



**Proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International  
Conference**

**of the Journal Scuola Democratica**

**REINVENTING EDUCATION**

**VOLUME III**

**Pandemic and Post-Pandemic  
Space and Time**

**ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA  
DEMOCRATICA"**

---

## Parents as Decision-makers. Financial-organizational Involvement of Families in the School of Autonomy

**Anna Granata** and **Valerio Ferrero**

University of Turin, a.granata@unito.it

Valerio Ferrero, valerio.ferrero1@posta.istruzione.it

**ABSTRACT:** *The involvement of families in school governance is a crucial aspect for the Italian school, especially after the reform of school autonomy. This research investigates the role of representatives of families in the governance of Italian schools in managing the donations of families for the educational offer and organizing school time.*

**KEYWORDS:** *School governance, Families in school, School time, Voluntary economic contribution, Equity*

### Introduction

Twenty years after the introduction of school autonomy in Italy, there are many challenges still open, including with regard to the role of different subjectivities within the school. This work focuses on parental participation in the school's organizational choices.

The research presented here began in September 2020 to reflect on the involvement of families, in particular of their representatives, in the governance of Italian schools: the focus is on two issues that are scarcely investigated by the current pedagogical literature: (1) management of the families' donations for the expansion of the educational offer and (2) their involvement in the organization of school time. These two issues are interconnected and have a strong impact on pupils' school experience quality.

The hourly organization seems to respond to the needs of parents more than the needs of pupils in the different stages of growth, at the same time the starting economic conditions of individual cohorts of pupils seem to strongly influence the quality of their educational experience.

Our research hypothesis is that the financial and organizational involvement of families may represent a non-traditional factor of school inequality, like other factors such as the precariousness of the teaching staff, the dynamics of segregation and the mobility of teachers and students (Ferrer-Esteban, 2011). The family dimension, studied classically in the social sciences as an element of inequality in educational paths

(Bourdieu, 1966), takes on new implications in the current context: where the State fails to guarantee the school welfare state, families are involved to the extent of their economic possibilities (Ferrera, 1996).

An equitable and quality school certainly also includes a clear analysis of the repercussions that the involvement of families in governance can have on the school experience of pupils from the most diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

## **1. Main normative requirements**

The most significant normative references for our research are the Legislative Decree 297 of 1994, which organizes the collegial bodies of the school and regulates the presence of families in governance, the Decree of the President of the Republic 89 of 2009, which regulates the temporal organization of the first cycle of education, and MIUR Notes 312 of 2012 and 593 of 2013, which indicate the ways in which it is possible to request an economic contribution from parents.

Legislative Decree 297 of 1994 specifies that parents, through their representatives, are present in all the collegial bodies of the school and that the president of the school council, which is a body with a deliberative function, is a parent.

The Decree of the President of the Republic 89 of 2009 specifies the temporal organization of the first cycle of education, especially significant for primary school. At the express request of parents during registration, full-time (40 hours) or normal-time (27 hours) classes can be activated.

The two MIUR Notes, then, specify that the economic contributions of parents are donations that schools can use to expand the educational offer provided by the PTOF. For parents, this is a voluntary contribution, whose use the school must report.

This normative reflection evokes the twenty-year reform of school autonomy (Constitutional Law 3 of 2001), which promotes autonomous choices in the individual institutions at the organizational, managerial, financial and, in part, educational level. It is a change that has yet to be made in many ways, but which brings out new dynamics relating to the role of the different actors at school.

## **2. A look at national and international literature**

In the school of autonomy, school leaders move between pedagogical vision and organizational leadership (Bianchi, 2020; Marzano, 2019), qualifying themselves as educational managers who need a sensitivity in identifying and responding to the needs of a specific context, translating pedagogical and organizational aspects into school education policies.

As already specified, parents are present in all collegial bodies. Formal collegiality therefore appears very strong (Domenici, Moretti, 2011), but

in some ways it does not translate into lines of action common to the institution, since the autonomy of teachers still seems to be stronger than school autonomy (Mincu, Romiti, forthcoming; Mincu, 2020; Franzoni, 2012; Mincu, 2013). In any case, it seems that school autonomy has strengthened the subjectivity of parents in school governance (Mulè *et al.*, 2020; Benadusi *et al.*, 2020).

Moving on to the main themes of the research, there is a loss of the original reasons that supported the presence of different temporalities, with reference to primary school but not only (Triani, 2017; Bovini *et al.*, 2017). The organization of school time, observed by us as a pedagogical and not merely organizational variable (Cerini, 2004; De Bartolomeis, 1980), now depends on the needs of adult society, not on a well-defined educational project, also due to continuous cuts. The question at stake is how to satisfy the educational needs of pupils in the different stages of growth, truly placing them at the center of the educational scene (Granata, Ferrero, 2020).

The request for an economic contribution to families appears as a compensation mechanism in the face of the lack of educational and social policies of the State, not only in Italy but also in the international sphere (Ferrera, 1996; Rowe, Perry, 2020). In Italy, families appear to be among the largest public school financiers: without their intervention, the educational offer would not be fully realized (Granello, 2010; Marotta, 2010) and schools are increasingly seeking non-ministerial funds to guarantee the essential services of school life (Melandri, 2009; Salerno, 2011).

The involvement of families in school governance can effectively represent a non-traditional factor of school inequality (Ferrer-Esteban, 2011): in other words, the school does not overcome initial inequalities and, sometimes, would create new ones.

### **3. The research**

The research integrates quantitative and qualitative investigation, seen not as radical alternatives but as polarity within which to act to understand the phenomena analyzed (Coggi, Ricchiardi, 2005). Therefore, the research design qualifies as an explanatory-sequential, according to the classification of mixed research methods by Creswell and Plano Clark (2008).

The relationship between family and school as regards organizational and managerial choices represents a delicate issue. Therefore, the choice of subjects to be involved represented a crucial step: there are school insiders (school principals, assistant teachers) and outsiders (representatives of parents, who live the school experience through their children).

The research took place in Piedmont and Lombardy, by virtue of the greater economic involvement of families in these two regions. During

the quantitative phase, 308 school leaders completed an online questionnaire; the heterogeneity of the sample made it possible to identify substantial differences between the first and second cycle of education with respect to the dimensions investigated. During the qualitative survey, in-depth interviews were carried out with 7 managers or vicars of comprehensive schools (pupils aged three to fourteen) and 6 representatives of the parents.

The analysis of the interviews was conducted considering the category to which the interviewees belong, so as to bring out similarities and differences within groups and between groups.

## **4. Results**

### *4.1. Quantitative analysis*

The analysis of the questionnaires shows that few schools have changed the economic involvement of families after the pandemic, making choices in the name of gratuitousness, equity, concreteness or quality.

From the point of view of temporal organization, the school principals responded to the questionnaire focusing above all on the changes made necessary by the pandemic emergency. The temporal reorganization was conceived as transitory, representing a response to bureaucratic needs, often not accompanied by pedagogical reflection.

The rationale of the choices was also useful in triggering controversy with the families, who, thanks to the representatives, brought their requests to the school council. The school has not changed itself, not even in a situation that offers ample room for innovation.

### *4.2. Financial involvement of families: results of qualitative analysis*

From the words of school principals and parents emerges the strong need on the part of schools to resort to donations from families to cope with the lack of ministerial funds and the precarious economic situation of almost all schools («What if we did not have the financial contribution of the parents? The school would go into decay!», a Lombard school principal said).

In some schools it happens that parents have an important role in the management of these funds, which sometimes are not even paid to the school but to associations which, although recognized by the school, are composed only of parents. In general, parental representatives, especially in the school council, have a strong role in defining school policies with the management.

The economic demand for families has repercussions on the educational possibilities of students: there is a strong risk of reproducing the starting inequalities and creating new ones. From the interviews conducted, a differentiation in the quality of the training offer emerges according to the economic resources of families, an aspect that appears as a non-traditional factor of school inequality (Ferrer-Esteban, 2011). In

this case, the Matthew effect seems to be activated: in the face of a starting disadvantage, inequalities in the school curriculum intensify and the school ceases to be an engine of equity.

The lack of regulatory clarity leads to difficulties in raising funds from parents, strategies to ensure fairness, discontent, confrontations and tensions. On the other hand, the anonymity of families who do not pay the voluntary economic contribution is not always guaranteed («There is low gossip. Teachers, representatives and other parents know who is not paying», a Piedmontese representative said), whether due to economic constraints or a political and principled choice.

Some schools have established solidarity funds to guarantee all pupils the same educational opportunities. These funds are financed with the contributions of the families themselves. Somehow a form of redistribution of resources is implemented, which however is not in many cases made known to families.

The financial contribution has become useless for the (still) few expert fundraising schools, which open up to the territory and involve families for their skills, not for their money. The managers who use this method of financing have identified resources present on the territory, at national and European level, whose the representatives of the parents also speak in the interviews conducted.

#### *4.3. School time: results of qualitative analysis*

Reflections on the temporal organization refer above all to primary school; in subsequent grades of school the difference between temporality is not so marked and the choice of school complex is mostly logistical.

From the interviews conducted, it emerges that the 40-hour school time in primary school is expression of parents' need to support family organization, also due to the raising of the retirement age which means that one can no longer count on grandparents.

School managers and representatives interviewed are aware that the time of 40 hours is not suited to the needs of children compared to the time of 27 hours, not surprisingly called 'normal-time'.

There is difficulty by schools in guaranteeing the quality of 40-hours school time, due to a lack of resources: the need to guarantee this school time for all leads to choices not supported by pedagogical reasons, such as a reduction of co-presences, fragmentation of teachers' interventions in the classrooms.

While some parents believe that 40-hours school time can ensure a quality school experience for all pupils, not all families and leaders are convinced («Full time? It looks like a factory worker schedule!», a Lombard school principal said).

40-hours school time at primary school basically represents a sort of compensatory action of the school oriented towards the welfare state (Ferrera, 1996), given the lack of real support for families in terms of social policies.

## Conclusion

Our research shows a marked role of parents in school governance, expressed through the economic contribution and the orientation of time choices.

The majority of institutions makes use of parental donations to support the life of the school: the Italian welfare state is strongly supported by the family institution and also at the school level a compensation mechanism is activated for lack of educational and social policies (Ferrera, 1996).

Equity appears to be at risk: in the face of a starting socio-economic inequality, schools of series A and series B can be created based on the different economic capacity of parents. This difference sometimes concerns the individual classes within the institutions, configuring a form of internal school inequality. The close link that emerges between the possibility of families to contribute and the quality of the educational offer is configured, in fact, as a non-traditional factor of school inequality (Ferrer-Esteban, 2011).

The need to make up for the growing shortage of ministerial funds is part of an at times ambiguous regulatory framework, which risks making a contribution that should be completely free mandatory in the eyes of parents. This data confirms a dynamic that has already emerged in international contexts (Rowe, Perry, 2020).

It is crucial that the importance of reducing economic inequalities between schools in different contexts is understood at a central level, by granting more resources to schools located in disadvantaged contexts.

As emerged from our research, the role of school principals in the school of autonomy is essential. Some schools have developed alternative fundraising strategies as a way of overcoming initial inequalities and granting a precise role to anyone who is part of the school community: the raising of funds takes place through local, national and European tenders, while families field their own skills. This strategy could be further explored by pedagogical research, in terms of supporting schools in the renewal of financial management with a view to greater equity and quality of school life for all pupils, as our Constitution urges to do.

## References

- Benadusi, L., Giancola, O., Viteritti, A. (2020). «L'autonomia dopo l'autonomia. Linee d'azione, esiti e prospettive di una policy intermittente», *Autonomie Locali e Servizi Sociali*, 2, 325-41.
- Bianchi, P. (2020). *Nello specchio della scuola*, Bologna, Il Mulino.
- Bourdieu, P. (1966). «L'école conservatrice. L'inégalité sociale devant l'école et devant la culture», *Revue française de sociologie*, 3, 325-47.

- Bovini, G., De Philippis, M., Sestito, P. (2017). «Il tempo pieno e la dispersione dei voti», in P. Falzetti (ed) *I dati INVALSI: uno strumento per la ricerca*, Milan, Franco Angeli, pp. 125-36.
- Cerini, G. (2004), «Il tempo scuola come variabile pedagogica», in E. Catarsi (ed) *La scuola a tempo pieno in Italia: una grande utopia*, Pisa, Del Cerro, pp. 58-83.
- Coggi, C., Ricchiardi, P. (2005). *Progettare la ricerca empirica in educazione*, Rome, Carocci.
- De Bartolomeis, F. (1980), *Fare scuola fuori della scuola. Orientamenti pratici per un nuovo tempo pieno*, Turin, Stampatori.
- Domenici, G. Moretti, G. (2011). *Leadership educativa e autonomia scolastica: il governo dei processi formativi e gestionali nella scuola di oggi*, Rome, Armando.
- Ferrer-Esteban, G. (2011). «Beyond the Traditional Territorial Divide in the Italian Education System. Aspects of System Management Factors on Performance in Lower Secondary Education», *FGA Working Paper*, 42, (12), Turin, Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli.
- Ferrera, M. (1996), «The 'Southern model' of Welfare in Social Europe», *Journal of European Social Policy*, 6 (1), 17-37.
- Franzoni, F. (2012). *Governance scolastica e comunità di apprendimento*, Milan, Franco Angeli.
- Granata, A. and Ferrero, V. (2020). «La scuola è un luogo di relazioni: sei lezioni dal lockdown per la scuola primaria», *Studium Educationis*, 3, 67-81.
- Granello, S. (2010). «Il bilancio delle scuole, questo sconosciuto», *Programma Education FGA Working Paper*, 21 (2), Turin, Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli.
- Marotta, A. (2010). «Genitori a scuola», *Il Mulino. Rivista bimestrale di cultura e politica*, 2, 253-62.
- Marzano, A. (2019). «L'agire organizzativo del Dirigente Scolastico per l'indirizzo e la gestione dell'istituzione scolastica», in C. Mulè, P. De Luca A. M. Notti (eds) *L'insegnante e il dirigente scolastico nella scuola dell'autonomia tra didattica, governance e progetto culturale*, Rome, Armando, pp. 518-34.
- Melandri, V. (2009). «Raccogliere fondi per gli istituti scolastici», *Terzo settore*, 6, 46-50.
- Mincu, M. E. (2020). *Sistemi scolastici nel mondo globale. Educazione comparata e politiche educative*. Milan, Mondadori.
- Mincu, M. E. (2013). «School Community, Parent Participation and Non-Neutrality: Globalisation challenges and communitarian responses», *Spirale*, 51 (1), 141-153.
- Mincu, M. E. Romiti, S. (forthcoming). «Evidence Informed Practice in Italian Education», in C. Brown, J. Malin (eds) *The Handbook of Evidence-Informed Practice in Education: learning from international contexts*, Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Mulè, P., De Luca, C., Notti, A. M. (2020). *L'insegnante e il dirigente scolastico nella scuola dell'autonomia tra didattica, governance e progetto culturale*, Rome, Armando.
- Plano Clark, V. L., Creswell, J. L. (2008). *The Mixed Methods Reader*, Thousand Oaks, Sage.



- Rowe, E., Perry, L. B. (2020). «Inequalities in the private funding of public schools: parent financial contributions and school socioeconomic status», *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 52, (1), 42-59.
- Salerno, M. (2011). «Fundraising and finanziamenti comunitari: i nuovi scenari della scuola dell'autonomia», in G. Domenici, G. Moretti (eds) *Leadership educativa and autonomia scolastica: il governo dei processi formativi and gestionali nella scuola di oggi*, Rome, Armando, pp. 297-318.
- Triani, P. (2017). «Il tempo pieno nella scuola primaria italiana», *Studium educationis*, 2, 81-91.