental right to adopt certain choices concerning individual need, that have to be answered by school through their resources.

<sup>10</sup> The quota refers to the cumulative sum of "very low" and "low" involvement degrees.

involvement, interesting the 33,5% of parents having chosen a public school versus a definitely more consistent 43,9% of the parents oriented to the private solution. Such data suggest that the presence of a participative leadership seems to have a strong consistency in the two school types, but, at the same time, the ability to engage less active parents reveals to be weaker in public schools<sup>11</sup>.

Table 9. Distribution of family involvement index by school type

Family involvement index	School type		Total
	Public	Private	
very low	9,0%	6,7%	7,9%
low	18,0%	12,2%	15,3%
medium	39,5%	37,2%	38,4%
high	23,0%	33,9%	28,2%
very high	10,5%	10,0%	10,3%
Total answers	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
Total cases	200	180	380

Pearson chi-square Asymp Sig. (2-sided) = 0,143

From a strict statistical point of view a significance value of 0,143, clearly over the standard threshold of 0,05 suggests independence between the family involvement and school type. Nevertheless, a potentially greater involvement of parents with children attending private schools could be explained both in terms of greater closeness to the educational project (regarding the school choice and the curriculum preference), as well in terms of more qualified users, considering that the level of education and socio-economic status is higher between parents enrolling children in private schools. By crossing parents level of education and socioeconomic status with involvement index we can obtain further suggestions. Generally, considering the compared means values of table 10, the parents'

<sup>11</sup> On this point, a confirmation emerges considering the opinion expressed by parents on communication flow characterizing family-school relationship, considered adequate by eight out of ten respondents, with a slightly higher value in private schools (80,6%) than in public ones (78,6 %). The percentage of respondents who would like to be more informed is almost equal (18,3% vs 18,4%) and the dissatisfied are very few (just two parents in private school and six in public schools), although private schools seem to be more active at the enrollment time, since 87,2% of them organize presentation and welcome meetings, compared to 75,1% of public schools.

level of involvement raises together their level of education, but it reaches slightly higher levels in private rather than in public context. On the other hand, looking to the parents socioeconomic status, while in public schools context, the involvement level raises quite evidently going from parents of the working class to upper service classes, between parents having chosen a private solution for their children, lower classes describes an even higher involvement level in comparison with the although significant degree of higher classes. In such sense, “working class” parents enrolling their children in private schools, considering the higher effort of school fee payment, seems to be characterized by an higher involvement in school life probably also by higher level of investment in their children school path.

*Table 10. Family involvement index: average values for parents level of education and parents socio-economic status by school type*

		School type	
		Public	Private
<b>Parents level of education</b>	Elementary-middle	2,34	2,79
	Secondary school	2,73	2,84
	University degree	2,75	3,00
	Total	2,69	2,91
<b>Parents' socio-economic status</b>	Working class	2,31	3,11
	Petty bourgeoisie	2,83	3,07
	White collar middle class	2,54	2,56
	Service class	2,75	2,87
	Total	2,70	2,81

Regarding choice “motivation”, we have identified some indicators referred to aspects that have most influenced parental school choice (tab. 11).

We identify three spreads between public-private as the reasons and motivations:

1. ideological coherence between school educational program and family values (indicated by 63,8% of parents in private schools and by 36,2% in public schools);

2. the presence of a “safe” and “quiet” environment (indicated by 60,5% of parents in private schools and by 39,5% in public schools). Two closely connected items present higher value in private schools: attention to compliance with the rules (57,4% vs 42,6%) and teachers stability in school (55,3% vs 44,7%);

3. the dimension of commitment of both teachers and students (in both cases, in private schools the value is higher than in public schools by almost ten percentage points).

The teaching quality is indicated by 51,6% of parents in private schools and by 48,4% in public schools, confirming that the concern for quality is common in both educational choices.

Table 11. Positive answers to the item: "Have you taken into account the following aspects enrolling you children in school?"

Aspects	School type		Total answers	Total cases
	Public	Private		
Suggestion from others (friends, relatives, teachers)	51,0%	49,0%	100,0%	149
Contingent reasons (school close to home, timetable...)	61,4%	38,6%	100,0%	189
Teaching quality	48,4%	51,6%	100,0%	314
Attention to compliance with the rules	42,6%	57,4%	100,0%	258
Teachers stability in school	44,7%	55,3%	100,0%	237
Safe and quite environment (safeguarding against risks and dangers)	39,5%	60,5%	100,0%	261
Parents opinions are taken into account	41,9%	58,1%	100,0%	155
Teachers are very committed to their work	45,6%	54,4%	100,0%	252
Students are involved in school activities	45,8%	54,2%	100,0%	236
This school well prepared students to continue their studies	51,5%	48,5%	100,0%	293
To give my children an education consistent with my family values	36,2%	63,8%	100,0%	254

Other two motivations have to be added. The issue "parents opinions are taken into account" has been indicated by 58,1% of parents in private schools and by just 41,9% of parents in public schools. The issue "this school prepare well students to continue their studies" has been indicated slightly more by parents with children attending public schools (51,4% vs 48,5%). Finally, practical reasons (school being close to home, timetable...) seem to more influence the choice of parents with children in public schools (61,4% vs 38,6%), as well as "suggestion from others (friends, relatives, teachers)" (51% vs 49%).

In a nutshell, it emerges that parents who have enrolled their children in a public school have taken mainly into account practical reasons (school being close to home, timetable, etc. 61,4%), the school ability to ensure a good preparation to continue studies (51,5%) and suggestion from others,

like friends, relatives, teachers (51%). On the contrary, the aspects less considered are “to give my children an education consistent with my family values” (36,2%) and a “safe and “quite environment, safeguarding against risks and dangers” (39,5%). Exactly these two items occupy, instead, the first (63,8%) and the second (60,5%) places in answers of parents with children enrolled in private schools. They have also indicated, in descending order, “parents opinions are taken into account” (58,1%) and “attention to compliance with the rules” (57,4%).

To obtain more concise and, at the same time, more explanatory information, the aforesaid items have been re-coded, creating three synthetic indicators: “Values”, “School quality” and “External factors”<sup>12</sup>.

Thus, in order to analyze at what extent parents have judged factors important, we have proceeded by averaging answers to items composing each aforesaid indicator<sup>13</sup>, obtaining a standardized scale. Comparing the three indicators’ values between the two sub-groups (tab. 12), it emerges that in both cases parents attribute primary importance to issues related, generally, to “School quality”. Attention to these issues seems to be slightly higher for parents with children attending private schools (mean 0,89 vs 0,79). It exists a similar difference, quite remarkable, observing the “Values” indicator’s scores (0,83 vs 0,60). “External factors” indicator matters most, as we’ve already said, for parents with children attending public school (0,61 vs 0,54), but, generally, among the three indicators, it is the one that has the lowest weight: in relation to private schools, parents probably take into account that unlikely they’ll find the desired school close to their home. It has also to be remarked that higher standard deviation values for all the three indicators in public schools probably suggest a more heterogeneous context.

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<sup>12</sup> The considered items were the following ones: for “Values” indicator “to give my children an education consistent with my family values”, “parents opinions are taken into account”, “attention to compliance with the rules”; for “School quality” indicator “teaching quality”, “teachers stability in school”, “teachers are very committed to their work”, “students are involved in school activities”, “this school well prepared students to continue their studies”; for “External factors” “suggestion from others (friends, relatives, teachers)”, “contingent reasons (school close to home, timetable...), “safe and quite environment (safeguarding against risks and dangers)”. To complete “external factors” indicator another question has been considered, i.e.: “have you enrolled your child/children in the closest to home school?”.

<sup>13</sup> We have assigned a different weight to the answer modalities (“yes” or “no”) of the question “have you enrolled your child in the closest to home school?”.

Table 12. Weight of each motivational indicator for school type

Indicators		School type	
		Public	Private
Values indicator	Mean	<b>0,60</b>	<b>0,83</b>
	Count	165	179
	Dev. Standard	0,36	0,22
School quality indicator	Mean	<b>0,79</b>	<b>0,89</b>
	Count	188	174
	Dev. Standard	0,27	0,21
External factors indicator	Mean	<b>0,61</b>	<b>0,54</b>
	Count	199	180
	Dev. Standard	0,32	0,27

Data referred to the “Values” indicator show interesting evidences considering parents level of education and socio-economic status. In relation to the level of education, in private schools the indicator hasn’t significant difference (scoring around 0,83 in all educational levels), while in public schools the highest value is in correspondence to lower educated parents (0,53 for university degree, 0,62 for secondary and 0,71 for elementary-middle). On the other hand, observing parents socio-economic status, in private schools the value slightly decreases when status raises (around 0,80 for petty bourgeoisie, white collar middle class and service class, 0,91 in working class), while there isn’t a direct correlation in public schools.

The educational need is not a “class” factor, but it is linked to family culture: the socially disadvantages families with children attending a private school seem to more strongly seek in educational system the safeguard of the values they believe, showing a demand that the same family type also request in public schools.

### Final remarks

The research sets within the actual debate highlighting how parents’ school choice is strictly connected to pluralism within educational systems, school autonomy and quality/equity of the educational offer (Benadusi, Giancola & Viteritti, 2008; Merrifield, 2011). In last decades the diffusion of the *quasi-market* orientation in the main European school reforms

(Walford, 1996) has been generally voiced in terms of education quality and schooling efficiency improving by introducing competition between schools. Besides, it has been assumed that the development of increased school choice would have driven schools to make consumers (parents and students) more responsive and informed (Feinberg & Lubienski, 2008). However, there is little evidence that the *quasi-market* of schooling has led to education quality and equity improvement (Musset, 2012); rather, it has frequently produced greater inequalities between schools and greater segmentation of the educational offer for children coming from different socio-cultural backgrounds (Walford, 1996). However, in many cases, the *quasi-market* has implied a reduction of public expenditure on schooling and a resultant partial privatization of educational system.

In Italy, the introduction of the school autonomy Law (1997) has ratified; “the passage from the conception of the *manager State*, ensuring uniformity of educational process, to the *facilitator State*, ensuring services’ quality and, on the base of the subsidiarity principle, helping individuals, families and local communities to answer to their educational needs, balancing between the role of merging and the role of ensuring diversities” (Ribolzi, 2009, p. 44).

This goal has been obtained through an allocation of efficiency permitting to choose schools that fit the desired kind of education (Schneider, Teske & Marschall, 2002). Therefore nowadays a model of multiple options seems to ensure diversity, as peculiar characteristic of contemporary societies. Nevertheless, it has to be remembered that the Law had been approved between harsh debate, still ongoing. Some supporters of private schooling expressed their contrariety considering that the approved text would not have permitted to family an effective right of educational choice, especially for those standing in low economic conditions. So the provision had been renamed as a “fraud law”, having been approved just the juridical equality, but not the economic one (Versari, 2009, p. 18). The expression represented a sort of cartel composed by those considering the Law a defeat for the “reasons of those promoting a free school” (Antiseri and Infantino, 2000). The supporters of private schools claim for realizing an educational system based on effective right and parity principle in educational choices that has to commensurate, inevitably, with the rules stated by school institutions, responsible to pursue school equality not only

from the point of view of results, but also from the perspective of social composition (Bottani, 2009).

As a matter of fact, the economic selection of pupils according to their socio-economic status makes the learning environment not enough pluralistic. Thus, it emerges the importance of connecting the private schools to public financing, since the Italian Ministry of Education awards grants to private schools of all educational levels to support their function within the “National Education System”, but it doesn’t imply financial support to parents for fees payment. The research has confirmed how parents encountering major economic difficulties in sustaining effort for children education are those belonging to the working class, having children enrolled in a private school, where one third of them declares to have to renounce to other expenses. Even if it’s a very small subsample, the information lead to question if a different school financing policy could permit a broader range of people to exercise a choice right. If, from the one hand, the State cannot prevent families to pursue the highest possible credential level for their children, intervening by “disadvantaging the favored situations”, on the other hand it cannot abdicate the primary function of operating on educational system in order to minimize privileges. The reorganization of educational system is part, indeed, of a diffused trend to re-examine the Welfare State and calls into the debate the way through which public services for people are managed, which must respect criteria of economic rationality, as well as the quality of the service itself and the redistribution of resources, protecting weakest parts of society. Such urgency is more pressing in school, for the particular social relevance of the role that the school itself plays in sustaining the development and the improvement of life quality, as a common good (Caselli, 2009).

Other considerations could suggest an enlargement of the private school access. In this sense, if there would be a full exercise of the school choice right extended also to families with lesser socio-economic status, this would render effectively sustainable the request of more economic support. In this case more questions arise. If everyone, even the poorest families would access easily to private schools, would, then, the richest family send still their children to the same schools? Would still be convenient sending children to a private institute? Research results show a certain homogeneity of values in parents that send their children to private schools, but do such

parents really ask for class homogeneity? Would a really more pluralistic private school have the same function for the higher status stakeholders?

Where the co-partnership applies in a welfare mix regime and with abundant resources (from private sector, no profit institutes, local agencies and communitarian programs), there is an enrichment of offer and a supplying model resembling the *quasi-market*; where educational offer implies typical public regulatory mechanisms, investments are less organic, less efficient and larger are inequalities between the financed schools and those marginalized (Colombo and Censi, 2010, p. 143).

Therefore, the current policy implemented by Law 62/2000 seems not efficient in sustaining the weakest part of population. As a matter of fact, only those parents which can buy the “competitive advantages” for their children (due to private school choice) are encouraged to do so, also by the social acceptability of such choice, disguised by the research of excellence, right of choice or market. This reflects Brown’s parentocratic ideology (1990), referring to a system conformed to richness and family ambitions, rather than to capacities and efforts by the students. In an ideal, pluralistic, mixed educational system, all parents regardless their socio-cultural and economic background, should make options for their children at the same degree of freedom and avoiding neither penalization or forcing.

Considering most influent motivations in enrolling children in a public rather in a private school, the research has provided some evidences to individuate a vaster set of motivation underpinning decision-making in education. Such motivations refer to three macro categories: values, quality and external factors. It emerges how in both school types parental choice is influenced by the worry for quality, while there are interesting differences regarding the other two kinds of motivation. Proximity to familiar values seems to most influence the choice of parents oriented to a private school and this is even more important among those belonging to the working class. Lastly, external factors, overall less influencing parental choice, show as more important for parents with children attending a public school, probably because in the case of private school parents are aware that they will find difficultly near home the desired kind of school, considering their unequal territorial distribution (Ribolzi, 2003).

Another issue emerging from the research leads to reflect on parents’ involvement in children school life. Data confirm that such involvement is quite limited, especially in public schools. This makes still far the

realization of an educational system based on a pluralistic frame, because autonomous schools should be built around a precise educational project, including participation of parents, not as clients in a market perspective but as partners with an active role in individuation of needs and in determination and management of school control. So, what is more needed is the diffusion of a new conception of collaboration of parents in school toward an educational co-responsibility (Pourtois and Desmet, 1997), characterized by common objectives and desire of negotiating, leading families to exercise a role of active participation. This is primarily necessary in a moment when the school system, experiencing difficulties in providing adequate technical knowledge and with feeble paradigms of cultural transmission, seems to need, more than in other historical times, the support of families to fulfill, within a polycentric system of socialization (Colombo and Censi, 2010), one of its main duties, that is, ensuring an effective process of socialization for young people.

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