The Italian School System's autonomy and learning

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Abstract

The present work aims to highlight the evolution of school autonomy policies in Italy since its inception. To do this, we analyze the premises and promises of autonomy in reference to new phenomena that have recently appeared in the universe of school. Finally, a comparison is made between autonomy and the performance of students that derive from it. This analysis is conducted in a multidisciplinary perspective, combining approaches ranging from educational policies to the sociology of education.

Keywords: Autonomy, education, school, multidisciplinary approach.

Introduction

In order to understand the importance and reason for the birth of school autonomy, it is important to answer three fundamental questions:

1- What were the promises of Autonomy, how does it arise, how is it interpreted, how is it affirmed?

2- How can the policy of Autonomy be related to the academic performance of students, and with the distribution of resources?

3- Balance of past Autonomy and in relation to the future.

To be able to answer these three questions exhaustively, it is necessary to have a multidisciplinary vision, able to combine historical reconstruction with approaches ranging from educational policies to the sociology of education, in order to stimulate a debate after twenty years of starting a reform that, despite everything, leaves deep traces in the Italian school fabric.

1. School Autonomy's birth and history

To analyze correctly and adequately the reforms that have affected the Italian School System, it is necessary to observe what has been done since the sixties and seventies (Schizzerotto and Barone 2006; Benadusi et al. 2019) where much was said about hypothetical major reforms, although in reality few reforms have been put into practice. Specifically, rather than reforms, which have not affected the Gentilian school model, we can speak of incremental and partial measures, including the Middle School Programs in 1979 and the elementary school in 1985. These initiatives, aimed at mitigating the levels of selectivity of the school and university system, were put in particular under the pressure of the student movements of the seventies (Benadusi et al. 2019). In 1974 the Delegated Decrees made the school field more involved with collegial bodies and support teachers (1977). Commissions, opinions, elaborations that follow one another until the end of the eighties to arrive at the Jug Commission in 1992, which provided for an

initial two-year period and a large nucleus of subjects common to all the fields of study of the Upper Secondary School, to which specific disciplines for each address are added.

From this school, still elitist but more inclusive, unequal but expanding, which many center and center-left governments would have liked to reform, but which never reformed, we arrive at the nineties. It is a structure that substantially derives from the twenty years of fascism with some injection of innovation sprinkled here and there over the years, thanks also to the many experiments of new ways and training contents, to the progressive extension of compulsory education and training, to partial interventions in the individual training segments. In this vacuum of reforms, only sporadic partial changes can be glimpsed, such as the change in the Elementary School Programs of 1985 and the Elementary School Reform Act of 1990. Interventions proliferate that derive less from mature political impulses and more from internal impulses of self-government that take strength from the development of innovative professional cultures and new pedagogical visions inspired by Montessori models and libertarian and progressive cultures of the seventies. These interventions were conductors of cultural visions that will enhance the emergence of didactic and organizational models that today find points of connection with the thrusts of teaching by skills (Benadusi and Viteritti 2018). Karst signals of local, sporadic, located and non-systemic autonomies that find spaces even before the Law on Autonomy as experimental projects (Benadusi et al. 1999).

The Italian School System begins to think about Autonomy when it presents itself to respond to two needs: the emergence of the European Education Area in the mid-nineties and the Italian institutional decentralization designed by the Bassanini law of 1997. The scenario of national reforms activated by Berlinguer up to Gelmini and then to the Buona Scuola therefore translates broader reforms of national and international administrative systems which, however, find shaky results in Italian education over time (Niceforo 2010).

The Berlinguer reform, approved in 2000, also affected the University but never fully entered into force even if its parts will find space in subsequent reforms. Berlinguer spoke of "mosaic" about Autonomy, an expression with which he meant the construction of a system starting from its tiles: autonomy of schools, baccalaureate examinations, integration of training systems, evaluation of the quality of the educational offer, reform of the legal systems, reform of university cycles in a European perspective. Some of these took the field, some others were very risky and were set aside, others were taken up (in a different and even opposite way) by successive center-right governments.

The school became the center of a process of mediation between macro-institutional objectives and the needs of the micro-territorial field of action (Manariti 2008). A policy action divided into four areas, didactic, organizational, research and development and administrative autonomy, which over time produces important but not systemic effects.

With the didactic autonomy it began to outline the overcoming of the logic of ministerial programs in favor of greater local planning that could also replace parts of the curriculum. Modular teaching takes shape, by topics, with a decentralization from the sole mono-disciplinary perspective in favor of connections and intersections between disciplines.

A sphere that has seen fluctuating trends, witnessed by the introduction of the Plans of the Educational Offer and the proliferation of projects sometimes little connected to each other. In this uncertainty, organizational autonomy has been expressed over time through the greater decision-making discretion of school directors and with the increasing presence of instrumental figures, teachers willing to engage beyond traditional classroom activities. An area that has had

mixed results, but which has certainly left its mark on the more intense role played by managers and in the creation of groups of teachers engaged in new design and organizational activities and disconnected from traditional school routines.

Autonomy in research and development is perhaps the most problematic: few central investments and much local inexperience have often transformed this dimension into imitative or adaptive practices that have not developed authentic forms of reflexivity. Perhaps the only thing that can be said today on this aspect is the greater willingness of schools to a more intense relationship with the academy for advice and training activities.

In 2001 the Moratti reform, after the break of the Fioroni ministry and the changes then made by the Gelmini reform in 2011, however, gives a setback to the reform process due to two factors: the pressure of austerity policy and the attraction for neo-liberal recipes adopted also in other European countries. This phase leaves many negative consequences, first of all the reduction in spending on education, the only negative example in the European panorama. In 2014, with the Buona Scuola, to meet the attempt to resume the reform process. Despite its name and the rhetoric that inspired it, that reform framework does not attempt to overhaul the system, but merely introduces a series of incremental changes. Autonomy is taken up as a background by focusing on some aspects: the permanent recruitment of temporary teachers, the growing role of school leaders, the promotion of school-work alternation and the emphasis on technologies (Baldacci et al. 2016; Ballarino 2016).

The design of Autonomy, interrupted, resumed, disavowed and readapted, is a design that remains unfinished. He followed events moving in a mostly continuist and incrementalist transformative trajectory that perhaps produced more changes than imagined, and perhaps not all expected.

How has Autonomy been studied? What are the cultural visions that have guided, supported, interpreted and contrasted you? Below we mention some of them, a reconnaissance exercise to look at how a policy enters the many meshes of scientific and cultural analysis.

First of all, the juridical-legislative vision that dealt with school autonomy even before it took legislative form (Carricato, 1997). The legislative culture has been the main spokesperson of the reform and its difficulties/implementation possibilities. In this one two voices can be distinguished. On the one hand, for example, the work of Pajno (2002), directly implicated as a legislative expert in support of politics, which presents a broad vision on the relationship between institutional reforms and school autonomy useful for monitoring the implementation chain from the point of view of regulatory textuality and strategies for adopting standards.

On the other hand, a bureaucratic-oriented legal culture, which in fact in the following years has reduced functional autonomy by linking it to merely fulfilling practices. As mentioned, the reform of the school was in close contact with the national strategies of differentiation of responsibilities and power between the center and the Regions and had to deal with subsidiarity, differentiation and pluralism (Morzenti Pellegrini 2006), also taking into account constitutional issues and the modification of Article V that had many consequences on the relationship between State and Regions in the governance of the school.

A second line of study sought to combine the orientations of education policy with visions deriving from the sociology of school organization (Benadusi and Serpieri 2000). Autonomy is seen here as an institutional, cultural and pedagogical process. Several works that over the years have followed a basic line can be traced back to this trend: linking the eclipse of bureaucracy, an institutional and policy look, the vision of the school as a complex organization (starting from

the school the concept of loosely coupled systems is coined by Weick in 1976) and teaching practices, all inseparable layers to deal with reform and its local implications in an integrated way (Viteritti et al. 2002).

In this perspective, the relationship between Autonomy and governance models is highlighted (Benadusi and Consoli 2004; Grimaldi 2010) bringing out the tensions in place in the implementation strategies of the reform between models oriented to the evaluator State or models more oriented to the (quasi) market, keys of analysis that highlight in particular the intertwining between reform processes and cultures of regulation of public space. The school is not a unique, static and systemic field, it is rather a network of processes in tension between reform designs and local practices located Landri and Palmas 2004; Viteritti 2009).

A third vision of school autonomy of an organizationist cut is that of which, also as a consultant to Minister Berlinguer, Federico Butera (2002) has been the interpreter, who inspired the introduction of the model of inter-school networks. A further declination of this vision has a more managerialist and businessist cut and we find it in a series of works (for example, Di Liberto 2001; Gentili 2007; Cegolon 2012) in which different points of view are associated that have the same intent: to look at the school as an economic investment according to the logic of the theory of human capital, to look at the school as a company according to the neo-liberal logic.

Finally, the last issue: the criticism of the reform that comes from two opposing perspectives. The first is conservative criticism, the school of knowledge, disciplines, knowledge to be transmitted that is nostalgic for the "good old days" and sees in autonomy, especially if combined with innovation, the destruction of state centralism that had historically been the bulwark of that school (Scotto di Luzio 2007). Then there is a vision that comes from critical thinking and that shows the risky connections between reform and neo-liberalism, in the version of the New Public Management (NPM), which would have enveloped all institutions and the school in particular with its reform projects. The pressure exerted by a process of an international nature linked to the processes of rationalization and entry of market logic into the public sphere would put at risk the sense of educational space put at the service of the logic of reporting and hypercompetition.

2. Learning and Autonomy

How and how can the phenomena and trends from the data of the major international surveys on student performance be traceable to school autonomy? It is a complex question and the answer is no different. But what is the use of a school policy if it does not produce effects on student performance, especially in a country like Italy that has always been lagging behind in international comparisons?

They analyze whether and how the results of student performance are intertwined with reforms or how much the two processes are misaligned. OECD international meta-analyses show that countries where schools enjoy greater autonomy in resource allocation tend to show better student performance than those with less autonomy (OECD 2013).

What happens in Italy? How is Autonomy visible as an effect in student achievement? In these twenty years some phenomena show signs of marked change indicate a tendency to remain static and fixity while other phenomena show a certain constancy, in particular inequalities in educational choices and in cognitive and school career results.

It is worth highlighting the increase in participation in the educational system of students with a migrant background (first or second generation). This participation 1, increasing over the years (from 2000 to today), first involved primary schools (10.8% of the total) and lower secondary schools (9.7%) and then became relevant also in upper secondary schools (7.3% of fifteen-year-olds in 2018). This phenomenon has had a strong impact on the organization of the school (especially at primary and lower secondary level), but has produced a multiplicity, even contradictory, of local adaptations in the face of marginal and insufficient system policies. These are recent phenomena that were not foreseen and programmable within the framework of Autonomy, but that schools have often had to manage independently.

On the change side, we refer to compulsory schooling; Two decisions concerned this fundamental aspect with respect to the effectiveness and equity of the Italian education system. These are decisions taken after autonomy that are consolidated by Law no. 53/2003 and which provide for all young people the right / duty of education and training for at least twelve years or, in any case, until obtaining a three-year professional qualification by the age of eighteen. It is then the law n. 296 of 2006 to provide that compulsory education, in Italy, has a duration of ten years, from 6 to 16 years of age. Despite the efforts, the data show that in both absolute and comparative terms, a still too high share of students leave school and training without having obtained, in the meantime, a higher education qualification after graduating from lower secondary school, placing themselves at a disadvantage, current and future, compared to their peers in school (Istat 2020). Analyzing recent data, the percentage of young people between 18 and 24 who leave school early is 13.5%. This share has decreased over time, even after the dangerous ascent observed in the two-year period 2017-18. It is then to be recorded a shift in time of the moment of abandonment that previously took place between the second and third year of secondary school and that gradually slips, due to the saturation of middle education (Benadusi and Giancola 2020), first the transition to upper secondary (Ballarino et al. 2011), and then placed in the first years of upper secondary school. Educational policies in the last twenty years, starting from the Autonomy, although they have perhaps had a mitigating effect, have therefore not eradicated one of the phenomena among which Italy is still among the most critical countries: early school leaving and early school leaving.

And in terms of learning? On this side, there is substantial stability over time (or at least little variation). In primary education, as regards the results in mathematics for fourth grade students, Italy is slightly above the TIMMS average (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), in a trend of stability but with differences between areas of the country. Turning to the data of students in the third class of lower secondary school, Italy worsens its comparative result by placing itself just below the TIMMS average (and in a trend of stabilization over time after having grown until 2011).

For upper secondary education, the latest edition (2018) of the OECD PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), providing an in-depth inter-temporal analysis (OECD 2018, 304), shows that in terms of reading skills from 2000 to today the trend is one of stability. With regard to mathematics, the trend appears positive with a tendency to flatten (growth with stabilization in recent periods); Finally, for the sciences, a trend defined as humped (more negative in recent years after a phase of growth). Overall, the average performance recorded by the various editions of the PISA survey shows us an education system with results systematically below the OECD average (but also the EU average).

In this context, two elements of variation are to be considered: the territorial one and the one between addresses. In the latest survey available on the national total, 23.3% of fifteen-year-olds do not reach the minimum level of reading competence (low performers), a percentage share slightly higher than the OECD average of 22.6%. Students in the Centre-North have a lower share of low performers for all skills, while higher values are recorded in the South (35.1% in reading, 37.7% in mathematics and 40.1% in science). Studies repeated over time (Benadusi et al. 2010; Giancola and Salmieri 2020) show that this figure is not only attributable to the quality of schools, but rather to the aggregate effect of "ecological" variables (education rates in the population; average wealth) and, not negligible, to the average expenditure per student at regional level. This shows how the outcomes of individual schools and the aggregate school system are highly sensitive to context variables that should lead to integrated policies. Even wider gaps are observed between different types of educational institutions. In high schools there is the lowest percentage of low performers in all skills. The most important factor of stratification "within" education systems is given by tracking, i.e. the division of schools into differentiated supply chains by curricular content. The three educational sectors (high schools, technical, professional) have remained substantially the same over time.

Through PISA data it is possible to establish a diachronic series of the percentage distribution of students in the three educational chains. The data show how constant the growth of the choice of high schools is, with the consequent decrease in enrollment in technical institutes and professional institutes. The type of school attended is confirmed and remains as one of the key factors in the explanation of performance differences (Giancola and Salmieri, 2020). The issue of the transition from lower secondary schools to high school and the choice of address remains a crucial element for the effectiveness and equity of the education system; But it is precisely this element that is not taken into account in school policies. In summary, the impact of policies starting from Autonomy on the one hand fails to improve the results of students' academic performance and on the other cushions the systematic (Giancola 2010) for which ascriptive factors (social origin, gender, migrant background) impact on the choice of the type of school in the sense of educational and social reproduction; following the combination of ascribed variables, educational choices and school path impact on student results (Pensiero et al. 2019) and, finally, the set of these variables has a significant effect on the propensity to continue studies at university level (Barone and Ruggera 2015). It can be said that school policies, starting from Autonomy, do not seem to have introduced reversals on those phenomena that distinguish Italy in the European and OECD panorama. We are unable to assess whether it had indirect effects and we cannot know what would have happened if the reform plan had been anything else. It can perhaps be said that there is a certain impermeability between policy directions (center or left) and macro effects on school performance.

The phenomena and trends shown in the data, if on the one hand are not directly attributable to school autonomy, are inevitably intertwined with it in unexpected, non-linear and non-analytically separable ways.

OECD's countries where schools enjoy greater autonomy in allocating resources show better student performance than those with less autonomy (OECD 2013). Autonomy and accountability seem to go hand in hand: greater autonomy in decisions regarding curricula and resource allocation tends to be associated with better student performance, particularly when schools operate within a responsible evaluative culture, therefore an evaluation aimed at improvement rather than competition (OECD 2016). The PISA 2015 and TALIS (Teaching And Learning

International Survey) 2013 (OECD 2018) data place Italy among the medium-high centralization nations (over 50% of school decisions are taken at central or ministerial level, as well as the recruitment of teachers). A negative action of certainly significant that is interposed between the reforms and its effects is the progressive contraction of spending on education that has occurred in the last twenty years in Italy. Between the end of the nineties and the start of school autonomy in the early 2000s 2, public spending on education (in percentage terms of GDP) was expanding and for the implementation of the autonomy policy an ad hoc fund was provided, in fact never implemented (which should have been added to the FIS – Fondo d'Istituto Investimento widely disregarded over time; From Passo 2014). Since the early years of the new millennium, public spending on education has been progressively contracting with an acceleration induced by the crisis of 2007-08, which marks the growing gap with respect to EU averages 3. This gap has not been filled even with the reformist interventions provided for by Law 107/2015, called Buona Scuola, which also put a strong emphasis on the relaunch of Autonomy. These data lead us to think that the weak effect of educational policies on student performance is to be closely related to the decreasing trend of economic resources for education in these twenty years.

3. Conclusion

In the light of what has been illustrated, what judgment can be given today of school autonomy? And what could be its future? The answer depends on the perspective you take. It could only be very critical if the judgment were formulated only on the basis of the overly optimistic expectations that many between the end of the last century and the beginning of ours had placed in it. But this will not be the case. To better define our perspective, we will briefly return to the historical-political path of this reform.

A part of the school world had seen in the Autonomy an alternative full of promises to the impasse in which top-down legislative reformism had slipped after the seventies. The reforming forces had emerged exhausted by the repeated failure of attempts to reform upper secondary education; Teachers and leaders in favor of it were increasingly doubtful of the realism and validity of that goal. At the same time, impatience grew for the suffocating centralist cloak that weighed on the world of school. Perhaps, many thought, the only chance was to hand over the keys to change into the hands of professionals in schools or civil society since the expectations placed on politicians had proved illusory. In short, reverse the path: instead of starting from the bottom, rather than betting the whole stakes on the reform of the legal systems, moving the center of gravity of the reform project to the autonomy of schools. The time, even observing what was happening in other countries, seemed ripe. With Berlinguer, Autonomy became part of a set of legislative and administrative interventions, including once again the reform of the legal systems. In the configuration given to autonomy, in fact, a synthesis was made between the secular idea of the school as self-government of teachers and the idea rooted in the Catholic pedagogy of the educating community, composed of teachers and parents.

If in part the hopes aroused by the Autonomy have been disappointed, if the critical voices even among the supporters of the time have become frequent, if the oppositions' protests are now proposed in a more fierce way, this depends on the fact that that overall design is still in many respects unfinished: an "open construction site", so we said in the years following the entry into force of autonomy (Benadusi and Consoli 2004). In reality, many of the conditions necessary for the functioning of that model have not been apprehended, or have been in a partial and

contradictory way, so much so that we must be careful not to mistake the implementation defects as intrinsic to the model. The governance model chosen was neither top-down nor bottom-up, but rather a mixed model that could be defined as multi-level and which implied a double operation: on the one hand the decentralization of state functions to peripheral entities (regions, local authorities, autonomous schools), on the other hand the maintenance in the central bodies (ministry, state administration, specialized technical agencies) of strategic functions, some entirely new. These functions should have been dealt with by the centre of the system, radically lightened of the weight of management skills and the overload of the bureaucratic staff dedicated to them.

With reference to the devolution of functions to the autonomy of schools and the changed role of the central government of the system, some of the new functions to be assigned to the central bodies in place of the old management tasks were in fact regulated with Presidential Decree no. 80/2013 which established the national evaluation system (SNV) and then activated with overall encouraging results. We refer in particular to the action of the two specialized agencies, INDIRE and Invalsi, which constitute the pillars of this system, in the field respectively of improvement and evaluation of schools and learning. In implementation of the rules on the SNV, Invalsi, in addition to continuing its work of measuring learning outcomes at national level and participation on behalf of Italy in large international comparative surveys, has recently started a more complex evaluation experience, the so-called RAV (Self-assessment Report), which has represented for all Italian schools an unprecedented opportunity for self-reflexivity and organizational learning.

In addition to evaluation, among the functions of a renewed system governance there should be others: the general rules of education, as stated in the Constitution, strategic direction, programming, and last but not least the support of school autonomy. The budget for these aspects appears to be more critical than that for evaluation. The revision of the legal systems remains essentially stopped fifty-eight years ago, programming is no longer talked about, in homage to the neo-liberal mainstreem of recent decades (Benadusi and Giancola 2020). Instead, it is discussed at European level where objectives and standards to be achieved are periodically set. Even that much planning-standardization required by the constitutional obligation to set LEPs (Essential Levels of Performance) has remained unfulfilled and this has contributed with other causes to disseminate chaos along the chain of governance of education and training between the competences of the State, the Regions and the autonomous schools, with many consequent controversies.

The legalistic and formalist mindset has continued to shape the relationship with schools and the classic government for circulars has been joined by an even more intrusive one: the government for circulars and notes. As for the leadership, it should be remembered that administrative decentralization has unloaded on it a plethora of legal-administrative tasks already the responsibility of the central and peripheral organs of the state administration. The overload of obligations and the related exposure to the risks that derive from it could not but distract it from operating, as envisaged by the design of autonomy, from propulsive leadership on the educational level and organizational and functional development. With reference to the actual practice of didactic and organizational autonomy and the impact on innovation, the balance is difficult to make. The analyzes carried out by Invalsi (2019) on the results of the self-evaluation of schools are helpful because they offer a description that, especially in comparisons between different areas and species of activity, is not exposed to the typical of self-reporting. What

emerges is an overall positive picture, even if it is multifaceted. Moreover, and in particular with reference to educational and didactic processes, external evaluators believe that the reading of the data proposes the return of a theoretical school still in fact distant from the real situation of school life (Invalsi 2019, 73).

The dramatic experience of the lockdown for the Coronavirus shows, albeit in a framework of improvisation, inexperience and risks of exclusion due to the digital divide, how much in the future the teaching and organizational flexibility, enhancing the experience made with remote technologies, with face-to-face work for small groups, perhaps transversal to classes, will be a challenge but also an inescapable imperative. If well managed, with more economic resources, better spaces and greater professional efforts, this new process will certainly help to advance in the field of innovation of equity and improvement of educational processes. Much remains to be done.

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