

Between social reproduction and new inequalities: the role of school leaders in guaranteeing equity

Tra riproduzione sociale e nuove disuguaglianze: il ruolo dei dirigenti scolastici nel garantire l'equità

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Abstract

Italian school is far from being that *great equalizer* enshrined in the Constitution. Social reproduction is still active, with the classic causes of inequality (socioeconomic and sociocultural status) regaining strength. Non-traditional factors of inequality produced by schools themselves are also emerging. School leaders have a key role in breaking these dynamics, also due to school autonomy. Thanks to issue-aware governance and distributed leadership, they can develop school policies with the entire school community that avoid distorting equity effects.

Keywords: equity, non-traditional factors of inequality, school, school leaders, school autonomy.

Sommario

La nostra scuola è ben lontana da essere quel *great equalizer* sancito dalla Costituzione. La riproduzione sociale è ancora attiva, con le cause classiche di disuguaglianza (*status* socioeconomico e socioculturale) che stanno riprendendo forza. Emergono poi fattori non tradizionali di disuguaglianza prodotti dalle istituzioni scolastiche stesse. I dirigenti scolastici hanno un ruolo chiave nello spezzare queste dinamiche, anche in virtù dell'autonomia scolastica. Grazie a una *governance* attenta al tema e a una *leadership* distribuita, possono elaborare con tutta la comunità scolastica politiche di istituto che evitino effetti distortivi in termini di equità.

Parole chiave: equità, fattori non tradizionali di disuguaglianza, scuola, dirigenti scolastici, autonomia scolastica.

Introduction

The Italian Constitution assigns the school system a central role in building a more democratic, cohesive and inclusive society (Ferrari *et al.*, 2019): the principles of democratic education and substantive equality emphasize the fundamental role of the school experience for social justice, stressing that it can only be achieved by taking equity as a horizon of pedagogical meaning. However, we need to precisely define these polysemous concepts, seeing equity as an operating principle through which an increasing degree of social justice can be achieved. Despite this idea of school as great equalizer (Bernardi and Ballarino, 2016), students' daily experience is plagued by inequalities (Crescenza and Riva, 2021; Gavosto, 2022). Thus, the school system disregards the democratic project (Baldacci, 2019), ceasing to be a vector of social justice and human emancipation. In this essay, after delving into the dynamics of inequality that characterize the Italian school system, we focus on the role of school leaders: given the normative framework of school autonomy, they play a key role in a equity-oriented school that reduces inequality.

1. A school *open to all*. Equity as a horizon of pedagogical meaning

The Italian Constitution assigns the school system a key role in achieving an ever-

higher degree of social justice, emphasizing that this is possible only if it assume equity as an indispensable horizon of meaning; the legislative production stemming from the Constitution moves precisely in this direction (Di Pol, 2016). On the level of pedagogical reflection, we must firstly define the ideal of social justice and then delve into the construct of equity: in fact, its polysemy requires terminological discernment to position ourselves among the different interpretations and elaborate a theoretical-practical definition consistent with the principle of social justice.

We can define social justice as an ideal that has never been fully realized (Bauman and Tester, 2002) according to which everyone must be included in participatory processes of citizenship (Gerwitz, 2006). Every person must be able to exercise self-determination despite the interdependence that binds human beings together (Bell, 2007): access to knowledge is the essential resource to be actors in History and acquire the indispensable capabilities to critically analyze what is happening, identify forms of oppression and injustice, and take action to counter them (Hackman, 2005). Looking at interpretations of the construct of equity, the first two, i.e., merit (Nagel, 1991; Savidan, 2007) and negative freedom (Silier, 2005; Van Hees, 1998), do not seem consistent with the ideal of social justice since they open up dynamics of social reproduction: in fact, they do not consider how different starting conditions affect school experience. It is an idea of equity that is related to achievement but does not consider the pathways that lead to a certain outcome; it also does not interrogate the school context, with the risk of reading low-achieving students as disadvantaged.

Elaborating a theoretical-practical definition of equity specifically on education by positioning between the last three interpretative strands, i.e., equality of opportunity (Bourdieu, 1966; Rawls, 1971; Roemer, 2000), equality of capabilities (Nussbaum, 2013; Sen, 2009) and social inclusion (Kanor, 2021; Taket *et al.*, 2013), is a choice with a strong ethical value (Peters, 2015): it affirms the need not to give in to a compensatory pedagogy whereby there is a norm to strive for or that the commitment to equity is activated only as a result of a worsening of the *status quo*. There is a need to value pluralism without tracing it back to an artificial idea of norm and homogeneity, to break the interdependence between students' backgrounds and educational pathways and to emphasize the role of schools so that each person realizes their own aspirations having acquired the skills necessary to lead a dignified life. Thus, equity becomes a horizon of pedagogical meaning to affirm the need to ensure excellence in education for all in terms of efficiency and effectiveness: everyone must acquire the skills to exercise citizenship by participating in political, social, cultural and economic life on the local and global levels. Diversity must not become inequality (Catarci and Fiorucci, 2015; Granata, 2016; Tarozzi and Torres, 2016): pluralism is a daily experience that emphasizes the need to enhance people's strengths without focusing on what appears as difficulty, also adopting a postcolonial perspective (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2013; Mbembe, 2000; Young, 2020).

2. The Italian school system between equity, inequalities and school autonomy

The striving for equity in Italian schools is enshrined in the Constitution and education laws, but the educational experience of students shows that the realization of this ideal remains a utopia. The dynamics of social reproduction, denounced as early as the 1960s (Bourdieu, 1966; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964; Milani, 1967), is an unresolved problem (Gentili and Pignataro, 2020; Giancola and Salmieri, 2020): children replicate the educational and life trajectories of their parents (INDIRE, 2021; INVALSI, 2022; OECD, 2022), with the socioeconomic and sociocultural conditions of families emerging as classic causes of inequality.

Then, today new factors of inequality emerge, defined as non-traditional because they are produced by the school itself due to its own organizational culture and operating choices (Ferrer-Esteban, 2011; Granata and Ferrero, 2022). They affect both different institutions and classes in the same school, depend on policy and governance choices and the educational actions of teachers (Gobbo, 2008; Goldring, 2002); combining with each other, they produce unprecedented forms of injustice that harm the entire school population (Benadusi and Giancola, 2020; Gavosto, 2022). They are numerous, very specific and difficult to identify, acting under the radar and differently from one context to another.

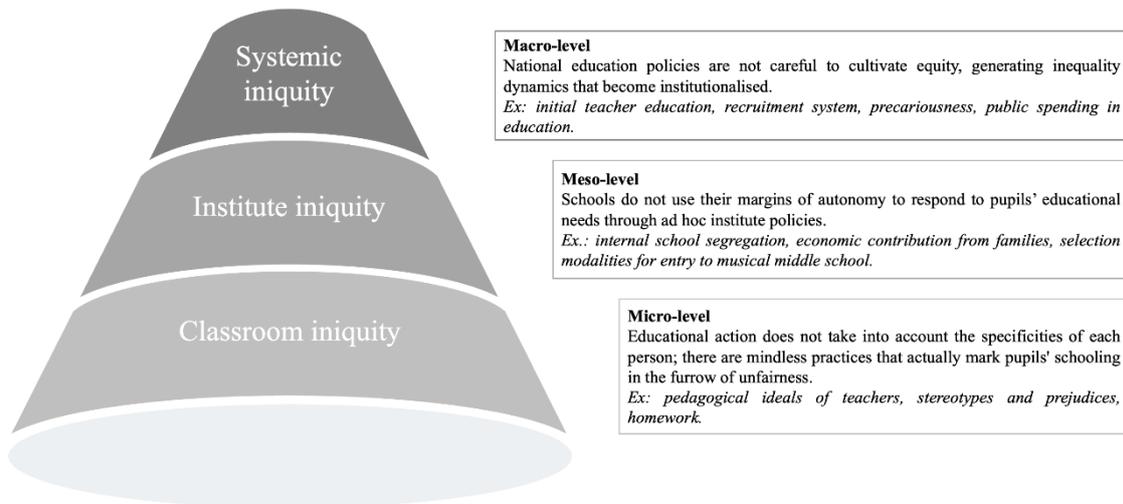


Fig. 1: Pyramid of inequity (author's elaboration).

The graphic elaboration (Fig. 1), based on Bronfenbrenner's (2009) ecological model and on the need to consider the relationships between the various levels, enucleates the main non-traditional factors of inequality. At a micro-level we have almost unconscious actions that take shape in the classroom and produce differences in access to educational opportunities. At a meso-level we find governance choices and institute educational policies that are not attentive to distorting effects in terms of equity. Lastly, at a macro-level we have a gap between legislation and implementation, with measures sometimes inconsistent with constitutional dictate. For the purposes of our reflection on the role of school leaders in fostering equity, it is necessary to look primarily at the meso-level and to understand how governance choices are influenced by macro dynamics and reverberate at the micro level. In the fourth section, we will take a deeper look at how some issues – use of extra staff, access arrangements to the middle school music program, demand for financial contribution from families, class formation and teacher assignment – take the form of non-traditional factors of inequality and how far the actions of leaders can limit distorting effects in terms of equity.

Indeed, the regulatory framework that governs the functioning of Italian schools, i.e., school autonomy, assigns a key function to their figure: through distributed leadership they implement educational management (Landri, 2021; Pirola, 2015) that allows each institution to make independent choices in the organizational, financial, managerial and educational spheres to achieve the general goals of the school system, established at the state level, responding specifically to the educational needs of the student population (Molinari *et al.*, 2015; Morzenti Pellegrini, 2011). The norms on school autonomy (Presidential Decree 275/1999, Constitutional Law 3/2001 and, years later, Law 107/2015) emphasize the indispensability of the school as the nerve center of a larger community, able of drawing up institute educational policies that integrate the various

actors in the territory (Benadusi *et al.*, 2020; Franzoni, 2012; Gavosto, 2013) with a view to equity and social justice (Campione, 2013; Cortigiani, 2010).

School autonomy is a vector of equity if it is used in a non-bureaucratized way, but under the banner of a well-defined educational planning (Palumbo and Pandolfini, 2016): each school can develop good practices according to the needs of the context, entering a network with other institutions and coordinating with the territory in the perspective of creating educational cities and educating communities. From the leader's point of view, it means acting on students' school experience by coordinating the development of institute educational policies that have a specific pedagogical vision.

3. The school leader in the autonomous school: leadership for equity

The problem of school inequity cannot be addressed by individual teachers: it is in fact a systemic dynamic that requires a shared idea of schooling according to the principles of equity and social justice and coordinated action by all members of the school community to be overcome. School is a complex system and leaders have a key role in fostering a transformative change that develops in a direction of equity (Gümüş and Beycioglu, 2020): it is important that they implement a leadership model that is not hierarchical imposition from above, but support, guidance and direction in the construction and renewal of a school culture by all actors with a view to improving development (Mincu, 2022). In fact, in each autonomous school the leader is responsible for the pedagogical-educational vision, which becomes concrete thanks to the shared definition of the mission, i.e., the set of actions to be carried out (Susi, 2000). It is about building a community of practice (Wenger, 2000) through the adoption of distributed leadership according to the logic of middle management (De Nobile, 2018; Paletta, 2020a, 2020b): leaders are not alone at the helm, but they must administer the school in cooperation with the secretarial staff, organize the institution according to the determinations of the Teachers Council and the School Council¹, enhance human and professional resources by encouraging their continuing education and interact with the territory (Papa, 2015).

In a school that acts according to equity, the leader must support the community in constructing meanings and acquiring awareness with respect to educational reality by providing clear guiding ideas and cultural guidelines (Domenici and Moretti, 2011; Sergiovanni, 2000). Beyond that, they must recognize teachers' abilities by assigning specific functions that support the development of the educational project (Mulè *et al.*, 2019) and control the quality of processes by fostering self-evaluation, self-correction and a sense of belonging (Mincu and Romiti, 2022). Thus, the leader performs a pedagogical and political function that makes ethical reflection essential (Maxci, 2002; Milani, 2019). As we have said, school autonomy is aimed at ensuring greater equity in the Italian school system through the reduction of inequalities at the local level, with institute educational policies based on the needs that emerge in the contexts: leaders have a crucial role, but their leadership and actions at the governance level must respond to the principle of social justice and not be left to chance (Bianchi, 2020).

The issue is not managing the school with surgical and aseptic precision by meeting deadlines, applying procedures, and responding to bureaucratic demands, but making the educational process efficient and effective, having in mind that promoting equity means ensuring an excellent educational experience for all, going beyond the idea that there is an average pupil and a one-size-fits-all. Each school has its own characteristics and presents particular dynamics, which cannot be addressed with easy recipes or ready-made solutions. If the Italian school system continues to have a centralized set-up since the majority of schools make cautious and prudential use of autonomy (Cerini, 2016;

Gavosto, 2022), with educational planning put on paper sometimes not translated into practice (Mincu, 2020), it is necessary to emphasize once again how useful it can be to give substance to the reflections we are enucleated. The leader, through clearly equity-oriented leadership and vision, can shape a school culture that responds to the ideal of social justice (Letteri and Dettori, 2022), thus fostering a creative interpretation of legislation that leads to institute policies capable of reducing inequality.

4. Leaders in action to overcome non-traditional factors of inequality

The school is a complex system in which the leader can rely on system figures to manage organizational processes and build a community that recognizes itself in precise pedagogical ideals (Agrati, 2018; Bezzina and Paletta, 2022). Giving life to an «educational us» (Milani, 2000, p. 200), i.e., a collegial relationship that supports intentional and reflective teamwork conducted in a coordinated, shared and coherent manner, is crucial for equity to be a systemic instance and not dependent on the issue sensitivity of the individual. Thus, the leader must both facilitate school-community-building processes and direct the development of school policies that reduce inequality.

As we have seen, schools as organizations often produce inequities because of governance choices and institute educational policies that are not attentive to the distorting effects on equity. Lack of awareness with respect to non-traditional factors of inequality results in profound disparities in students' educational pathways: excellence in education is thus reserved for the few, even though the Constitution stipulates otherwise. Leaders have a key role in counteracting these dynamics. Below we analyze some non-traditional factors of inequity, highlighting how creative use of school autonomy through the leader's leadership averts the emergence of inequity at the individual school level. It is necessary to point out that the dynamics presented are specifically extrinsic in different contexts; for this very reason, we cannot provide universally valid guidelines, but pedagogical guidelines from the perspective of leadership for social justice (Forde *et al.*, 2021; Torrance *et al.*, 2021) that are extrinsic in a daily practice attentive to equity thanks to the contribution of the entire school community, ethically engaged in critical and reflective work with respect to education policies and their implementation.

Extra staff... For what?

Law 107/2015 introduces the extra staff: these positions are allocated to institutions every year and following the schools' request, based on the educational needs of the student population and usable in contiguous school grades (Cocconi, 2015; Gambardella, 2019). Thus, schools have an opportunity to differentiate themselves from each other by developing original educational offer that is specifically responsive to what students need. Therefore, it is necessary to formulate an educational planning that refers to a specific pedagogical vision whose the leader is the first advocate. In contradiction to the regulations, extra staff is often used for impromptu replacements of absent teachers (Casacchi, 2016). The issue is complex and entangled: in fact, on the one hand extra staff is assigned to schools as a tool to make their teaching and organisational autonomy concrete through specific educational activities; on the other hand, it is unthinkable to leave children without a teacher. Educational planning at the institute level should succeed in combining the need to have teachers available to replace absent staff with the need to construct interventions and proposals that use the extra staff in a creative and coherent manner with the educational needs of the context. School leaders, to whom it is up to to assign teachers and supervise the projects implemented (Gaeta and Maurizio,

2006), are primarily responsible for the way in which extra staff are used. This dimension can create distorting effects in terms of equity, since an inequality is created between those schools that know how to manage extra staff by balancing emergency management and educational planning and those in which this staff is used without a defined vision.

Focusing on educational needs that emerge in each context, critical issues highlighted in the *Self-Assessment Report* and solutions hypothesized in the *Improvement Plan* (Robasto, 2017) allows for the use of the extra staff in ways that characterize each institute as peculiar. Reorganization of school time (Chipa *et al.*, 2022), personalization of educational itineraries, implementation of outdoor civic education pathways in synergy with the territory (Rossetti, 2022), activities to support students with special needs, such as teaching Italian L2 or support in study activities are examples of creative and pedagogically oriented use of the extra staff in an equity perspective.

Musical middle school, but not for all

As far as the Italian context is concerned, the literature on school segregation has often focused on the presence of first- and second-class institutions and, within the same school, first- and second-class classes (internal school segregation) based on students' socioeconomic and sociocultural backgrounds (Oberti, 2007; Pacchi and Ranci, 2017), without fostering a transformative relationship between different people. With reference to internal school segregation, there are few studies that delve into the selection modalities for access to musical middle schools and their distorting effects in terms of equity. The legislation is clear: Law 124/1999 and Ministerial Decree 176/2022 specify that the test for admission to musical middle school must be orientation-aptitude and that prior experience in instrumental practice is not required. Instead, the tests often focus on assessing the candidate's proficiency in musical subjects: thus, students who have already gained some experience in this area enter musical middle school (Rizzo and De Angelis, 2019). This school-produced dynamic takes away opportunities for children who have not been able to learn privately how to play an instrument. In this case, equity- and social justice-oriented leadership should simply comply with the relevant legislation, making the entrance test truly attitudinal and useful in probing the candidate's motivation (Rizzo and Croppo, 2021) and finding creative ways of organizing it, also to avert the formation of elite classes (Chiappetta Caloja and Rizzo, 2019; Rizzo, 2022). The key role of the school leaders clearly emerges: they can orient selection methods from an equity perspective.

Hands off families' wallets

Requesting a financial contribution from families is a widespread dynamic, in Italy but not only (Granello, 2010; Marotta, 2010; Rowe and Perry, 2020). The Ministry of Education has legitimized this practice with two notes (312/2012 and 593/2013) that allow schools to invite families to pay a voluntary fee for the expansion of educational offer and the ordinary management of the institutes. As we have shown in a recent study (Granata and Ferrero, 2022), it is a governance choice managed differently between institutes and between classes in the same school: sometimes the payment of the amount is presented as mandatory, sometimes anonymity is not protected.

In any case, it is a distorting practice in terms of equity: the rich get richer and richer, we might say with hyperbole. This creates some elite schools or classrooms, where students have access to numerous educational opportunities because parents invest substantial finances, and others with downward educational offerings. Some schools have

gone beyond this practice, engaging in fundraising activities to raise funds through participation in local, national, and European calls for proposals (Granata and Ferrero, 2022; Rivoltella, 2022; Worth, 2002). It is a decision in the name of equity, as it allows everyone to access quality educational experiences without discrimination based on families' affordability.

Mixité, without segregation: class formation and teacher assignment

Internal school segregation depends on the criteria through which class formation takes place and how teachers are assigned. In each class, *mixité* should be guaranteed (Granata, 2016): this French term indicates the presence in the same class of students with different experiences and backgrounds, according to a principle of heterogeneity. However it may happen that the children of people with medium-high socioeconomic status are divided by the children of people with low economic opportunities, immigrants or low sociocultural status are the pupils of another class (Bonini, 2012; Pacchi and Ranci, 2017): thus, homogeneous classes by family background are created. Teacher assignment also proves to be a problematic aspect in this regard: there are classes in which all teachers are already present in September, others that wait months before they are fully staffed due to delays in appointments (Granata and Ferrero, 2022). Sometimes there are unclear dynamics whereby precisely the most complex classes because of the high level of heterogeneity remain unstaffed. Leaders have a key role: it is their prerogative to assign teachers to classes and to identify, in consultation with the Teachers Council, the criteria for dividing students. Acting under the banner of equity means balancing the presence of tenured and non-tenured teachers in each class, without having some that can count on teaching continuity from the entire staff and others that find new teachers every year. In terms of class formation, they must be vigilant about the choices made so that segregation dynamics do not take place.

Conclusions

In this essay, we have highlighted the importance of acting at the level of school governance to overcome non-traditional factors of inequality. Furthermore, we saw that in the normative framework of school autonomy, leaders have a key role in fostering equity: it is up to them to give the school a vision geared toward reducing inequality and to formulate, together with the whole community, a mission to achieve the goal.

The examples provided allowed us to understand how essential the leader's leadership is for a school to pursue the constitutional democratic project. The leader supports the work of building the pedagogical identity of the institution: if it is oriented to the idea of equity that we have described, it can truly reduce inequalities by conveying social justice through creative use of the possibilities offered by school autonomy.

Notes

¹ In Italian schools, the School Council is composed of the school leader (member by right), a representation of teachers, administrative, technical and auxiliary staff, parents and, in high schools, students; it is chaired by a parent (Legislative Decree 297/1994).

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