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‘Lonely’: education policies and their reception, between indigestible carrots and demands for proper regulation

Anna Malandrino

In the field of education policy, 2021 was marked by policy initiatives in two areas above all others. That is, alongside policies aimed at the ‘normal’ functioning of educational institutions, measures were put in place to deal with the Covid-19 emergency. Three major – what can be termed ‘structural’ – initiatives were taken, all of which affected schools, and affected them on both fronts. These were the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), the *Decreto ‘Sostegni bis’* (follow-up subsidies decree) and the 2022 Finance Law. There were, in addition, a number of ‘minor’ initiatives taken in order to address more specific issues in the field of education.

In this article we shall focus on those policies – understood as both decisions and non-decisions (Polsby, 1980) – that had to do with the staffing and functioning of schools, policies which in their turn are essential prerequisites for the provision of education of high quality. The individuals who were directly affected by these policies were, therefore, head teachers, the directors of general and administrative services, teachers, and administrative, technical and auxiliary staff. However, an understanding of policy-making processes within the education sector is illuminating because it offers insights into the working of an institution – the school – that, in one way or another, touches the lives of everyone. The analysis is developed by drawing on the classic distinction made in the literature between what Vedung (1998) calls policy instruments that act as ‘sticks’ and those acting as ‘carrots’. This means that we expect to find, in policy-making, some balance between regulatory measures (and corresponding sanctions) and incentives (implying benefits for those they target) (cf. *infra*). As we shall see, both educational policy and the politics of education in Italy are unusual. This is because the lack of attention on the part of successive governments has generated, on the part of educational providers – the so-called ‘street-level bureaucrats’ – not only a thirst for financial measures benefiting those targeted – a phenomenon that is a permanent feature of all areas of policy – but also (and perhaps above all), a demand for regulation. ‘Street-level bureaucrats’ – an expression usually translated into Italian as ‘*burocrati di strada*’ (Campomori 2007) – are those employed by the public administration working in direct contact with the citizens who are targeted by, or beneficiaries of, public policies. The category includes, for example, police officers and teachers, and they are distinguished by the high level of discretion associated with their roles (Gofen and Lotta 2021; Lipsky 1980). Such discretion is usually defended tenaciously by the bureaucrats as a necessary prerogative. However, during the year under investigation, those employed in education revealed a need, expressed by the associations representing their interests (especially the trade unions), for the Government to make its views clearer and engage in stronger regulation. 2021 provided an excellent opportunity to explore this unusual feature of the education sector, as the pandemic made obvious, in the eyes of public education service providers, the need for clearly specified rules associated with the requirement to relieve street-level bureaucrats of excessive burdens of responsibility.

The sources used to explore what happened in 2021 are of three kinds: a) legislation and official documents, which enabled the identification of the main measures introduced; b) articles drawn from the ‘*politica scolastica*’ (education policy) section of the specialist online daily, *Orizzonte Scuola*, to identify the reactions and demands of educational employees; c) semi-structured interviews with Italian head teachers. Regarding b), 77 articles were selected, according to their relevance, from

January to December 2021. As for c), a total of seven interviews were conducted with head teachers employed in schools located both in the north and in the south of the country in order to eliminate any impact of the geography variable on the results.

The article is structured as follows. The following section reviews the literature concerning policy instruments, focussing especially on the typology elaborated by Vedung and colleagues (Bemelmans-Videc *et al.* 1998) and subsequently taken up by several other authors. The two subsequent sections describe, first, the demands for, and the measures adopted to provide, greater benefits for education staff, and then the appeals for greater regulation. The final section concludes by offering an interpretation of the significance of the events discussed for the provision of education in Italy.

Policy instruments and their reception

Policy instruments are essential elements of government intervention and of public policies themselves (Capano and Lippi 2017). They are the techniques of governance the authorities adopt to direct collective action and promote social change (Acciai and Capano 2021). Faced with a problem to be resolved, decision-makers can thus choose between different types of action – each of which reflects a particular requirement and is associated with given expected effects – and therefore between different kinds of instruments. In this connection, there is a very well-known distinction made between 1) regulatory instruments, 2) incentives and subsidies and 3) information provision (Vedung 1998). Within this framework, regulatory instruments have been conceptualised using the metaphor of the ‘stick’ and defined as measures aiming to prescribe or prevent given behaviours usually by making threats of the imposition of sanctions. Both the literature and the world around us provide numerous examples of sticks: from the regulation of car parks and parking charges (Westin *et al.* 2020) and of carbon dioxide (Johansson *et al.* 2018) to regulation of the careers of public officials. Normally, the failure to meet an obligation defined by the regulation in question is met by the imposition of a sanction, which can be pecuniary or of some other kind, up to and including the deprivation of personal freedom (through imprisonment). In the literature, regulation is often described as an expensive instrument, one whose marginal costs are greater than its marginal returns (Lemaire 1998). Not least, such instruments tend to be received by those they target less favourably than instruments of the second kind, that is, incentives and benefits broadly defined, metaphorically conceived as ‘carrots’ (Schmidt 2013). Here too the range of examples is huge. It includes the research and development (R&D) incentives provided to firms (Johansson *et al.* 2018), tax exemptions made available to taxpayers, salary increases made available to public officials. The third kind of instrument is the ‘sermon’, or in other words, the communication of information (Vedung and van der Doelen 1998), often adopted in support of measures of the first two kinds. We mention it here for the sake of completeness, though we do not consider it in this article. Examples include vaccination campaigns (Gesualdo *et al.* 2021) and information provided to public officials concerning instruments made available by the government to assist them in the performance of their duties (Malandrino and Sager 2021).

In general, the literature tends to emphasise that policy instruments, regardless of their kind, are more likely to be accepted by individuals with higher rather than lower levels of education (Serbruyns and Luysaertb 2006). We therefore expect that in schools, where the levels of educational attainment of staff are medium to high, the reception of regulatory instruments will not be entirely negative but rather more or less readily accepted. Vice versa, one who is familiar with the Italian education system and its age-old issues – from the problem of insecure employment to the deficiencies in professional training and development – will anticipate that financial incentives perceived as inadequate, or ill-defined in terms of eligibility criteria, will not necessarily be greeted warmly. These ‘working hypotheses’ will be tested by reviewing the expressions of protest on the part of educational staff, brought to light by their representative organisations and their trade unions, in response to the decisions and non-decisions of the Government. More specifically, by reviewing

the principal financial measures debated in 2021 and the main appeals for regulation on the part of teachers and other staff, we will show that, in contrast with other sectors where incentives and benefits are usually preferred to regulation (Schmidt 2013), education reveals a slightly different pattern. In turn, the way in which policy instruments are chosen (or not chosen) and utilised (or not utilised) reflects the policy styles of decision-makers. In the case here considered, the choice of policy instruments – especially the failure to regulate, and the inadequacy of the incentives provided – was, as we shall see, interpreted as a reflection of apathy on the part of policy-makers and of a passive style of policy-making – so much so that a former minister described the ministry of education as having been mothballed by the ministry of the economy and finance (Niceforo 2010).

‘Indigestible carrots’ and demands for improved standards

The combination of, on the one hand, the Recovery Fund – the resources provided to support an Italian population racked by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic – and on the other the budget law for 2022, meant that 2021 was marked by a series of demands for the provision of benefits, and by the corresponding measures: ‘carrots’ in terms of Vedung’s typology. When, however, they were adopted, far from being greeted positively by all concerned, they gave rise to bitter controversy concerning the numbers of beneficiaries, the sums involved and the criteria for accessing them. Such episodes were numerous and they affected everyone directly or indirectly involved in the management of schools – from the schools sections of the trade unions to the directors of general and administrative services, and teachers and head teachers.

Demands for more investment in education began to be heard from January 2021 when the trade unions appealed for a reduction in class sizes and the employment of additional staff on three-year contracts using the resources made available through the Recovery Fund. The Fund itself, as well as its scheduling and deployment, was at the centre of the internal conflict that led to the fall of the Conte II government and its replacement by the government under Mario Draghi. At the beginning of the year, those in education pushed for part of the resources to be used in the ways mentioned above, but for the most part their demands fell on deaf ears.

In the spring, Dl. no. 73 of 25 May 2021 introduced ‘urgent measures concerning the Covid-19 emergency to support firms, the labour market, young people, health and locally-provided services’. Converted into law by legge no. 106 of 23 July 2021, this was the above-mentioned *Decreto Sostegni bis*. Article 59 made provision for some of those on temporary contracts to be employed permanently,¹ while at the same time excluding large numbers of them. Thus, while it gave permanent contracts to those on the highest grade (*prima fascia*), it excluded – unjustly according to the trade unions – those with 36 months’ service on the grade immediately below (*seconda fascia*). The measure therefore affected no more than a small minority of teachers on temporary contracts: those who had passed a qualifying examination when it was possible to do so, a possibility that is currently provided in Italy mainly for special needs teaching. This meant that, as things stood, it could only be taken by those with the resources (in terms of time and money) to undergo the necessary training abroad and then, on the basis of EU law,² to get it recognised by the Italian system.

2021 also saw the trade unions issue the latest in a long series of calls for a pay increase for teachers, whose salaries are way behind those of their colleagues in most other West European countries (Eurydice 2021). In public debate, the demand has always been linked with the issue of raising standards in the teaching profession. The Government responded by including in the 2022

¹ Cf. also ministerial decree no. 242 of 30 July 2021, entitled, ‘Procedura straordinaria in attuazione dell’articolo 59, commi da 4 a 9, del decreto-legge 25 maggio 2021, n. 73’ (‘Extraordinary procedure pursuant to article 59, subsections 4-9 of decree law no. 73 of 25 May 2021’).

² See directive 2013/55/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 November 2013, amending directive 2005/36/EC concerning the recognition of professional qualifications, and EU regulation n. 1024/2012 concerning administrative cooperation through the internal market information system (‘IMI regulation’).

Finance Law (legge no. 234 of 30 December 2021) provision for a pay increase, but one that amounted to little more than €100.

With regard to teachers' pensions, article 1, subsection 87 provided for the abolition of the '*quota 100*' early retirement provision, and its replacement, for 2022 only, by a '*quota 102*' system, while retaining (art. 1, c. 91) the right to retire early through the so-called '*APE Sociale*' arrangements only for primary-school teachers – provisions considered overall inadequate by the trade unions.³ What made the carrots offered by the Government difficult for teachers to digest was not only the design of measures, but also the way they were implemented. Problems of this kind led, for example, to delays in paying the salaries of supply teachers – delays condemned by the Cgil (Confederazione generale italiana del lavoro, or Italian General Confederation of Labour) as 'the latest shameful hold-up by the ministry of finance in making available the money allocated in the budget to education to allow the pay arrears accumulated by teachers to be made good'.⁴

Dissatisfaction with the lack of attention and regard for education reached a climax with the first draft of the finance law, which, out of a total budget of €33 billion initially provided just €260 million for education. Such dissatisfaction was ultimately expressed in the strike of education staff which took place on 10 December when the trade unions renewed their demands concerning several issues central to the running of schools. It is interesting to note that at the time of writing only two of the trade unions' five main demands⁵ were actually met. As compared with the demand for a pay increase for teachers of at least €350 per month, the Finance Law allowed for only €100. Moreover, at the start of 2022, following the trade union demonstration, teachers on temporary contracts with 36 years' service were still waiting for their positions to be made permanent. A further set of issues, ones recognised by the trade unions themselves as 'more technical' in nature, had also been ignored. They included regularising the positions of school administrators '*facenti funzione*'⁶ and the adoption of restrictive conditions for job transfer requests through the collective bargaining process rather than legislation. By early 2022, therefore, the two demands that had been accepted were the retention of the technical and auxiliary staff⁷ hired to cope with the demands of the Covid emergency, and reduction in the number of so-called '*classi pollaio*' (or 'chicken-coop classes', with excessively large numbers of pupils). In this regard, article 1, subsection 344 of the 2022 Finance Law made it possible to derogate from the existing limits on class sizes in order to reduce overcrowding, especially in schools in deprived areas and in those with high drop-out rates.

Overall, then, both the 'carrots' adopted and the reactions to them (of trade unionists and other policy actors), highlighted once again the low priority given to education. When schools were closed in order to limit the spread of the virus, education at least temporarily rose to the top of the agenda of public debate and even led to the opening up of a major political cleavage – between those wanting schools to reopen ('*aperturisti*') and those insisting that they should remain closed ('*rigoristi*'). This

³ Translator's note: *Quota 100* is so-called because it makes it possible for the employee to retire when the sum of his/her age and the number of years for which s/he has contributed equal 100. APE stands for '*anticipo pensionatico*', 'or early retirement'. The '*APE Sociale*' makes it possible for workers facing certain difficulties, such as unemployment or caring responsibilities, to retire early.

⁴ Ilenia Culurgioni, 'Stipendi docenti, Pacifico (Anief): in Italia si lavora 43 anni per 45 mila euro. Retribuire formazione obbligatoria', 6 November 2021, <https://www.orizzontescuola.it/pacifico-anief-green-pass-non-va-prorogato-ma-abolito-precari-senza-stipendio-trasformati-in-morti-di-fame-intervista/>.

⁵ Flc-Cgil, 'Governo assente, la scuola si ferma il 10 dicembre', 24 November 2021, <http://www.flcgil.it/rassegna-stampa/nazionale/governo-assente-la-scuola-si-ferma-il-10-dicembre.flc>.

⁶ Translator's note: literally, 'those carrying out a function'. The reference is to administrative staff performing functions above their pay grades but without having been promoted or paid the corresponding salary.

⁷ Ministry of education, circular no. 1,376 of 28 December 2021, 'Oggetto: «Proroga dei contratti sottoscritti ai sensi dell'art. 58, comma 4-ter, del D.l. n. 73/2021, recante "Misure urgenti per la scuola" – Prime indicazioni per le istituzioni scolastiche»' ('Re: «Prorogation of contracts signed in accordance with article 58, subsection 4-ter of decree law no. 73/2021 containing "Urgent measures concerning schools" – Initial guidance for educational institutions»), https://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/5407202/m_pi.AOODPPR.REGISTRO+UFFICIALE%28U%29.0001376.2-8-12-2021.pdf/47c5f80b-6d89-cab6-6ccc-5bfb560ec77c?t=1640716377515.

division had a consistently high profile throughout the first three waves of the pandemic and was eloquent about the importance of effectively functioning schools to ordinary Italian families. Despite this, in 2021 the cause of education struggled to gain a hearing when it came to drafting the finance law, illustrating once again the tendency of governments to be indecisive concerning the relevant issues. All this took place against the background of the expressions of esteem for the education system on the part of public authorities such as the president of the Republic – expressions that were certainly well deserved, but largely symbolic and somewhat romanticised (Malandrino and Sager 2021).

It is as well to remember that investments and incentives for education are provided for in the NRRP whose implementation is due to take place after the end of 2021 when this article was written. The plan envisages the construction of new nursery and infants schools – which should lead to an increase in employment opportunities within such institutions – as well as the upgrading of existing school buildings, including measures to enhance their safety (M4C1.1, Investimenti 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3). It also envisages providing funding for investment in IT training for teachers (M4C1.2, Investimento 2.1). In short, for those working in schools, the anticipated benefits of the NRRP are a better working environment and an enhancement of their professional capacities. The trade unions have said little about these aspects, as it will only be once they have been implemented that it will be clear how the Government intends to follow up on them. Indeed, the plan contained no objectives the ministry of education had to reach before the end of 2021.⁸ Urgent decrees allocating plan resources have already been approved – such as, for example, Dl. no. 152 of 6 November 2021 (converted into law by legge no. 233 of 29 November 2021). This provides for competitive tendering arrangements (art. 24, c. 1-3) to be put in place for projects aimed at giving effect to the ‘Piano di sostituzione di edifici scolastici e di riqualificazione energetica’ (Plan for the replacement of school buildings and for efficiency enhancements). It also provides for the transfer of about €63,000,000 from the complementary operational programme, ‘Per la scuola. Competenze e ambienti per l'apprendimento’ (For schools. Skills and environments for learning), to the complementary operational programme, ‘Governance e Capacità istituzionale’ (Governance and institutional capacity 2014-2020) of the Territorial Cohesion Agency (art. 24, c. 4), to enable the funds to be spent on supporting schools and realising school building projects envisaged by the NRRP. Neither in this case were there any particular expressions of opposition worth noting. The schools section of the Cgil, for example, confined itself to the dissemination of information about the aforementioned initiatives, by means of the publication of an official statement on its website.⁹

Swimming against the tide: demands for more regulation in education

Demands for more regulation, not only in response to the pandemic but also in relation to personnel matters more generally, were numerous. Especially during the most acute phases of the pandemic, the trade unions spoke loudly of the need to apply safety protocols correctly. The document illustrating the provisions of the 2022 finance bill showed that far from demanding greater autonomy, school head teachers asked to be given more support in terms of managing their administrative and legal obligations.¹⁰

⁸ Italiadomani, ‘Relazione sullo stato di attuazione del Piano nazionale di ripresa e resilienza, 23 dicembre 2021’ (‘Report concerning progress in implementing the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, 23 December 2021’), Schede di sintesi delle attività delle amministrazioni titolari di misure del Pnrr, Ministero dell’Istruzione (Executive summaries of the activities of administrations with responsibility for NRRP measures, Ministry of Education).

⁹ Flc-Cgil, ‘Pnrr: le prime disposizioni urgenti relative al settore scolastico. Interventi su scuole innovative e risorse del Programma operativo complementare «Per la Scuola»’, 8 November 2021, <http://www.flcgil.it/attualita/fondi-europei-2014-2020/programmi-operativi-nazionali/pon-scuola/pnrr-le-prime-disposizioni-urgenti-relative-al-settore-scolastico.flc>.

¹⁰ Explanatory document accompanying the finance bill, p.188: ‘It must be remembered that head teachers have a multiplicity of tasks and responsibilities which, in other areas of the public administration, are carried out by several

This pattern was also in evidence in relation to the issue of the recruitment of special needs teachers – whose work was crucial given the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on pupils with disabilities, and in relation to whom the Movimento insegnanti di sostegno specializzati (Movement for special needs teaching professionals) drew attention to the lack of any effective planning. However, it also concerned, in a more general way, the other policy issue essential to guaranteeing the quality of teaching staff and of the service they provide. Thus, the Associazione nazionale dirigenti pubblici e alte professionalità della scuola (National association of public-sector leaders and high-level professionals in education, Anp) called for greater regulation of teacher training and for closer attention to be paid to high teaching standards – standards, which, during the pandemic, had certainly been in evidence among staff, all of whom were dedicated to public service (Malandrino and Sager 2021) – but which revealed weaknesses, especially in the management of distance learning, with a consequent worsening of pupil performances in comparison with the pre-pandemic period.¹¹

Especially interesting was the fact that a number of issues concerning teachers found their way onto the political agenda without giving rise to any concrete decisions. Thus, there was no legislation to remove the obligation on teachers to remain at the schools where they had been first appointed for five years before being eligible for transfer, about which the trade unions complained loudly (only a reduction of this obligation to three years was provided). On the other hand, the problem of teachers on temporary contracts, a long-running sore in Italian education, was certainly met by demands from the trade unions that their positions be made permanent – but in the context of a robust binary system (with the return of the so-called double channel of recruitment) managed on one side by a competitive appointments process, on the other by offering permanent contracts to first and second level teachers already in post. When the graduatorie provinciali scolastiche (provincial educational rankings, Gps) – which had already been digitalised by the previous government in the interests of social distancing and contagion avoidance¹² – were reopened, requests were made for greater attention to be paid to the separation between first and second levels (*prima fascia* and *seconda fascia*), something considered essential to allow qualifying teachers to apply for inclusion in relation to both procedures. In truth, this was a demand that was met.¹³

The education system in Italy has always suffered from an inability of governments to introduce incisive reforms capable of making a significant difference in terms of guaranteeing the quality of provision (Scotto di Luzio 2007). If this is true with regard to the initial and ongoing training of teachers (Malandrino 2021), then it also touches on the vexed question of teacher appraisals, currently absent from the ensemble of regulations and practices that govern the functioning of schools. However, the question here is more complex. Proposals for establishing a system of appraisals are made periodically by policy-makers before regularly being shelved because of the opposition of the trade unions in confirmation of their tenacity in pursuit of their own sectional interests (Capano and Terenzi 2019). Such tenacity was also on display in 2021 with the failure of efforts to secure the introduction of the proposed reward for ‘dedication’, a term whose definition can be found in the *Enciclopedia Treccani* in the absence of any greater detail to be found in a draft

different managerial staffs. In addition, head teachers do not receive sufficient legal support from the administrative structures they oversee’.

¹¹ Invalsi (Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema dell'Istruzione, or National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System) data available at <https://www.invalsiopen.it/risultati/risultati-prove-invalsi-2021/>.

¹² Ordinance no. 60 of 10 July 2020, <https://www.miur.gov.it/-/pubblicata-in-gazzetta-ufficiale-l-ordinanza-ministeriale-n-60-del-10-luglio-2020>.

¹³ Ministry of Education, notice of 9 August 2021, ‘Oggetto: D.m. 30 luglio 2021, n. 242. Avviso apertura funzioni per la presentazione delle istanze di partecipazione alle procedure di attribuzione dei contratti a tempo determinato ai sensi dell’art. 59 comma 4 del decreto legge 25 maggio 2021 n. 73, convertito, con modificazioni, dalla legge 22 luglio 2021 n. 106 e dell’art. 2, comma 4, lettere a) e b), dell’Ordinanza ministeriale 10 luglio 2020, n. 60’, <https://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/0/Avviso+prot.+25187+del+9+agosto+2021.pdf>.

proposal that was rather vague and then dropped.¹⁴ Earlier, a similar arrangement had been included in Matteo Renzi's so-called '*buona scuola*' (good school) reform. It was then watered down by a provision contained in the 2020 Finance Law¹⁵ – as is confirmed by the fact that the Government felt compelled to introduce the new proposal for a dedication reward. What is interesting, however, is that an appraisals system is demanded by several groups in the field in education – mainly by head teachers but also by a number of teachers themselves, who propose assessment by outsiders as a means of limiting the inevitable discretionary decision-making that would be involved in entrusting appraisals to the committee for the evaluation of teachers, given its composition.¹⁶ In considering appraisals and the reactions to them, therefore, it is as well to keep in mind, among other things, the importance of the issue of who carries out the appraisal. The appraisals issue is, naturally, linked to the issue of career progression. This currently takes place on the basis of seniority, but head teachers' organisations have instead demanded progression on the basis of 'merit'. However, the issue is also linked to the question of the motivation of teachers, which is held back by the absence of any kind of incentives system. Thereby, it draws attention to the potential for choosing between various policy instruments in relation to the same objective. To motivate teachers, governments could in principle adopt an appraisals system based on exclusion or on rewards. That is, it could encourage the desired behaviour by the threat of sanctions (for example disciplinary action in the event of negligence being uncovered during the course of an in-service appraisal) or the promise of an incentive (for example, a salary increase as the reward for a particularly positive appraisal). Currently, however, the Italian education system lacks either type of appraisals system. It is certainly the case that head teachers can impose disciplinary sanctions on teachers. Paradoxically, however, the fact that this authority is not linked to an appraisals system places decision-making in the hands of a single individual who, among other things, is unable (even in these cases) to draw on the support and guidance of clear sets of regulations.

More generally, the pandemic whose effects were still being felt in 2021, drove policy actors, and especially the trade unions – even more so than in the past – to demand greater intervention and more detailed regulation by central government, as well as a greater degree of transparency. Thus, greater clarity concerning infections data, and the implementation of a regular screening programme in schools were both called for. Greater regulation of school buses and the school timetable were demanded. Trade unions insisted not only on salary increases and on making permanent the jobs of those on temporary contracts. More than anything else, they demanded greater certainty in relation to all aspects of education – from the management of disabled pupils to the means of giving effect to the procedures (aimed at the stipulation of temporary contracts) for the recruitment of short-term employees, procedures that revealed a number of ambiguities during the course of the school year. Such ambiguities were a sign of the divergence between the triumphant narratives of the minister for education and the actual functioning of the procedures laid down by the ministry, as is apparent from the trade unions' communications.¹⁷

Moving on to the management of the crisis: there were demands for more tracing, for involving head teachers in more certain procedures, and for not leaving them alone to deal with the emergency.

¹⁴ Bill presented by the minister of the economy and finance and deposited on 11 November 2021, '*Bilancio di previsione dello Stato per l'anno finanziario 2022 e bilancio pluriennale per il triennio 2022-2024*', art. 108.

¹⁵ Legge no. 160 of 27 December 2019, art. 1, c. 249.

¹⁶ The body consists of: 'a) three teachers from the educational institution, where two are chosen by the college of teachers and one by the institution's governing council; b) two representatives of parents, in the case of infants' schools and primary schools; one representative of pupils and one representative of parents, in the case of secondary schools, chosen by the institution's governing council; c) an external member chosen by the regional education office from among teachers, head teachers, educational and technical directors' (legislative decree n. 297/94 and subsequent modifications, art. 11).

¹⁷ Flc-Cgil, '*Errori nelle Gps: il Ministero non risponde alle richieste del sindacato. Cresce il contenzioso. Grave l'atteggiamento di rifiuto di un confronto costruttivo*', 4 October 2021, <http://m.flcgil.it/scuola/precari/errori-nelle-gps-il-ministero-non-risponde-alle-richieste-del-sindacato-cresce-il-contenzioso-grave-l-atteggiamento-di-rifiuto-di-un-confronto-costruttivo.flc>.

Bearing in mind the structural difficulties of local health authorities with responsibility for quarantining, head teachers often had sole responsibility for the success of pandemic measures in their schools:

“We principals were abandoned. It was left up to us to sign quarantine orders, when it should have been done by the Asl [‘Aziende sanitarie locali’: Local health boards]. Not because they were unwilling to do their jobs eh, they haven’t got the staff! But I took on the responsibility for the good of the school community”.¹⁸

It must be said that the NRRP attempted to respond to some of the above-mentioned issues. It should also be said that an evaluation of the measures it provides for will have to await their implementation. They include, for example, the setting up of a school for advanced levels of teacher training (M4C1.2, Riforma 2.2). This is supposed to work in tandem with career progression and is due to open its doors in 2025. While it may be a positive development, from another perspective past experience suggests that there is a risk that the measure, presented as a reform, instead becomes merely the latest incremental change in the field of teacher training (Malandrino 2021). To what extent the plan itself has the potential to meet the demands of the policy actors just mentioned, is something that will have to be evaluated following approval of the measures implementing the plan itself, measures still at an embryonic phase of their development. What it reveals, for the purposes of our present concerns, is that the constant demands of those in education – of the trade unions and staff associations – for ‘more regulations’, is symptomatic of a lack of attention to education on the part of policy-makers, and of an inability of governments to take positions on crucial policy issues such as teacher appraisals. 2021 significantly raised the profile of these issues because, alongside the ‘classic’ demands, there were demands for more effective programming and regulation in relation to the management of the pandemic, and this simply confirmed the tendency to inactivity in the field of education policy.

Discussion and conclusions

The decisions and non-decisions we have considered show above all that in 2021 Italian policy-makers continued to be uninterested in education notwithstanding the programmatic declarations of the incumbent government. This was despite the high profile of education in public debate due to the pandemic, and despite the fact that the ministry of education is one of the largest public-sector employers in the country¹⁹ (meaning that teachers therefore constitute a not-small proportion of the electorate). One might object that the Draghi government’s tendency to favour the reopening of schools, a tendency often contrasted with the closures that took place during the Conte II government, contradicts the assertion concerning policy-makers’ supposed lack of interest. However, in the first place, any comparison of the two governments’ management of the pandemic, and especially of the restrictions they designed and imposed, must take account of the differences of context, of which an essential element, given the pandemic, was the availability or non-availability of vaccines. It must also be remembered that the decision of the Government to re-open at all costs was driven not only by a recognition of the intrinsic value of education and of classroom teaching, but also, arguably, by the need to relieve families of the additional caring responsibilities they found themselves carrying as a result of the school closures. And last but not least, the Government’s stance has to be evaluated in light of the circumstances in which teachers and head teachers found themselves. Subject to the obligations surrounding the Green Pass (on which see Profeti in this issue), teachers were obliged, for months on end, to work in close contact with young people who were excluded from the vaccine rollout, and only included later (with all the difficulties associated with implementing the new

¹⁸ Interview with head teacher (CI3), 9 September 2021.

¹⁹ Data from the annual accounts, <https://www.contoannuale.mef.gov.it/occupazione>.

provision). Head teachers, meanwhile, had to adapt to constant and sudden changes to the regulations surrounding the management of quarantining.

Consequently, assessing a government's stance towards education on the basis of its most immediately visible measures – such as the return to classroom teaching – carries the risk of adopting a partial, not to say misleading, approach to the analysis of that government's policies, especially if one is concerned to ask whether there has been a change of direction on the issue in comparison with the past. As we have seen, the issue is one that covers much more than the mode of delivery of teaching, and also includes all the measures concerning the internal functioning of schools, in particular those concerning personnel. The personnel represent the backbone of the system and must be reckoned with bearing in mind that the quality of an essential service like education depends on them. This is no ideological assertion, but one well-grounded in studies of the motivation of personnel, so much so that authors of such studies are constantly asking themselves what drives such motivation (Pelletier and Rocchi 2016).

Two caveats are, however, necessary. In the first place, the discontent of those in education and of their trade unions and professional associations did not arise out of nowhere in 2021, not even taking account of everything having to do with the management of the emergency. Yes, there was a degree of disappointment with the chaotic management of quarantining and the constant changes to the regulations. However, the difficulties involved in managing problems of this kind were the product of 'structural' problems, above all the absence of a level of middle management – already present elsewhere in Europe (Bennett 1999) – that could relieve head teachers of the legal (and other) responsibilities associated with the management of entire and often comprehensive institutions. The issue of middle management was included in the public policy pronouncements of the Conte II government and especially in those of the education minister, Lucia Azzolina, in her 2021 strategy document,²⁰ but never acted upon (Azzolina herself was removed from office along with the government of which she was a member in February 2021). In the second place, it will only be possible to assess the credibility of the programmatic declarations of the Draghi government and of its minister for education, Patrizio Bianchi, in particular, in the long run. It is not possible to assess the performance of a government – especially one intending, at least on paper, to introduce organic reforms – less than twelve months after it took office. Even less so is this possible given that the government took office in the middle of a pandemic. Reforms have to be implemented – as the long list of Italian reforms never implemented, in education as elsewhere, bears witness.

This article therefore demonstrates two things. This first is that until the structural problems of Italian education are resolved – through effective approaches to employment insecurity, education management and professional training by means of improved salaries and an equitable and impartial appraisals system – the carrots offered by government will always be badly digested. The second is that education requires more attention from government, greater certainty and clearer regulations. It is obvious that the incremental (and frenetic) changes that have characterised education policy (Capano 2020; Malandrino 2021) cannot help to provide this certainty insofar as every change brings with it the need for adaptation which in turn requires time and, often, temporary approaches of trial and error.

A recent episode can, perhaps, serve to illustrate better the fundamental problem. During a recent education conference, the question was asked, 'why the Government [had] only adopted non-binding guidelines' concerning a very specific issue that goes beyond the focus of this article and will not here be pursued any further but which had to do with the implementation of initiatives concerning the enhancement of provision in the native languages of migrant pupils in schools. The answer given was that the approach had been adopted in order to enable schools to respond to the specific needs of their local areas. Yet in other European countries governments set out minimum requirements for the

²⁰ Ministry of Education, 'Atto di indirizzo politico-istituzionale, Anno 2021', https://www.miur.gov.it/documents/20182/0/m_pi.AOOGABMI.Registro+Decreti%28R%29.0000002.04-01-2021.pdf/ae043ea2-8130-e3a4-f7ee-0a3bf096f01f?t=1609786965292.

provision of courses in pupils' native languages to ensure uniform implementation on an equal basis. If a certain number of families request teaching in a certain language, then the school must provide it. Such rules are clear, and ensure equality of treatment in similar situations throughout the country concerned. In contrast, the Italian approach places in the hands of head teachers the burden of a decision which, with all the other responsibilities a head teacher has to deal with, is bound to be given a low priority. Therefore, if one is to sum it up, the basic problem with education in Italy is (also) this: on the pretext of autonomy, education has been abandoned, left to its own devices by governments uninterested in its reform, its interests safeguarded only insofar as it is ancillary to other sectors, especially the economy, rather than because it is intrinsically deserving of proper regulation and support.

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Semi-structured interviews carried out by the author (anonymised)

1. CI1: Head teacher, Calabria, 25 May 2021.
2. CI2: Head teacher, Calabria, 24 June 2021.
3. CI3: Head teacher, Calabria, 9 September 2021.
4. CI4: Head teacher, Piedmont, 24 June 2021.
5. CI5: Head teacher, Piedmont, 8 November 2021.
6. CI6: Head teacher, Piedmont, 9 November 2021.
7. CI7: Head teacher, Piedmont, 29 November 2021.

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