Challenges of Equitable Access to Education in Italy: the Role of Families

Luisa Ribolzi*

Author information

*   Former Full Professor of Sociology of Education. Email: luisa.ribolzi@gmail.com

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Abstract: In stratified societies, schools reproduce the mechanisms of selection. The Italian school system guarantees equality in access, but not in outcomes, and its function of "social elevator" is lost. Only an integrated system of autonomous schools, both public and private, could respond to the growing social complexity, by enhancing diverse strategies to reduce inequity through "quality in education": and freedom of parental choice is a requirement for quality education. The standardized offer, giving exactly the same courses to all students, even if different, can't copy with the increasingly different demand of education, that asks for equality in differentiation. In Western nations, the trend is to move from the centralized State school to an integrated system where the private sector, financed by the State, cooperates with public school (subsidiarity principle). It is important to stress that choice initiatives may go hand in hand with furthering equality in educational opportunities and outcomes. There is a bias against parents' participation and parent-run schools, because of the idea that only the public school can give a common basis for the civic order, but the mandatory and monopolistic common school is no longer the expression of a coherent local community, but is instead a "shopping mall" of competing messages with no moral core and no focused notions of education. The supposed "neutral" school is itself a compelling ideology, perhaps an effort to break two institutions that have been most resistant to totalitarianism: families and religious institutions. Schools must accept the existence of other learning places, such as industry, and other teaching actors, such as the family. The central means to improve quality without denying equity is accountability: schools should be accountable to students and their families, and to the new important actor, civil society in its varied forms. Education is a public and common good, and its organizations play essential roles.

Keywords: education, family, subsidiarity, accountability, public/private relationship

*   Former Full Professor of Sociology of Education. Email: luisa.ribolzi@gmail.com

Foreword

Education has two meaning: as a commodity, it allows or makes it easier to obtain social rewards (wealth, prestige, power...); as a tool for personal empowerment, it contributes to one's growth, independently from its exchange value. Real equity in education means using school to improve full citizenship. Such citizenship implies development and participation in social life, regardless of personal characteristics (social class is one the "traditional" categories, but we have to add gender, race, age, religion), with the exception of merit.

In stratified societies, schools reproduce the mechanisms of selection: part of the population is not allowed to enter education, or it doesn't complete studies, or eventually it joins short tracks that lead to manual or subordinate jobs. Education in post-industrial societies has become a major dimension of inequality, alongside occupation and wealth. In any case, relationships between social structure and educational system are very complicated, so it is impossible to think that educational policies alone could eradicate social inequality: as Jencks ironically wrote in 1972, "if you want to reallocate the income, you have to reallocate the income"[1].

The Italian school system has had undoubted results in improving basic schooling, but its centralistic and monopolistic nature has survived far beyond its historical aims. It guarantees equality in access, but not in outcomes, and its function of "social elevator" is lost. Perhaps it has been connected to economic growth more than to an actual role in reducing inequalities. Failures, withdrawals, early tracking, difficulties in finding a job are affecting weaker groups: if we consider the greatest form of inequity, the early leaving from education and training (ELET), we see that students leaving without completing upper secondary school come from deprived groups (immigrant, low income, single parent families...).

Only a flexible and site based system of autonomous schools could respond to the growing social complexity, by enhancing diverse strategies to reduce inequity and cope with the needs of a heterogeneous clientele: as Renaut (2009) wrote "modernity is characterized by equality in differentiation". The right to education is the right to quality education: equality is part of quality. The Action Plan Education 2030 for Sustainable Development Goals calls for "ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all, and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all". Goal 4 is "quality in education": and freedom of parental choice is a requirement for quality education.

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[1] If public education is financed by tax payers adopting a "one-fits-all "approach, it creates a "reverse redistribution", and lower and middle classes will finance higher education attended by the affluent children.

Formal or informal choice (either directly or indirectly through housing choice) has become an important means for parents to influence the educational success of their children, and thus the reproduction of the intergenerational inequality (Dronkers & Robert, 2004). Parental attitudes toward education and parental choices (or forced choices, if any!) influence, if not determine, the educational destiny of children. This particularly affects the choice between state and private officially-recognized schools: if admission to private schools is not free from economic barriers, as in Italy, where the "public" nature of the education in private sector has been officially recognized by the Law 62 in 2000, the lack of funding penalizes disadvantaged families, that are forced to stay in the schools their children are assigned to.

Educational equity is a fundamental value of social justice: however, during the Nineties, the many documents of the European Union were centered on three "magic word": employability, quality and citizenship, and equity was not included. In 2000, goal n.2 of the U.N Development Goals was "ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling": only in 2015 the n.4 of the U.N "Sustainable Development Goals" is to "ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning". The principle of educational equality states, first, that children have a right to access to, and to complete, a quality education regardless of their level of ability or social background (status, gender, race…); secondly, that school populations should be heterogeneous with respect to race, class background and ability levels.

But schools are not all the same for quality (there are good schools and bad schools) or for educational programs (Brighouse, 2000). How is it possible to guarantee equity? Is it the same probability to be in a good or bad school for pupils from different background? No indeed, bad schools should not exist. At this point the problem is "who chooses? Schools or families"? Or it is casual, as in a lottery? Selection in access or early tracking is against educational equity, because it doesn't ensure either that achievement is unaffected by personal characteristics (even "level of natural talents" is culturally determinate), nor that the gap between more and less academically talented children is narrowing.

Early leaving as a form of inequity

Social mobility is lower in countries with high inequality: a key driver of income inequality is the number of low skilled workers, and education is a strong asset that can contribute to long term growth sustainability. In a period of crisis, education for innovation is transforming knowledge into money.

For this reason, early school-leaving[2] is a relevant social problem, and it is a predictor of social and economic marginality, causing difficulties in finding a job (if not a job less safe and well-payed), risk of deviant behavior, worse health conditions, and so on. Last but not least, it reduces the possibility of enjoying full citizenship.

Social and personal costs of a bad or too short education are high; this is the reason why one of the main objectives of the Lisbon charter was to have in 2020 less than 10% of ELET in the Union countries. In 2016 (MIUR 2017), the average E.U. rate was 10.7%: Italy was 13.8%. But the average value has little significance: five regions (Sicily, Campania, Sardinia, Puglia and Calabria) had values higher than the European average, with Sicily at 23%: other were under that value[3]. The PISA data say that about 12% of youth at fifteen are no longer in schools, almost all of them being low achieving children from disadvantaged groups.

Since 1962, the school reforms allowed access to the same basic education (from 6 to 14) to every Italian student: but the equality of access opportunities doesn't coincide with equality in final results, because schools give exactly the same courses to all students. The growing differentiation in students' characteristics should have implied a paradigm shift in educational provision and curriculum design, to offer a range of possibilities for a variety of users. As the 1978 UNESCO declaration on race and racial prejudices says, "All individuals and groups have the right to be different, to consider themselves as different and to be regarded as such. However, the diversity of life styles and the right to be different may not, in any circumstances, serve as a pretext for racial prejudice" (art.1, par.2). Therefore, at the end of lower secondary, there is a culturally biased tracking: failing students, or underachievers or needing a job in short time, choose shorter vocational courses run by local authorities, or three years state vocational education. The five years technical or professional diploma has a middle-class audience, lyceum is attended by students that intend to continue to university.

If we look at the causes of the drop outs, we can find three main factors: socioeconomic status, particularly the parents' educational level[4], immigration, and previous school failure. There are also structural causes, such as living in a deprived area with poor schools, or in a region where the rate of unemployment is high and the job demand is low and gives no opportunities

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[2] The European definition of an early leaver, adopted also in Italy, is a young between 18 and 24 that has successful completed no more than the lower secondary school.

[3] MIUR 2017 uses data from the *Anagrafe Nazionale degli Studenti* (National registry of students), that started in 2006. In that year the rate was 20.8%, but it was calculated in a slightly different way, so comparison is not really easy.

[4] In 2012 the rate of early leavers is in Europe was 10.5% if parents have an ISCED 5-6, 62.2% if parents have an ISCED 0-2: six time greater. Values for Italy are 9.5% and 52.6%. (European Commission Eurydice, 2014).

to qualified youth. Factors reducing the risk of early leaving are pre-primary education, effective career guidance, and a strong Vocational Education and Training system, both initial and lifelong. But the willingness to continue in education is connected to a good experience in schools that doesn't exist for failing students, so "when it rains, it pours". The ideotype drop-out could be an immigrant boy from a low income problematic family (divorced parents, single parent, deviant parents or siblings…): but an early labeling, even if used to identify students at risk to improve specific actions, could become a stigma, lowering their self-esteem, in a kind of negative Pygmalion effect.

To summarize the challenges connected to the equal possibilities of success, we can list four mayor limits in Italian educational system:

- Regional inequity: rates of success, i.e. the international tests score, are higher in some regions, lower in other, mainly in Southern regions;
- Tracks inequity: rates of success are higher in academical schools than in technical or vocational, with lowest values in regional vocational education;
- shortage of diversification of quality alternatives, hierarchically ranked: regional vocational education is normally considered as reserved for failing students;
- Insufficient curriculum personalization and availability of specialized educators for at risk students: state schools do not introduce specific actions to favor the disadvantaged sectors of the population[5].

In conclusion, we can say that in Italian centralized and monopolistic State school inequalities still exist, even if formal and traditional forms have changed to new forms: not only poor children, but also immigrant, Muslim, youth living in inner cities, and normally more characteristics add up. As for gender, in European countries the girls' long run has ended: we could speak of a "reverse inequity" because in every level and track, from compulsory to higher education, girls' percentage of success is higher than boys': both in upper secondary school and in higher education, the difference is even greater in the final year, because boys leave three times more than girls. Examining the ELET, we can see that the rate of early leavers is 13.6% for boys, 10.2 for girls. In non-European countries, moreover, cultural factors and role expectations can be against girls' education. Intergender differences decrease everywhere when socio-economic status and parents' education rise.

The debate on the relationship between equality and quality in education originated with the pessimistic idea that more means worse instead of more means different. Equality doesn't mean that every person succeeds in the academic stream. Difference is not discrimination: to enjoy equality doesn't coincide with attending all together the classic lyceum. This is a great error

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[5] Parent association and civil society organizations volunteer to fill the institutional gap.

and injustice, as don Milani explained: persons are different and equity is equality in differentiation. If both equality and efficiency are valued, and neither takes absolute priority over the other, then, in places where they conflict, compromises ought to be struck: but any sacrifice of either has to be justified as a necessary means of obtaining more of the other, or possibly of some other valued social aim (Okun, 1975). Making reforms happen, policy makers need to build consensus on the aims of education reforms, and actively engage stakeholders, especially teachers, in implementing the policy responses, based on an information system where the gap between data collection and data use is as short as possible. In assessing reforms' success, efficacy[6], not efficiency, is the starting point, moving focus to educational use of resources to evaluate the investment rentability.

Parental choice and equity

Parental choice is one of the fundamental rights connected to citizenship, even if the context could produce a tension clash between the values of equity and choice as expressed in education (Berger, 2014). To allow the various social groups to freely engage in education, a decentralized framework works better, while still fostering cooperation towards the achievement of common national goals. In Western countries, school tends to be more decentralized and the principle of educational choice is becoming increasingly accepted and prevalent. The trend is to move from the centralized State school to an integrated system where the private sector, financed by the State, cooperates with public school (subsidiarity principle). Someone called it "retreating from public education", and criticized school autonomy as 'managerial discourse'; the Unions see it as threatening the job security of teachers. In fact, the decline of the welfare state and the concurrent shift to free market ideologies and decentralized organizational models was accompanied by a switch in focus to individual success rather than commitment to collective goals.

It is important to stress the rights of communities to educate young people according to their fundamental values, and choice initiatives may go hand in hand with furthering equality in educational opportunities and outcomes. There are three kinds of autonomous schools: autonomous neighborhood, the result of local initiatives; autonomous selective schools of choice, whose aim is excellence and that require large parental financial outlays, with scholarships for economically disadvantaged students; autonomous non selective schools of choice, usually run by parents and teachers, such as charter schools in the U.S..

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[6] See CELE: http://www.oecd.org/education/innovation-education/centreforeffective-learningenvironmentscele/

Autonomy is considered by opponents as negatively impacting upon equality in educational opportunities, even if granting independence to schools with distinctive pedagogic or ideological orientations means more flexibility in curriculum and greater parental and community involvement in the determination of educational policy. Schools of choice born of 'local grass roots' initiatives create a particular atmosphere, higher level of involvement and satisfaction for parents, a sense of shared community, and more professional autonomy for the teaching staff committed to educational innovation as a part of its job.

Schooling attainment is persistent across generations and has clear links to skills and perhaps other traits that are rewarded in labor markets. It is commonly assumed that once adequate measure of schooling quality has been developed, the only effects of parental economic status on offspring earnings would operate through effects on cognitive functioning and schooling, with the direct effect of parental status on offspring earnings vanishing (very few people, perhaps 2-4% of the total, receive inheritances of significant magnitude). Poor health has substantial effects on incomes later in life, and the children of the well to do are much healthier than poor children. There is a contribution of parent-child similarity, and traits are persistent across generation and are important as predictor of economic success (race, group of individuals with whom the person interact, personality traits). Eliminating racial discrimination and improving educational achievement are important goals, but others are more controversial. Educational inequalities due to family background are unacceptable, and educational policies must eliminate the unfair mechanism, and compensate for inherited disabilities, without compromising important values of family life.

Family influence is not only a matter of wealth: normally, rich families value education more than poor families, even if today there is a growing incongruity between economic and cultural status, i.e. for migrant people with high levels of education working as manual workers. Poor children need enriched schooling, even if some scholars disagree on the role of special actions: Basil Bernstein (1970) says that labeling of children as "culturally deprived" undervalues the life outside school of working-class students, and compensatory education set in train a whole series of negative consequences. Teacher expectations of the working class children are lower, and parents, who became regarded as part of the problem rather than essential to its solution, are excluded from the participation. In Gorard's opinion, on the contrary, "there are indications that the nature of a national school system and the social experiences of young people in schools can begin to equalize educational outcomes as more widely envisaged" (Gorard, 2010).

Measures to reinforce equality

There are at least three tools to reinforce the foundations of equality: funding based upon a 'pupil basket' of services, which would be equitable and transparent, including differential support for special needs students; focusing external evaluation on consulting and support for schools to achieve their stated goals; realizing good initial and in-service training for teachers. Where private school tuitions are paid by the family, choice creates a different school composition, with relatively homogeneous populations, and the risk is of increasing the gap between socially advantaged and disadvantaged. Private schools are much more expensive than State schools, and serve more children of well off parents, who generally receive better schooling and benefit from material, cultural and genetic inheritance, even if "the intergenerational transmission of economic status is accounted for by a heterogeneous collection of mechanisms, including the genetic and cultural transmission of cognitive skills and noncognitive personality traits in demand by employers" (Bowles& Gintis, 2002, pag. 2)[7]. Families tend to praise academic outcomes as the final result of the school, but a more equitable concept is based on added value: schools are good, if they can improve the pupils' achievement. Too many choices are influenced by the status, not by attitudes or competencies: educational policies improving information and helping low income families to take advantage of educational alternatives provide a mean to improve educational equality, enhancing the peer effect in a more mixed class composition.

In Italy the introduction of autonomy in 2000 has changed the relationship between the central Ministry and autonomous schools, introducing such concepts as competition, family choice, accountability into the supposed "uniform" school, but lacking an effective financing system. The Italian school system continues to reproduce social stratification and traditional divisions: higher versus lower classes, North versus South, immigrants versus natives. Face to the promised "democratization", in the state school actually the distribution of educational opportunities is extremely uneven (Gasperoni, 1996; Ballarino & Checchi 2006). In fact, schools have always been different, and quality was related to educational program, school composition, teachers' turnover and so on. If the system is regulated by the demand, and institutional offer importance is decreasing, you could have two contrasting consequences: there is the possibility for poor families to escape the bad quality school they are assigned

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[7] The genetic factor is now considered as having a reduced influence on the intergenerational transmission of wealth: possibly, the family environment is more challenging, but this is not necessarily connected to the status: genes and environment affect human capital, but the effects of wealth and other contributions to income are unaffected by genes and environment (Taubman, 1976).

by residence, but also the risk that their marginality could increase (Pitzalis, 2012).

Where a large number of schools of choice exists, there has been a debate about the effects of choice on the children "left behind" (Bifulco et al., 2009), examining the impact of school choice programs on the peer environments of students who remain in their geographically assigned schools. The first evidence was that many relatively advantaged students have used school choice programs to opt out of assigned schools with concentrations of disadvantaged students, given that parents of lower socioeconomic status tend not to exercise choice, if they are not asked to do it. It may well be that practically the more affluent are the beneficiary of educational choice, but on average there are only small differences in peer composition for non-choosers. More substantial differences emerge for students in schools with strong concentrations of disadvantaged students located near choice schools attractive to high achievers[8], and expansions of parental choice may have significant adverse effects on the peer environments of a particularly vulnerable group of students.

There is a bias against parents' participation and parent-run schools, because of the idea that only the public school (religiously neutral and capable of setting religious differences aside) can give a common basis for the civic order. A number of people believe that one cannot modernize society without modernizing communities, including families, schools, church, and propose the state school as an irreplaceable institution for educating children (Berner Rogers, 2018). Novoa (2002) calls them "newspaper intellectuals", an ingroup censuring and excluding those who are not part of their closed world. The educational discourse in the era of communication is made by "experts" that often are nor teachers neither educationalists. They create a planetspeak, a conceptual amalgamation whose scientific value is next to zero, but has a strong normative force as to how individuals should speak, think, and act in the educational field.

The mandatory and monopolistic common school is no longer the expression of a coherent local community, but is instead a "shopping mall" of competing messages with no moral core and no focused notions of education. Private schooling is a way to limit the overbearing intrusion of national government into sensitive domains of community and personal life, and the agenda of the government that imposes its school on society as a whole, reducing morality to a question of preference, but in Italy people sending children to private schools have to pay for their "free" choice. The supposed "neutral" school is itself a compelling ideology, perhaps an effort to break two institutions that have been most resistant to totalitarianism: families and religious institutions.

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[8] The "competition effect" on school productivity is not so strong, because the notion that the unproductive public schools will go out of business and that new and more effective public schools will replace them is far easier imagined than done.

From this point of view, autonomy is in the service of the fulfillment of the self, seen as the final arbiter. Ironically, to "free" students from the "yoke" of their families and to foster children's development of autonomy requires compulsion (Levinson, 1999, p. 389).

Religious freedom, for its opponents, is only freedom to worship: any other form is accused of "bigotry". But religious affiliation is not stratified by income, race, ethnicity or gender, and churches apportion opportunities for skills development relatively equally among members (quoted in Glenn, 2018). In order to function effectively as educational communities, it is essential that schools, like families and religious institutions, enjoy real independence to hold and to express distinctive world views. The smug educated élites see no need to pay attention to the convictions and values, much less the behavioral norms, of these they consider, in their secularist orthodoxy, unenlightened, insisting that religious beliefs must be kept strictly private, ignoring that religion is a strong source of identification. The so called "consensus liberalism" needs to acknowledge that (with the legitimate state control), faith schools are not a challenge for social cohesion. The risk comes instead if children are forced in a monopolistic state system, that is a breach of fundamental parental rights, and generates unattractive and ineffective schools (Glenn, 2009).

Promoting educating communities: a reliable answer for equity

The growing influence of international demands for Human Rights makes evident that an imminently global civil solidarity has become a factor on the contemporary world scene, even if civil society seems to be isomorphic with the nation. Goal 7 of the Action Plan Education 2030 about Sustainable Development Goals proposes an aim of education for human rights (gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, environment defense). Inclusive education is the basis of pluralism and a factor of democracy, but there is, actually, a risk to avoid: "human rights" could be a Western concept, with little or no significance for non-Western or developing countries, if we think to "export" it without adapting it to the cultural background.

Civil society is not identified with the state: it is the arena in which social solidarity (the we-ness of a national community, the feeling of connectedness to 'every member' of that community that transcends particular commitments) is defined in universalistic terms. As Habermas says, "the sphere of private people come together as public" (1989, pag.27). Only this thread of solidarity can provide a thread of identity and allow the individuals in a group to be conceived of as themselves responsible for their 'natural' rights (Alexander, 1997). In this perspective, civil society should be "conceptualized as a realm of solidarity, a we-ness that simultaneously affirms the sanctity of the individual

and these individuals' obligations to the collectivity" (ibidem). In functionalist terms, civil society can be conceived as a social dimension, or a subsystem, that receives inputs from other spheres, is bound by their constraints and makes efforts to constrain them in turn. Conceived as a form of social organization that is distinct from both economic and political categories, civil society can be seen as a unique sociological concept. It does not imply community in a traditionalist sense, it is not an abstractly universalistic understanding, but must be translated into terms of realistic, concrete every-day thought and speech.

The Italian monopoly model was originally designed to promote unity in the new-born nation, and it was based on human rights, but it ended ensuring the exclusive authority of the State, often associated with the cultural ethos and behavioral norms of the dominant élite, with local authorities only cooperating in the provision and maintenance of the educational services. Teachers were, and are, poorly prepared, and too much ideologized, and the curriculum has been inadequate to cope with the changing demand (mass education in the Sixties, or, in recent years, the mass immigration that is a challenge to the national identity). The growth has benefitted the rich more than the poor: the gap increased even for middle class "growing unequal". Equity passes not by creativity of single teachers or institutions, but through formal rules specifying the characteristics of different institutions, whose unlimited expansion is only apparently more democratic, as Boudon (1973) demonstrated 45 years ago. School systems have never been "ivory towers", but now they must become "transmural", which means to accept the existence of other learning places, such as industry, and other teaching actors, such as the family. The central means to improve quality without denying equity is accountability: schools should be accountable to students and their families, and to the new important actor, civil society in its varied forms. Education is a public and common good, and its organizations play essential roles. They need to be involved and engaged at all stages, from planning through to monitoring and evaluation, with their participation institutionalized and guaranteed. If quality is a tool to learn human rights, quality schools ask for gratuity (direct or indirect): poor families need to be supported not only to pay the tuition, but also for the period when students don't work, and don't make money. Only an educational system including everyone could face the changes and create a sustainable development.

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