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Cui Bono? Local governance of training and educational institutions and their legitimation

The book presents the findings of a case study concerning The local governance of educational institutions and their social legitimation in Piemonte.

Content of the book (Long version Abstract)-

The Knowledge Economy requires a protracted and recurrent commitment to education. To be motivated to make this commitment, it is essential that students and their families have confidence in schools and teachers. And it is equally essentially that the public be willing to see larger slices of government spending go to education. This case-study investigated the processes and forms of legitimation that grant credibility to the institutional and political actors in Piemonte, with particular attention to the governance of training, education and the production of knowledge. Our focus was on the representations of the post-compulsory school system in four provinces of Piemonte: Torino, Cuneo, Alessandria and Novara. Given its aims, the study analyzed perceptions of the current education system's strengths and weakness and how they compare with the past, the priorities for the school's future, and the school's relationships with other institutions and settings (e.g. the labour market).

The general starting hypothesis is that we are in the midst of a crisis of the school system as institution: a growing divide between the claims to legitimacy of those actors who governs the systems and the more or less widely spread belief of the legitimacy of these claims. The study thus sought to relate the post-compulsory school system's performance as an institution and the claims to legitimation made by several institutional actors to the beliefs, representations, values and preferences common among the segment of Piemonte's population that is most directly involved: young people in their last year of high school or recently graduated, their families, principals, stakeholders outside the education system and policy-makers.

At the (micro) level of the "teaching-learning situation", which here coincides broadly with the "classroom situation", the theme of (de-)legitimation and (re-)legitimation regards aspects such as recognition of teachers' authority, their perceived fairness, capacity for getting involved in the new linguistic codes, and for informalization without losing sight of their institutional mission.

At the (meso)level of the "school system configuration", the reforms introduced in recent years come into play, with the changes they have made in local school autonomy, governance, subsidiarity, managerialization and so forth, and the extent to which the implementing these reforms has met with approval among the main stakeholders.

As regards the (macro-level of) relationships between the school system and its influential outside stakeholders, the problem is to re-legitimate the institution by opening channels for communication and cooperation with the territory, with the new needs expressed by the labour market and the economy, new cultural interests, new social problems, etc.

The case-study employed a mixed quantitative and qualitative research design. For the quantitative investigation, two different surveys – one with CATI telephone interviews and one with face-to-face questionnaires – were carried out between late 2010 and early 2011.

In the first survey, 440 telephone interviews, each consisting of around 28 questions, were administered to a sample of adults from 35 to 65 years of age living in the four selected provinces and having at least one child enrolled in post-compulsory education or holding an upper secondary school diploma. A quota sampling procedure was used, with province and type of school as the quota categories. Out of the total sample, 60% of the interviewees had at least a secondary school diploma, while 72% were women.

The face-to-face survey was conducted with a sample of 560 young people between 18 and 25 years of age living in the four provinces of Piemonte who were attending or had successfully completed a post-compulsory school program. The questionnaire used in the survey consisted of 51 questions with different response formats. Here again, a quota sampling procedure was used, with province

and type of school as the quota categories. Of the interviewees, 35% had a general high school diploma, 28% had a vocational school diploma, and 37% had a technical school diploma.

The qualitative portion of the study expanded the point of view offered by the young people and parents. For this purpose, 56 interviews were conducted with local stakeholders such as administrators, teachers, principals and other persons involved in the policies that have a direct or indirect impact on upper secondary school and vocational training. In addition, two focus groups were held in Turin and Cuneo (October 2011), involving administrators, teachers, principals, unionists.

For the individual interviews, we used a structured guide with approximately twenty questions to address the following issues: expectations and agreement regarding the priority goals of the education and training provided in public upper secondary school, assessments of the education system's internal operation, effectiveness and fairness, the plurality of training agencies and networks of schools and teachers, efforts to cooperate with employers, and education, training, apprenticeships and economic modernization.

The focused interviews were conducted on the same arguments with a less-structured guide.

The case-study confirmed that, also in Piemonte, young people's and adult's confidence in the education system is eroding. Schools should almost prepare young people for the labor market and university, and should instill good citizenship. In the participants' view, if the education system reaches these objectives at all, it does so to a non-satisfying extent. The average score given to the school system by young people is 6 in Cuneo, Alessandria and Torino, 7 in Novara. Parents assign an average score of 5½ to today's school, 7+ to the school of their past.

Adults and young people show dissatisfaction also for the level of information on some important issues affecting the governance of the school and its organization.

By contrast, the main stakeholders who were interviewed maintain that the education system in Piemonte has a number of strengths: it has a methodological approach that provides a good general grounding and relational skills, although there are too many different programs, a plethora of diplomas and certificates, and the curriculum is outdated.

A weak point mentioned by stakeholders was in orientation, both upon entering secondary school and when leaving it. Another weakness noted was the lack of "escape hatches" from one type of program to another: this has a significant impact on dropouts, especially in the first two years of high school.

A frequent criticism is that the post-compulsory school system does little to ready young people for the job labour market (or for university). This is not simply a question of educational "content": the system opens few channels with organizations in the labor market (e.g., through traineeships, corporate visits, meetings with professional people, talks by company representatives, etc.). This criticism is particularly forceful in Torino, while in Novara the general evaluation is good. A typically Italian characteristic, which produces information asymmetries and distortions in the use of human capital, is the heavy reliance on informal social networks (especially of family and friends) as the main channel for finding a job. There are at least two ways in which the school system could act to correct this distortion.

First, it can be a channel whereby young people expand their social capital, through higher quality internships and traineeships (currently, many are of no use in providing an understanding of how a real-world job situation actually works). Second, given the school's centrality in the educational process, it could be the institution that returns the skills young people have – rather than simply "knowing the right people" – to a central position in the hiring process.

The stakeholders take a positive view of technical and vocational education, and express concern about the tendency of growing numbers of young people to opt instead for the academic programs offered by general high schools. What is needed is to provide incentives for girls to enroll in

vocational programs (where they are now underrepresented) and expand the offerings from technical schools.

In all schools, it is necessary to strengthen courses in the new digital technologies and encourage pupils to study a foreign language (with mother tongue teachers in schools and funding for periods or short stays abroad).

According to the interviewed stakeholders, the school system teaches individuals to think critically and conduct themselves civilly in interactions with others. By contrast, it is weak in terms of instilling democratic values and rules. Without denying the importance of employment-oriented education, the key informants also put upper secondary school's function of developing active citizenship back in the spotlight. Even interviewees who belong to the world of training and guidance rather than that of the school stress the dual value of secondary education.

In particular, they emphasize that the school must draw a clear line between short-term training for a specific job, and an educational approach that forms the person. Some of the interviewees call for studying subjects such as history or literature that "open the mind" and help young people be more capable, even in the work environment. The same is true for certain subjects that are now supplementary: civics, citizenship, physical education (more than sports *per se*), environmental studies, self-management and self-marketing, and ability to communicate and write, starting from the ability to write a résumé.

Young people consider teachers to be fair, competent and up to date, but insufficiently able to inspire interest and engage their students. The adults, on the other hand, believe that the teachers of the past were better, in terms of being competent and up to date, although they maintain that today's teachers are more capable of dialoging with students. According to the stakeholders there are many good, highly motivated teachers who are interested in keeping up to date and are appreciated by students. There can be no doubt that there has been a decline in teacher's authority and standing. Too many teachers are not at home with the new media and ICTs, and this means that they cannot help students make knowledgeable use of these technologies.

According to the young people, student's demotivation is partly the result of having to deal with obsolete equipment and deteriorating classrooms. For the adults, violence, bullying and demotivation itself are more serious problems. And many problems escape notice: the disabled (access barriers and lack of effective support), students who hold down a job (shortage of night school classes), children of immigrants, who do not yet have a good command of Italian (shortage of language labs and cultural mediators), and psychologically or socially vulnerable students (lack of psychological support at school).

Social capital is trust and confidence in others and in the institutions; it is the propensity for community life (whether lay or religious). If it is reproduced, this is in part due to the school system, which is in turn its beneficiary. Teachers and non-teaching staff (as well as classmates) are the beneficiaries of greater confidence in the school system. Less confidence is vested in principals, and even less in the representative bodies. School, even though it is no longer seen as a way to move up the social ladder (especially for the children of Italian citizens), is still essential as a place where the family opens up towards the community: this takes place in particular in the relationship that the school system maintains with the associations in the area around it.