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The Promotion of Equity in Schools During Neo-liberalism and Post-democracy Regime

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[Review of the book: *Equità e merito nella scuola. Teorie, indagini empiriche, politiche (Equity and merit in school. Theories, empirical investigations, policies)*, by Luciano Benadusi and Orazio Giancola, FrancoAngeli, Milan, 2021. ISBN: 978-88-351-0760-6]

«Pour que soient favorisés les plus favorisés et défavorisés les plus défavorisés, il faut et il suffit que l'école ignore dans le contenu de l'enseignement transmis, dans les méthodes et les techniques de transmission et dans les critères de jugement, les inégalités culturelles entre les enfants des différentes classes sociales: autrement dit, en traitant tous les enseignés, si inégaux soient-ils en fait, comme égaux en droits et en devoirs, le système scolaire est conduit à donner en fait sa sanction aux inégalités initiales devant la culture» (Bourdieu, 1966, p. 336).

Taken from a 1966 essay dedicated to the “conservative school”, the opening quote by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu introduces us to one of the most complex questions regarding educational contexts in terms of models, policies and practices in school classes: the equity of schools and their ability to promote and reward merit. Bourdieu accused the school processes of favouring social reproduction and preserving the privileges of the wealthy classes instead of promoting equity and equal opportunities in educational paths; this critique represented, and still represents, a denial of one of the founding myths of Western modernity: the equality of all citizens in being able to fully benefit from the possibilities offered by society according

to their own merit/commitment regardless the ascribed attributes (gender, class, race, socio-economic status, etc.).

In this sense, education is one of the key institutions of modernity. And it is not by chance that the functionalist sociologists immediately gave it a central role in terms of social solidarity and effectiveness of the “system”. In education, the differences of origin and social background should not matter. By functionalists, education must provide adequate norms and values for modern/organic, liberal and democratic social solidarity, and at the same time select the most motivated and gifted male students (only from a certain moment onwards, also female students) to fill the most prestigious positions. Since the end of the Trente glorieuses, some critical studies (such as Bourdieu & Passeron 1970; Bernstein 1974) contributed to unveiling the ideological elements of this non-conflictual and organic view of schooling. They focused on the level of educational processes and social actors (teachers, pupils and their families) reaching conclusions that are useful for understanding both the micro and the structural dynamics.

In some cases, these conclusions have fuelled scepticism and distrust of the attempts to democratize the educational system after the enthusiasm for the 1960s’ reforms. And yet, these reforms guaranteed an enlargement of the school population all over Europe for people previously excluded on the basis of their social class. To what extent have these progressive and egalitarian reforms fostered a greater equality in educational systems and, more broadly, in society? Has the promotion of educational equality favoured or hindered the promotion and enhancement of merit? What is the relationship between promoting scholastic inclusion and the quality of the educational processes? What is the effect of introduction of neo-liberal principles into European public education systems?

To discuss these and other complex issues, the work published by Luciano Benadusi and Orazio Giancola is a fundamental compass. The authors tackle the issues related to schooling and the link between equity and merit, keeping macro, meso and micro-processes together, through work that translates the complexity of the topic addressed into an interpretative wealth. Moreover, their work collects long-term reflections and research (among others: Benadusi, 1984; Bottani & Benadusi, 2006; GERESE, 2005), through a systematisation that looks at the present and the possible future. They do so by firstly reviewing the main contributions on the subject of equity and merit from the philosophical debate on justice and from social science (sociology, pedagogy, economics) research results (chapter 1). The main approaches analysed concern: the classical, or so-called “spurious meritocracy” - recalled by Pierre Bourdieu’s opening quote - and contemporary neo-liberalism, and three other approaches which share an egalitarian imprint: the equality of opportunities, the equality of capabilities, the equality of conditions for in-

clusion. Through an intense discussion of the various contributions relating to the egalitarian approaches, the authors propose a multidimensional theoretical framework to analyse data on the representation of justice among European citizens and students (chapter 2), data on educational inequalities with a comparative analysis always in the European context (chapter 3), and educational and social policies (chapter 4). The empirical analyses - some of which are original - refer to numerous European and international investigations and databases (GERESE, ESS, EVS, ISSP, OECD-PISA, OECD-PIAAC, Eurostat).

While highlighting a dynamic of greater inclusion favoured by the aforementioned democratisation policies of European education systems, the reported results confirm the persistence of inequality - with strong differences between countries and between macro-areas. In particular, the Italian case scores persistent inequalities by territory (with the South in disadvantage), and by upper secondary education tracks (with technical and professional institutes in disadvantage). Moreover, if from the post- second world war period to the beginning of the 1980s the educational policies have had an egalitarian impetus, and reformed the access to education in a strong comprehensive manner, the following neo-liberal season and the regulatory model based on the market have fostered the inequalities between individuals, schools and territories.

Therefore, what spaces does remain to consider an equitable school, to restore “trust in education as a strategic resource for changing society and the upward mobility of the lower classes” (p. 7)? As the initial quote, there is a need to support the change in pedagogical-didactic models as a key to promoting equity in educational processes. According to the authors, if education cannot treat everyone as if they were the same, it is then necessary to rethink an education capable of differentiating and individualising teaching without falling into segregationist forms.

Policies for a fair school shun a “spurious” conception of merit, and go beyond a vision of equity as mere equality of opportunity. In fact, the equality of opportunity principle maintains a basic competitive approach that does not include those who emerge from this competition defeated. It is therefore necessary to hybridise the different conceptions of equity, to contextualize them, envisaging policies capable of guaranteeing an equality of both “primary” and “secondary” outcomes (Boudon, 1973). The text designs the potential of four school policies - early childhood education and care policies, extension and enrichment of school time, change in the pedagogical-didactic model, redistributive policies in favour of schools and deprived areas. All these policies do promote equity and inclusion. Indeed, one of the findings of the book concerns the close relationship between inclusion and quality in educational processes.

Without rhetoric, there is a great challenge that we can define “epochal” for European democracies, where the old forms of social exclusion (aggravated by the crisis of the labour market and social protection systems, see Castel, 2003) are combined with new forms of severe social exclusion, defined “abyssal” by the Portuguese sociologist Santos (2018), characterised by processes of invisibility and dehumanisation. In this regard, the authors give the educational system a mission, as regards the school’s socialising role and its promotion of social cohesion: equal and inclusive education should play as a defender of democratic values and practices in times of post-democracy (Crouch, 2004), and as a barrier to xenophobic, nationalist and authoritarian forces.

Within this framework and with reference to the Italian context, Italian Law No. 92 of 20 August 2019, which introduced the transversal teaching of civic education in the first and second level education from the 2020-2021 school year (Albert et al., 2021) could represent an interesting experimentation in educational contexts, also with regard to knowledge and competences of global citizenship and intercultural openness (Council of Europe, 2016; Tarozzi & Torres, 2016), essential dimensions for a democratic, inclusive and plural school.

Despite a considerable complexity of the writing (due to the ambitious purpose of providing a multi-level discourse), the book by Benadusi and Giancola is a significant work that has an important strength: translating sophisticated theoretical and empirical analyses into clear policy advises. In this sense, the text is suitable not only for an audience of academics and students (better those attending masters and specialist courses), but also for school principals and teachers, for policy makers and for educational policies commenters.

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