

# The challenge of equity at school: Pedagogical reflections and notes on the Italian case

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## Abstract

The paper focus on equity in education. After a terminological disambiguation on the construct, we analyze the Italian school context, plagued by old and new inequalities: in addition to the classical causes (socio-economic and socio-cultural status), non-traditional factors of inequality emerge, produced by the school itself. School autonomy is a possible tool to act in the name of equity.

**Keywords:** equity; inequalities; school, Italy, interculture.

## Equity: A polysemic construct

Equity is a polysemic construct: it is necessary to understand which interpretations respond to the principle of social justice, understood as an ideal that has never been fully realized (Bauman & Tester, 2002) according to which everyone must be included in the participatory processes of citizenship (Gerwitz, 2006), exercising self-determination despite the interdependence that binds human beings (Bell, 2007), having access to knowledge as a tool to be actors in History and possessing the indispensable capacities to critically analyze what is happening, identify forms of oppression and injustice and intervene to counter them (Hackman, 2005). It is a matter of affirming the value of schools in achieving an ever-higher degree of justice and democracy.

### Equity as merit

Commitment and talent enable anyone to achieve any status; the influence of other factors is not considered (Savidan, 2007; Nagel, 1991).

### Equity as negative freedom

There should be no external factors influencing people's schooling and careers (Abravamel, 2008; Colombo, 2012).

### Equity as equality of opportunity

Starting conditions influence educational and life paths. Privilege must not become merit (Bourdieu, 1966; Rawls, 1971; Roemer, 2000).

### Equity as equality of capabilities

The role of education is to increase the capabilities of the individual, ensuring that everyone has a level that allows them to live in dignity and exercise their agency (Sen, 2010; Nussbaum, 2001).

### Equity as inclusion

We need to recognise the value of each person, guaranteeing autonomy and participation and institutionalising pluralism (Kanor, 2021).

**Figure 1.** *Interpretations of the equity construct*

The first two strands risk opening to social reproduction: school contexts are not in question and there is a risk of seeing students who do not achieve a certain level of results as disadvantaged. Positioning oneself within the last three strands to elaborate a theoretical-practical definition of equity specific to education and schooling is dictated by the desire to value pluralism without leading it back to an artificial idea of norm and homogeneity, to declare the need to decouple the interdependence between students' backgrounds and schooling paths and to emphasize the role of school so that each individual realizes his or her aspirations, having acquired the necessary skills to lead a dignified life.

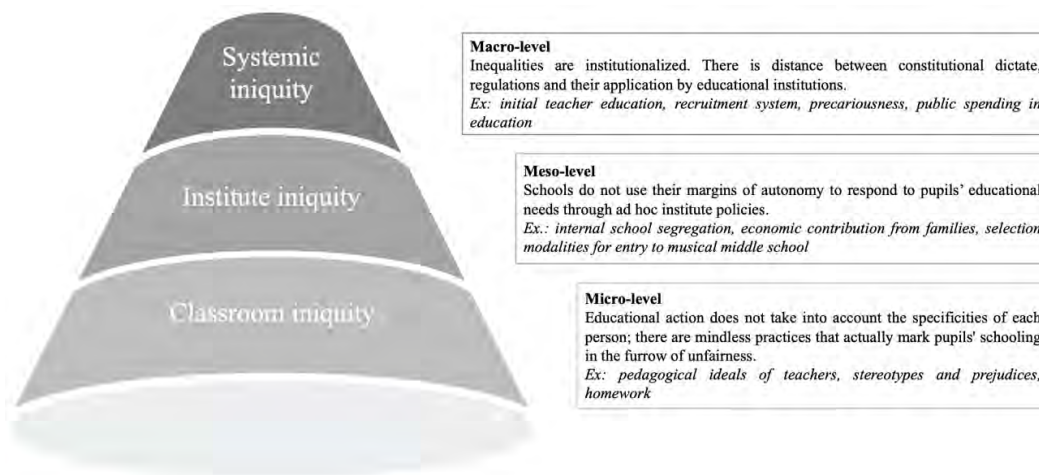
Thus, equity becomes a horizon of meaning to affirm the need to guarantee excellence in education for all in terms of efficiency and effectiveness: everyone must acquire the capabilities for exercising citizenship in terms of participation in political, social, cultural and economic life on a local and global level. This vision calls for a new, more complex and critical reading that takes into account the contributions of intersectional theory (Hill Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 2017), critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2020) and approaches derived from post-colonial studies (Ashcroft et al., 2014; Young, 2020): these are ways of reading inequalities and discrimination and considering pluralism as an everyday experience.

### **Italian school and equity**

The Italian school responds to the idea of equity that we have outlined, at least on a normative level: the Constitution states that “the school is open to all”, sanctioning its commitment to achieving substantial equality between citizens (Di Pol, 2016). From these constitutional principles an important legislative production has derived to give vigor to the ideal of equity in education, but the schooling of students remains plagued by deep disparities.

The socio-economic and socio-cultural background of pupils still weighs on their educational pathways (Eurydice, 2020; OECD, 2022), but today new factors of inequality emerge, defined as non-traditional because it is the school itself that creates them due to its own organizational culture and operating choices (Ferrer-Esteban, 2011). They affect both different institutions and classes in the same school, they depend on political and governance choices and the educational actions of teachers (Gobbo, 2008); combining with each other, they produce unprecedented forms of injustice that affect all students (Benadusi & Giancola, 2020; Gavosto, 2022; Granata & Ferrero, 2022).

The graphic elaboration (Figure 2), based on Bronfenbrenner's (2009) ecological model and on the need, pointed out by Ogbu (1981), 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. Finally, at a macro-level we have a gap between legislation and implementation, with measures sometimes inconsistent with constitutional dictate.



**Figure 2.** *Iniquity pyramid*

The presence of non-traditional factors of inequality that act under the radar and are hidden, insidious, very specific and difficult to detect because they can be very different from one context to another requires targeted solutions to meet the needs of individual contexts. The regulatory framework in which the Italian education system is set, i.e., school autonomy, proves to be very useful to act in a direction of equity and counter inequalities.

### **School autonomy for equity**

School autonomy can be crucial in terms of equity (Campione, 2013; Cortigiani, 2010), with a key role played by school leaders who implement educational management through a distributed leadership model (Domenici & Moretti, 2011; Marzano, 2019). Schools make autonomous choices in the organizational, managerial, financial, didactic spheres consistent with the general aims of the education system to respond specifically to the educational needs of their students (Morzenti Pellegrini, 2011). They devise school policies that integrate the various actors of the school reality and of the territory, in the perspective of a school that becomes the nerve center of a wider community (Mulè et al., 2019).

School autonomy is a useful tool for reducing inequalities provided it is used in a non-bureaucratic manner, but under the banner of a specific and well-defined educational project (Palumbo & Pandolfini, 2016). It is a matter of acting on the daily experience of students, on what they experience in the classrooms through school policies and choices shared by all the actors that are part of the school community. In Italian schools, the School Council is the collegiate body that formulates school policies and is chaired by a parent: this is no coincidence, we wish to emphasize that the principle of educational co-responsibility is also valid at governance level.

Three Year Educational Offer Plan to make the implicit curriculum manifest (Amico, 2018; Anello, 2021)	Educational Co-responsibility Pact written in a shared manner to bring out the meanings attributed to the school by both professionals and families (Dusi & Pati, 2015)
Reinforcement teachers for educational planning (Casacchi, 2016), also in terms of reorganizing school time (Lelli, 2015)	Fundraising activities not to create inequalities by asking parents to contribute (Granata & Ferrero, 2022)
Social accountability as a tool for formulating new educational policies at school level (Boccia, 2016)	Schools as communities of practice developing training paths adapted to the needs of the context (Ellerani, 2018)

**Figure 3.** *Examples of the use of school autonomy for equity*

Despite this regulatory framework and of what the literature emphasizes, the Italian school continues to have a centralized structure with a prudential use of autonomy (Cerini, 2016). Educational planning put on paper is often not put into practice (Romano, 2016): expertise in the use of school autonomy belongs only to a few schools (Gavosto, 2022). Schools that engage in research paths and use regulatory possibilities creatively and unbureaucratically, as exemplified in Figure 3, achieve appreciable results in terms of equity and reduction of inequalities.

## Conclusions

In this short text we have explained how equity in education an emergency in the Italian context is, plagued by old and new inequalities. School autonomy is absolutely a resource in this sense, but it must be used creatively and not bureaucratically.

Researchers and school professionals are thus called upon to act synergistically: exploiting the potential of school autonomy, specific research paths can be developed to reduce inequalities in individual contexts and act in the name of equity.

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