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## BETWEEN INSTITUTIONAL FRAGMENTATION AND LOCAL DISCRETION: THE GOVERNANCE OF TRANSITIONS IN THE ITALIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

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### ABSTRACT

*This article focuses on educational trajectories in Italy, with particular attention to the transition from lower to upper secondary schools in a governance perspective. After introducing the foundations and transformations of the Italian education system, two issues will be analysed: the new early vocational tracks and the inclusion of pupils with immigrant backgrounds. These issues may seem distant and disconnected, but their choice is aimed at producing a varied evidence of governance problems in welfare and education policy in Italy, with a particular focus on the issue of coordination.*

**Key words:** Governance, vocational education, Italy, transitions, immigration

## TRA FRAMMENTAZIONE ISTITUZIONALE E DISCREZIONE LOCALE: LA GOVERNANCE DI TRANSIZIONI NEL SISTEMA DI ISTRUZIONE ITALIANA

### RIASSUNTO

*L'articolo analizza la governance delle traiettorie educative in Italia, con particolare attenzione alla transizione fra scuola secondario di primo e di secondo grado. Dopo un'introduzione sui fondamenti e le trasformazioni del sistema educativo italiano, verranno analizzati due temi: I nuovi percorsi di istruzione formazione professionale e l'inclusione scolastica dei minori di origine straniera. Questi temi possono sembrare distanti fra loro, ma l'attenzione su di essi permette di trovare diverse evidenze di comuni problemi di governance delle politiche sociali ed educative in Italia. In particolare, si pone attenzione al problema del coordinamento.*

**Parole chiave:** Governance, formazione professionale, Italia, transizioni, immigrazione

## INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on educational trajectories in Italy, with particular attention to the transition from lower to upper secondary schools. This transition has been challenged by societal and institutional transformations throughout Europe: accessibility may be hindered by variable selectivity processes, both locally and nationally; family background still counts in students' ability to cope with difficulties; and formal support is often ineffective in dealing with structuring conditions (Parreira do Amaral et al., 2013). To acknowledge how this process has been shaped in Italy, we will first focus on the path-dependency of previous institutional configurations and then on the problems and answers provided in the last decade. For this reason, after introducing the foundations, features and transformations of the Italian education system, we will analyse two issues: the creation of new vocational tracks (Regional Systems of Vocational Education and Training; RS-VET from now on) and the inclusion of pupils with immigrant backgrounds (PIBs).

These two issues may seem distant and disconnected, but their choice is aimed at providing a perspective from Italy on relevant educational issues: the relevance of education and its inclusive dimension—which, in the Italian case, grounded a wavering ten-year effort to reform secondary tracks; the pluralisation of life courses; and the de-standardization of youth transitions that make constellations of disadvantages more diverse and difficult to grasp—especially in a highly contentious area like immigration.

Among the possible standpoints from which to enter these research fields, this article uses a governance perspective, by analysing how institutional relations affect access chances in RS-VET and for PIBs. Thus, the policy process will be followed from problematisation to outcomes, with special attention to a major problem of Italian governance models: micro-regulation, which is institutional and territorial fragmentation that affects policy enforcement, and effectiveness.

This issue will be studied by matching a macro- and micro-perspective, using *desk* policy analyses, interviews with national stakeholders and informants and local case studies (with observations; interviews with principals, teachers, pupils, parents and experts; and vignette interviews with practitioners).<sup>1</sup> In particular, we will match governance structures with the opportunity windows of street-level bureaucrats' discretionary power.

Discretionary power and autonomy are a constitutive part of many jobs in the social field, including educational professions, since their activities cannot be fully routinized (Maynard-Moody *et al.*, 1990). This means that they are not simply implementing higher-level decisions (even though they are responsive to external pressures): street-level bureaucrats are *de facto* policy-makers who can block reforms and alter rules, but also establish innovative practices and creative solutions to everyday dilemmas through their actions (Lipsky, 2010). Nevertheless there are different ways in which the interplay between discretion and rules can take place, with different forms of legitimacy and direction (Galligan, 1990; Sosin, 2010).

## THE ITALIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM: STICKY TRANSITIONS AND DIFFICULT RESCALING

## MAIN FEATURES

Italy has had a comprehensive education system since 1962 (when early tracking was abolished), which was widely confirmed later, e.g., with the abolition of most special schools in the 1970s. Its system is made up by three tiers—a 5-year primary education with a common curriculum and most teaching hours dispensed by a single teacher; a 3-year lower secondary tier with a common curricula and specialized subject teachers; and a 3-to-5-year upper secondary tier with different paths (see Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup>

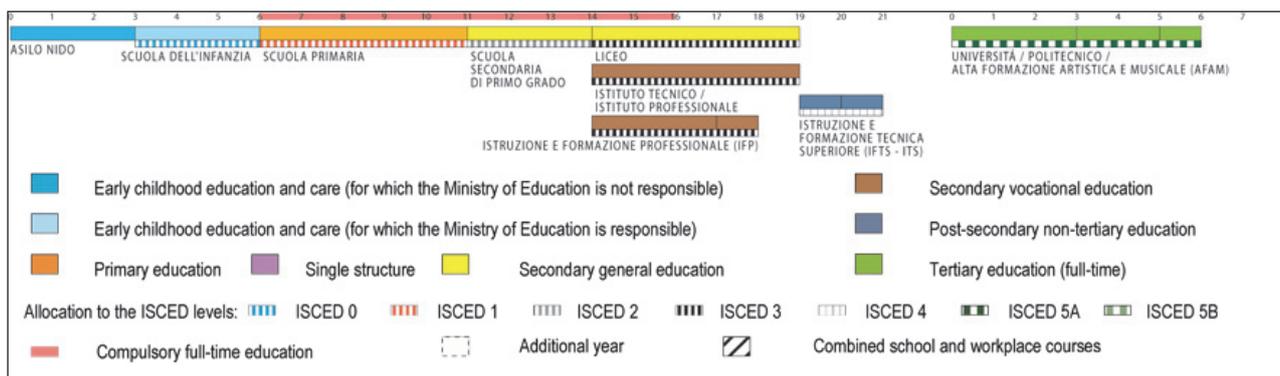
This system has traditionally been governed in a centralistic, bureaucratic–hierarchical way by the Ministry of Education, notwithstanding a well-known, traditional territorial cleavage (Grimaldi, Serpieri, 2012), which is a fundamental feature of the country that does not only concern socio-economic dimensions, but also institutional performance and educational and training structures. However, this “central government monopoly” has been eroded by two waves of decentralization: during the 1970s and later and more substantially, during the 1990s and 2000s.

In the first period, responsibility over vocational training was devolved to the nascent regions, while grassroots instances were recognized with the creation of representative bodies in schools (1973).

During the second period, schools were granted autonomy in management, organization and teaching (in 1999), with a share of school- and locally flexible

1 The results presented here are based on research materials collected within the FP7-funded project GOETE (“Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe”; Contract no. 243868): we used 89 interviews and 11 focus groups with principals, teachers, students, ex-students, parents and experts (a total of 157 interviewees) in local case studies of three Italian cities, plus document analysis and 12 interviews of national privileged witnesses for high-level governance (collected in 2011 by the staff of University of Urbino Carlo Bo and University of Bologna, Italian partners of the project; see Barberis *et al.*, 2012; Barberis, Kazepov, 2012). These materials have been complemented with 15 vignette interviews to social workers collected within a project of national interest (PRIN 2006) on “The territorial dimension of social policy” (see also Barberis, 2010; Kazepov, Barberis, 2013).

2 These include: 6 paths of general education, 2 paths and 11 specializations of technical education (in-between general and vocational), 2 paths and 6 specializations of vocational education, 21 national specializations of vocational training (plus other active at regional level).



**Fig. 1. Structure of the Italian education system 2012/13. Source: Eurydice.**  
**Graf 1. Struktura italijanskega izobraževalnega sistema 2012/13. Vir: Eurydice.**

curricula hours.<sup>3</sup> Then, the decentralization process climaxed with the 2001 Constitutional reform (still to be implemented in full), which expanded the financial, legislative and management roles of regional governments considerably, especially in the fields of education and training. From then on, the process slowed down and has even shown signs of recentralization (OECD, 2012).

**EMERGING CRITICALITIES**

In the intersection between traditional (e.g., class and territorial divides) and new problems (e.g., the de-standardisation of life courses and the changes in family subsidiarity and labour market structures) and institutional responses (in particular, a decade of partial school reforms in the 2000s), it is possible to stress some weaknesses in governance of the Italian education system that will re-emerge throughout this article:

- an inconsistent governance structure (mainly hierarchical and bureaucratic), which results in blurred school autonomy and wavering decentralization, especially as far as resource management is concerned;
- a decentralization that set up an unclear division of tasks and responsibilities between the state and its regions, further institutionalizing a traditionally strong territorial divide;
- an unreformed lower secondary tier, which is a weak point in the entire educational path;
- hard transitions from tier to tier;
- an unclear “division of labour” between vocational education and early vocational training; and
- a challenge to the traditional integrative and comprehensive school model raised by new profiles of pupils and families.

“Universal” in its welfare aims, the Italian education system proved to be highly selective in practice, with tracking effects (see Tab. 1) and serious problems

with granting equality and social mobility, as part of a “blocked society” where social origin is a strong determinant of success (Schizzerotto, 2002; Ballarino, Checchi, 2006; Ballarino *et al.*, 2009; Schizzerotto *et al.*, 2011; see also Coccia, Mundo, 2012). Social mobility is weak, both for traditionally disadvantaged categories (e.g., social class) and for more recent ones (e.g., immigrant background). Over the last decades, this problem also evolved into a problem of relevance, with vocational paths becoming more and more detached from the labour market and general education less and less able to meet the expectations of upward social mobility.

Institutional transitions and school cycles contributed to the implicit selection of the disadvantaged. The bridges among school tiers are weak, due to different educational styles, methods and endowments, resulting in high failures in the first years of each tier.

In this respect, the transition between lower and upper secondary education (taking place with pupils aged 13–14) is a striking example: a shift from an inclusive to a selective learning environment is matched with a challenge to pupils’ coping strategies, since they have to choose among different tracks.

In fact, while lower secondary schools still aim for a welfarist function (i.e., the reduction of disadvantage), upper secondary schools have a more selective mission. This clashes with recent school reforms, which defined the first two years of upper secondary school as part of the compulsory education system. The different missions of the two levels—social inclusiveness vs. skill selectivity—makes vertical continuity difficult.

The accumulation of “transition shocks” in this step is remarkable: in our fieldwork, we noticed negative effects coming from different teaching styles, the structuring of class groups (with new classmates), the physical distance of upper secondary schools from home (especially for those living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods), the decreasing ability of parents to support pupils when progressing through their educational career (especially

3 On the other hand, financial autonomy has always been limited (Eurydice, 2007).

for pupils from families with poor educational qualifications), and decreases in public support and services (e.g., for disabled students).

Data can help to frame the issue. The failure rate in the first year of lower secondary education is 4.8% (versus 3.8% in the second and 3.7% in the third) and peaks at 14.6% for PIBs (Miur, 2012a); it reaches 16.6% in the first year of upper secondary education (versus 5.6% in the fifth year) and peaks at 25.9% in the vocational tracks (Miur, 2012b).

This has long-standing consequences: notwithstanding relevant improvements in the last two decades, the share of early school leavers in the 18–24 age group is among the highest in Europe (18.2%, peaking to 25% in Sicily and Sardinia) (Istat, 2013), in addition to the school participation of youngsters aged 15–19 (83.3 vs. 86.7% in the EU for 2010).

One of the most dramatic background data for this age group in Italy concerns the NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) group: more than 2 million (22.7%) of the 15–29 population, but also some 11% of the 15–19 age group—almost double the OECD average (Istat, 2013; OECD, 2012)—and still increasing in the aftermath of the crisis, especially in Mezzogiorno.

This information has to be complemented with the tremendous rise in youth unemployment, which nearly destroyed more than a decade of improvement (Istat, 2013): in the 15–24 age group, unemployment is now over 35% and much higher for females and in Southern Italy. In a country that is “youth-unfriendly” in housing and characterized from the late 1990s by a striking “flexinsecurity” in the labour market, this is also a reason for the well-known issue of the high number of young adults living in their parents’ household (Berton et al., 2009; Micheli, Rosina, 2009). These data show a muddled transition to adulthood and a mismatch between education, training and the labour market.

### THE ROLE OF POLICIES

More than a decade of reforms in secondary and tertiary education, training and active labour market policies have been aimed at reducing this gap, although their effects seem quite partial, since this effort was not matched with an adequate prioritization of education in the political agenda.

As a proxy, we can use data on educational and training expenditures: in Italy, it is lower than the EU-27 average (4.5 of GDP vs. 5.5%), even with a widening of the gap in recent years, due to the joint effects of crisis, retrenchment policies and priority setting in the political agenda.

Thus, these reforms have been implemented in penury. The strengthening of school autonomy was not matched by a national steering on priorities and criteria, so that every single school enacts its own guidance, transitions and follow-up procedures; on the other hand,

the extension of compulsory schooling to the age of 16 (2007) was not harmonized with reforms in the school tiers. This means that compulsory schooling finishes with a “transition without transition”, since it is not matched with final exams or exit certificates (see Fig. 1). The main problem is that no reform has been organic, and the reforms only added up bits pieces to the previous scheme, without a general view on the system as a whole.

Hence, educational transitions may receive inadequate institutional treatment, which adds to the weaknesses of each specific tier, particularly the lower secondary one: left untouched (but for minor changes) since 1977, this short tier (just three years, compared to the five year primary and upper secondary tiers) is the source of a huge part of the performance gap (as far as social class, territorial divide and ethnic background are concerned) (see Invalsi, 2012; Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 2011).

From an analytical point of view, we can distinguish a structural dimension of the problem (inconsistent structuring of the educational tiers and of the education/training/labour sectors) and a temporary dimension (a long, puzzling implementation of new tracks)—which, in turn, risk assuming a structural dimension (e.g., institutionalizing local and regional fragmentation). The following paragraphs will introduce two prime examples of this process.

### REFORMING INITIAL VET

The implementation of RS-VET will be described as an example of on-going reforms. In particular, there will be an analysis on:

- 1) how (if) the state achieves coordination and tries to prevent regional fragmentation;
- 2) how regions—with different levels of institutional effectiveness, political vision and labour market opportunities—work on the relevance of their vocational paths; and
- 3) how this affects transitions.

Most of the education reforms in the 2000s were aimed at increasing the relevance of the secondary tracks and easing the transition towards the labour market. VET came back onto the political agenda during the late 1990s, when the mismatch between education, training and a changing labour market was more and more thematised. At that time, the institutional landscape was characterized by declining apprenticeship; regional vocational tracks with hardly acknowledged qualifications; an almost absent non-university tertiary education; and a strong preference of pupils and families for general or technical education, so that the vocational tracks mostly welcomed pupils with unsuccessful educational careers (Tuè, 2003), with consequent negative outlooks for their futures (Schizzerotto, 2002).

At first, most of the attention was dedicated to apprenticeship (with two reforms in 1997 and in 2003).

Then, the VET also entered the policy agenda, with the reform of upper secondary schools and the establishment of the RS-VET, which is a regionalized system of training paths that result in a vocational qualification and are a way to fulfil compulsory education requirements.

As a consequence, a pupil aged 14 with an exit certificate from a lower secondary school can access (Isfol, 2012a):

- a. an upper secondary school—general, technical or vocational (5 years): 2.7 million students are enrolled here, whose some 540,000 in vocational schools;
- b. RS-VET (3–4 years): students enrolled here grew from 23,500 in 2003/04 to 242,000 in 2011/12; and
- c. for those aged 15 onwards, an apprenticeship aimed at achieving a school certificate (just implemented).

With a decade of reforms carried out by different governments, the shapes of the secondary tracks were not uncontested. In the end, the position that most often resulted from the policy-making, endorsed by the centre-right coalition in power between 2001 and 2006 and between 2008 and 2011, has been that of increasing the role of training, as complementary or a substitute to school education, with work-related programmes.

Nevertheless, the debate on the relevance of these paths and on the balance between education and training contents is still on-going, which affects the structuring of RS-VET in different regions. We can identify three main sources of differentiation:

- *policy legacy*: the role, importance and structure of vocational education in different regions before the setting of the new system;
- *ideological cleavage*: the reforms were been mainly carried out by right-wing national governments that are more favourable to privatization and separation between education and training, but some (left) regional administrations opposed them and started implementing a school-centred model ruled by public actors;<sup>4</sup> and
- *lobbying*: regions where training providers are strongly inserted into political and institutional pillars usually support a training system divided from education tracks. Regions where civil servants and their unions (including school unions)

have higher bargaining power usually support school-centred or integrated tracks.<sup>5</sup>

The first evaluations seem to show that pupils' performance and satisfaction are greater in non-school tracks (Teselli, 2011), though opponents think that the lack of a strong integration with schools is detrimental and maintain that RS-VET is not providing flexible skills for future labour market and social integration. Supposedly, it allows for short-term labour integration, though it is inadequate in the long-term (which is also due to low investment in human resources by Italian firms and strong positioning in mature economic sectors that require few skills).<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, supporters of non-school paths maintain that track diversification is needed, for those that will never (and currently do not) enter the upper secondary and tertiary paths: *“actually, a share of those in 3-year vocational paths can't stand full-time education, as short as it is, and drop out even from vocational training”* (FF 69–71). Thus, even shorter and more flexible vocational tracks could be needed.

#### IMPLEMENTATION: A STATE OR A REGIONAL SYSTEM?

These standpoints looked quite irreconcilable; thus, the implementation focussed on a procedural agreement, with hardly any agreement on the principles and foundations of the system—it was a never-ending bargaining process and an ineffective juridification. The norms regulating this issue are quite blurred and fragmented, and there are no less than 15 laws and presidential decrees, 11 Ministry decrees, 10 agreements between the state, regions and local authorities and 3 guideline documents issued between 1999 and 2011.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, not all of these norms are consistent with one another, e.g., in setting the target age groups—*“and I don't go into chaotic details, but actually the law stated that all the vocational side was up to regions, while we still have state vocational schools”* (LS 65–69).

Two overlapping reforms were implemented in the same period, which contributed to this outcome:

- 1) The 2003 reform that established RS-VET; and
- 2) The 2008 reform (implemented in 2010) that addressed upper secondary schools and extended their duration to 5 years, which clearly split vocational education from vocational training, with RS-VET being the latter.

4 As an interviewed stakeholder put it, “we have a clash of extreme positions: leftist regions think this [RS-VET] is a second-rate option, a defeat, so they try to keep pupils at school at least till 16 [...]; on the other hand, there are regions almost aiming at a German-like dual system” (LS 235–243).

5 A good example of the workings of these conditioning factors is Sicily. Its vocational system has been built as a patronage system, with the result that VET in Sicily employs around half of the sector's workers in the whole country. As a manager said before the last regional elections, “as of today, there are no political conditions to change [...] It's clear that a shift from a condition where we maintain institutions and their staff to an outcome-oriented system is not easy at all” (LA: 99–116).

6 The lack of results from follow-up studies does not allow clarification of this point.

7 This list does not include regional laws, regulations or guidelines. In this respect, a trade-union document says that “between 2003 and 2007, in Region Emilia-Romagna, 18 deeds (agreements, protocols, covenants, guidelines, laws and decrees) were issued; 7 in Latium, 13 in Liguria, and 11 in Lombardy” (Cisl-Scuola, 2011; our translation).

Thus, according to the 2001 Constitutional reform, VET is under sole regional jurisdiction; however, the 2008 norms moved around this to avoid the devolution of state vocational schools. While one interpretation would suggest that the state had to devolve vocational schools to regions, “schools opposed it, not trusting the regions, and the Ministry of Education wanted to keep its stake; so, to avoid legal appeals by the regions” (FF 98-101), vocational qualifications issued by state schools were levelled with other secondary-school diplomas. On the other hand, regions did not fight hard to have this jurisdiction, because it implied enormous and difficult efforts in an expensive and complex field, which was possibly not so appealing in the election arena and not necessarily endowed enough by state transfers. The general consequence is that, notwithstanding a policy orientation toward boosting training, opportunity reasons led to reduce training chances themselves.

Therefore, there are currently competing and overlapping tasks between the two tracks:

- state vocational schools are poorly endowed and becoming less relevant (due to cuts in lab teaching). Students have enrolled in this track less than in the past, and employers have begun to prefer RS-VET students—at least, before the worsening of the crisis jeopardized the Italian industry (Miur, 2012c; Unioncamere, 2012); and
- on the other hand are RS-VET paths, which are not fully implemented or endowed.

To add complexity, many regions with low political will, institutional performances and/or endowments were in trouble with implementing RS-VET and had to sign “subsidiarity” agreements with the State Educational System.

This means that state vocational schools have to accomplish RS-VET’s job. Thus, (state) vocational schools that were forbidden to issue (regional) qualifications could do so after an agreement! Two models were put into place:

- a) *integrative subsidiarity*: 5-year vocational education, including 3-year vocational training; vocational training and education are organized together, with collaborations between vocational schools and training centres.
- b) *complementary subsidiarity*: vocational education and vocational training are two separate tracks. Thus, schools offering 3-year qualifications do so with separate classes for 5-year diploma students and are considered the same as any other licensed regional training centre operating “in the market”.<sup>8</sup>

Such a chaotic system, if not effective, nevertheless had advantages for the institutions involved: they could skip explicit clashes over the model to follow (while

creating their own mixes of school- and non-school-based VET) and state school endowments could be used, which limits bargaining on new allocations in a context of limited resources.

It must also be mentioned that, in a context of territorially variable institutional performance and labour market accessibility, school-based VET tracks played an important role in maintaining common national standards. Nevertheless, the overall implementation was quite chaotic, with potentially negative outcomes on users and a further increase in regional inequality.

From a bottom-up perspective, in our case studies, we mainly observed unclear information on the implementation of new tracks (both for educational professionals and families), which resulted in inadequate guidance (also due to low institutionalization and standardization, with poor resources, no guidelines and many short-term, project-based efforts) and a lack of flexibility. Two situations that were observed in locale case studies are quite indicative.

On the one hand, a region that usually has high institutional performance, Emilia-Romagna, experienced relevant difficulties: support for an integrative subsidiarity (with a relevant role of school-based paths and a postponement of training) first resulted in inadequate guidance and the risk of dropping-out pupils who were only interested in vocational training. The enrolment in predominantly school-based paths could lead to losing them for one or two years, with difficulties in “recovering” them afterward.

On the other hand, the lack of proper bridges is seen in a case from the Marche region, where some 15–16 year-old drop-outs from lower secondary school who now work in their family business (bakeries, fishing boats, etc.) did not have the chance to re-enter the system through VET, but had to rely on the goodwill of the lower secondary school they dropped-out from to receive an informal agreement for individualized tutoring.

#### NO-MAN’S LAND: ESCAPE FROM INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

The evidence above shows a lack of coordination at the macro- and micro-levels. On the one hand, most regions want to move on their own, according to their own priorities, lobbies and resources. On the other hand, after the 2001 Constitutional reform, the state has had troubles in identifying proper coordination strategies (and possibly does not want to push this further; otherwise, it should grant adequate, statutory funding) without undermining regional autonomy. In addition, vocational schools and training centres fight for the same targets, but with inadequate chances to support their educational trajectories.

<sup>8</sup> In 2011/12, among the enrolled in the first year of RS-VET, 39% were in training centres accredited by Regions, 56% in integrative subsidiarity and 5% in complementary subsidiarity (Isfol, 2012a).

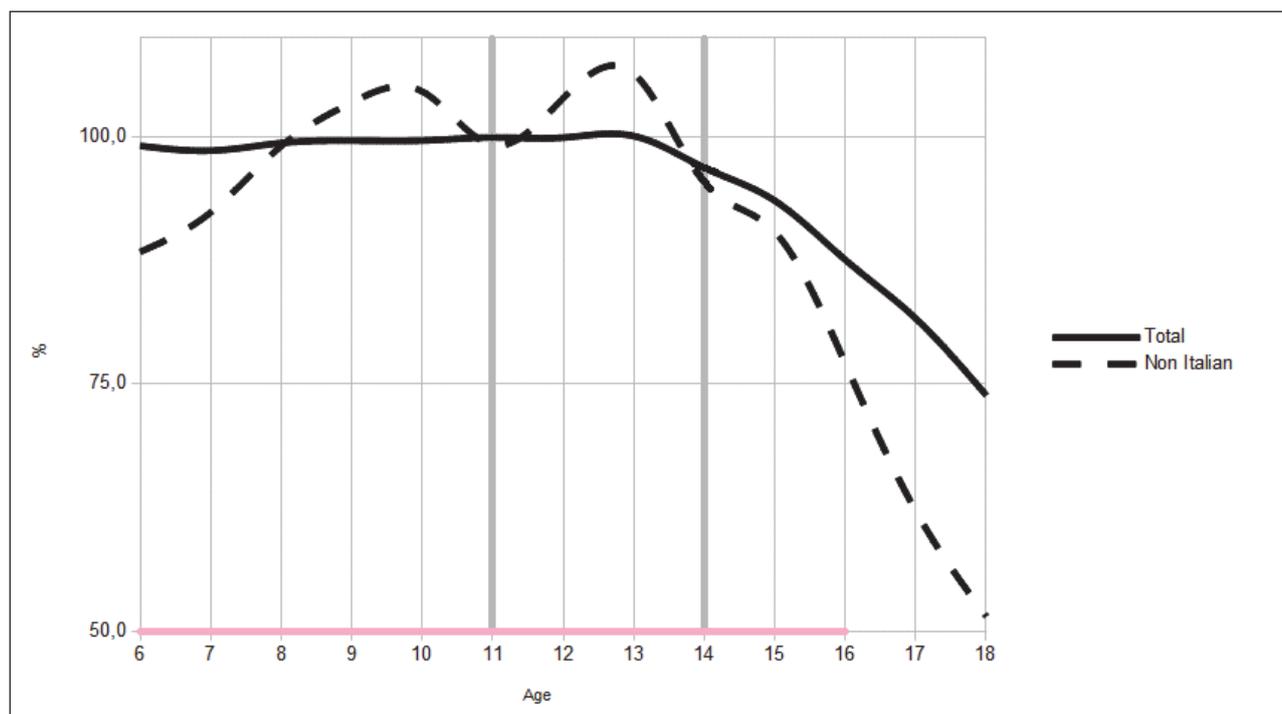


Fig. 2. Enrolled in the education system, as a share of registered in Municipal Civil Registry.<sup>10</sup> Source: own calculation of Istat; Miur, 2011; Miur, 2012d.

Graf 2. Vpisani v izobraževalni sistem, delež registriranih v Občinskem civilnem registru.<sup>10</sup> Vir: lastni izračun na podlagi Istat; Miur, 2011; Miur, 2012d.

Therefore, most stakeholders prefer to protect their (not so effective) fields and “don’t play along” (as an interviewee put it). They enact blame-avoidance strategies and lay responsibility on other actors. As a consequence, the system is horizontally and vertically fragmented to a large extent. Even very basic “harm reduction” measures, e.g., a national list of local and regional training providers, qualifications and national information systems, have not yet been fully implemented. Also, a clear, shared system to certify competencies is far from achievement.<sup>9</sup>

In general, the problems here are related to a wider issue, i.e., an incomplete shift from a centralist to a regionalist state, as the central state is still working in a bureaucratic–hierarchical way, while regions (and other autonomous bodies, including schools) are not competent, effective or endowed enough to take charge of the jurisdictions acquired ten years ago through the Constitutional reform.

#### FUNDING CHOICES AND CHANCES

*“We built up a fantastic car, but we haven’t got any gas and we keep it in the garage”* (LS: 230).

In an era of retrenchment and budgetary constraints, the new VET underwent thorough scrutiny. Where to invest resources is a matter of political priority, policy legacy and lobbying. Most of our interviewees maintain that RS-VET should be more endowed.

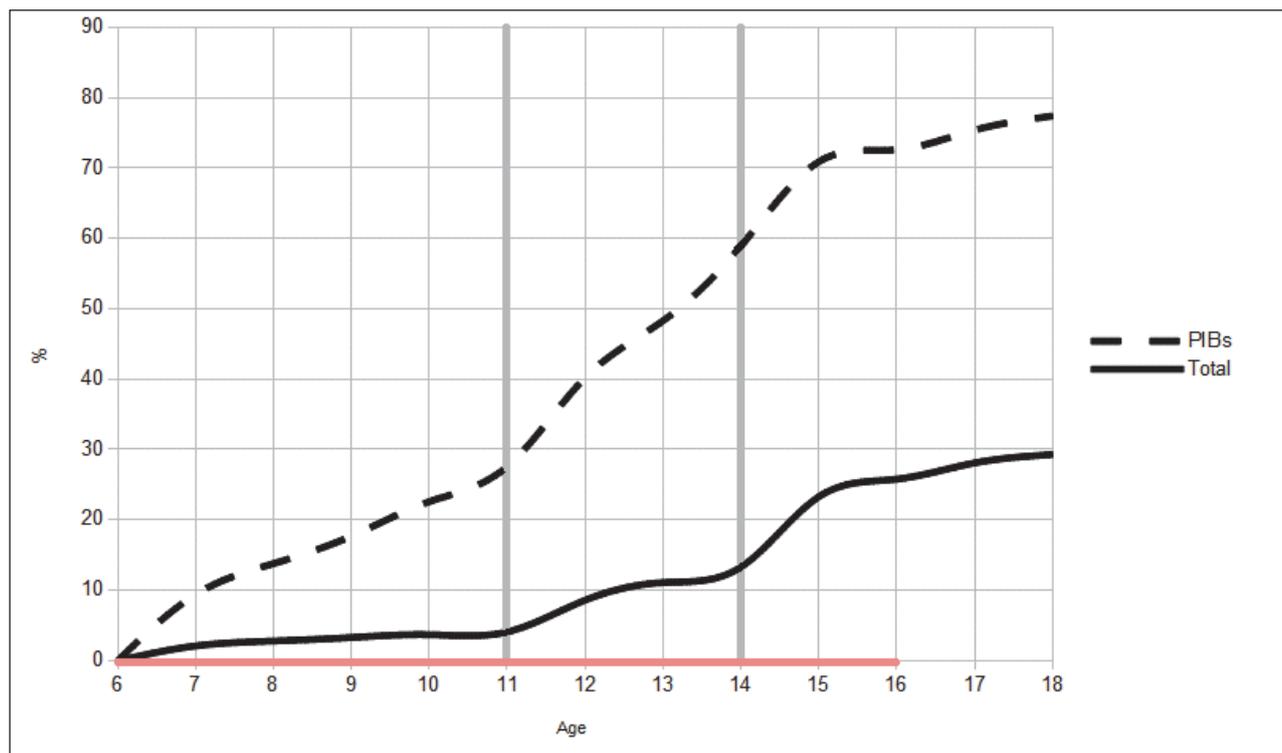
The issue is becoming more and more urgent. From 2011, RS-VET was no longer an experiment, but “ordinamentale” (i.e., statutory, belonging to regular jurisdiction)—with many implications: first, ESF (covering ¼ of expenditures at that time) can no longer be used to finance the system; second, according to the Constitution, funding should be guaranteed by the state to cover basic service standards.

In a context of decentralized penury, this also means a rat race among the regions over funding criteria: laggards want catch-up funds using a discourse of equity, while the frontrunners want funds according to enrolled pupils, in order to maintain and widen their system.

The idea (not only for VET) was to define a “standard cost”, although with serious implementation problems. On the one hand, it is unclear how much money can be allocated—especially considering that, although the al-

9 The only effective coordination in this field has been the institution of 21 national qualifications (approved in April 2010 by the State–Regions Conference), which were built to be consistent with the European Framework.

10 “Total” is the number of pupils enrolled in schools in the year 2009/2010 as a share of persons in the Civil Registry by age on January 1st 2010; “non-Italian” is the number of non-Italian citizens enrolled in schools in the year 2011/2012 as a share of persons counted by age in the 2011 Census (on October 9th 2011).



**Fig. 3. Hold-back rate by age and school tier.<sup>11</sup> Source: own calculation of Miur, 2011; Miur, 2012d**  
**Graf 3. Stopnja zadrževanja glede na starost in stopnja v izobraževalni poti.<sup>11</sup> Vir: lastni izračun na podlagi Miur, 2011; Miur, 2012d**

located government budget has been constant, pupils in RS-VET have increased tenfold. Thus, some regions are starting to push pupils toward state vocational schools through subsidiarity to cut costs, thus weakening the reform.

On the other hand, pupils enrolled in state vocational schools, as subsidiary RS-VET, blur the computability of “standard costs”, since part of teacher, premise and facility costs are paid by the state and every region has a specific mix of (state) school and (regional) non-school integration, according to their own agreements.

#### PIBS AND ACCESS TO EDUCATION

The participation of a growing number of PIBs is one of the largest challenges that the Italian education system had to face in the last decade: it implied not only a quantitative, but also a qualitative change, due to a large plurality of trajectories—by generation and age at migration, area of origin and destination, and schools involved.

The number of non-Italian citizens in Italian schools grew from 574,000 in 2007 to 756,000 in 2011. They are now 8.4% of pupils, 44.2% of whom were born in Italy (peaking at 80% in pre-primary education). They

are mainly from Central and Eastern Europe (Romania, Albania, Moldavia, Ukraine), but also from Northern Africa (Morocco, Tunisia) and Asia (PRC, India, Philippines).

In the tiers we are interested in, they account for 9.3% of lower and 6.2% of upper secondary education (Miur, 2012d). Such a fall in their shares cannot be explained just by the evolution of migration waves—it is due to a drop in participation (see Fig. 2).

Furthermore, the general problem of school tracking is accentuated when PIBs are taken into account: vocational education is attended by just 19% of Italian pupils, but by 30% of PIBs born in Italy and 40% of foreign-born PIBs. PIBs are 12.1% of pupils in vocational education, but just 2.7% of those in general education (*ibid.*). They are even more prevalent in the RS-VET mentioned above—some 15% (Isfol, 2012).

Also, PIBs have a significantly delayed educational careers, especially in vocational schools. More than one out of seven there is 20 or older (Miur, 2012b), as an effect of delays in previous grades; thus, the gap in hold back rate is impressive (see Fig. 3).

Nevertheless, tracking, segregation and underachievement of PIBs are not only a problem in Italy (Szalai, 2011), so it is worth noting what is peculiar in

<sup>11</sup> Year of reference: 2011/12 for PIBs, 2009/10 for total.

this case: first, the gap in performance with native-born Italians is wide in comparative terms, even though it is mainly due to first-generation immigrants; second, it is not strongly related to socio-economic background, but mostly to migrant condition itself and thus to direct discrimination effects (OECD, 2010).

A further analysis of Fig. 3 can help to make another point: transitions from one tier to another are tough, but all of lower secondary education opens the gap for PIBs, thus producing complex transitions in the following steps. This general weak point of the Italian educational system has a specific effect on PIBs: being held back increases their chance of dropping out and increases tracking processes toward shorter vocational tracks.<sup>12</sup>

Discrimination effects can be seen in the type of hold-back. Actually, repetition is not the main source of delay. According to data from Goete students' survey on third-grade students in lower secondary schools in three Italian cities (see McDowell *et al.*, 2012), 16.4% of PIBs were repeating a year in their school career, versus 7.2% of Italians. 48.2% of PIBs are held back, compared to 7.6% of Italians. Thus, failures account just for one third of delays, the others being due to institutional coping (i.e., the classes and age groups where newcomers are placed). Thus, a governance arrangement plays a major role in hindering equal opportunities (see also Huddleston *et al.*, 2011).

### POLICY PRIORITIES AND PIBS

The Ministry of Education has a long record of documents on the integration model to be used with PIBs, which culminated with a paper on "The Italian way to intercultural education and the integration of foreign pupils" (Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 2007).

The tracking, segregation and guidance of PIBs at the secondary level have not been national priorities for many years, since attention was much more focussed on integration issues in earlier tiers, where the numbers have been more relevant. Nonetheless, the evidence of such discrimination is a challenge for a comprehensive system that refuses special education in its norms and professional cultures (*ibid.*; see also McDowell *et al.*, 2012).

We can hypothesize that a comprehensive approach in this field did not result from reflexive thinking on explicit expectations and goals for this target group, but as an isomorphic application of receipts thought for other target groups—a policy legacy, more than an object of a real debate. This caused unintended consequences in a context where a comprehensive approach is under constant challenge due to retrenched support, even for "traditional" categories of disadvantage.

As a matter of fact, Ministry guidelines provided principles, but few indications and tools for everyday practice; they were also matched with a limited re-training of staff and, likewise, limited action plans and resources. As an example, the principle that newcomers should be placed in the class corresponding to their age as often as possible is stated, but there are no real enforcement mechanisms or tools to cope with misimplementations and shortcomings resulting in unequal treatment (in particular, the need for more individualized and assisted education). The consequence is that the principle is not sufficiently taken into account, and the hold-back rate is shaped as described above.

As a further consequence, we can see the poor national coordination of this issue within a decentralizing comprehensive system. Schools and local authorities built up their know-how incrementally within local policy networks—and according to individual goodwill, given the lack of training and retraining.

Moreover, in this case, where the target is potentially politically sensitive, support for localism seems to work as a "sweep-it-under-the-carpet" strategy. Accommodation via micro-regulations avoids a negative politicization of the issue, as well as heated national debates and hatred.

This put local actors under great pressure, without any empowerment and support mechanism. Emerging risks, like the ones concerning PIBs, find fragmented answers, which are reflected in the above-mentioned trajectories. At the same time, local actors can be subject to blame games.

### BLAMING THE SCAPEGOAT: SETTING A THRESHOLD FOR PIBS

An example of the blame game is a Ministry circular letter (n. 2/2010, "Indications and recommendations for the integration of pupils with non-Italian citizenship"), which defined a 30% threshold per class for PIBs (especially newcomers with weak language skills). This letter touched a real problem, i.e., the uneven distribution of disadvantaged pupils. However, it also provided a negative and discriminatory symbolic answer: just a formally tough limit (to show commitment to public opinion), though with unclear implementation rules, no resources and a total devolution of responsibility to local networks. Thus, it allowed for political gains without much effort, as we can see after retracing the reasons behind this norm.

Such a national measure basically sprang from a single case of a primary school located in a peripheral district in Rome, where PIBs were some 95% of enrolled pupils, as a consequence of local discretionary prac-

12 Again, we should also stress the long-term effects of early hold-backs, which significantly widen the gap with Italian nationals. The likelihood of a PIB being held back is 3 times higher than Italians at the upper secondary level, 10 times at lower secondary level, and as much as 22 times in primary education.

tices: activism toward immigration issues in that school and a neglect of it in the nearby ones.

What happens in the capital city soon climbs the political agenda. Between 2009 and 2010, some right-winged stakeholders—including the then-mayor—labelled this school a ghetto to clear up. Even though this case did not reach the heights of media debate, it was very important for the political agenda and the definition of the situation, which was grounded in the Ministry circular letter (and a Parliament inquiry).

Notwithstanding divergent discourse on this case—some parents and many teachers maintained that teaching pupils with different ethnic backgrounds (most were born in Italy) together was a positive integration experiment—some local media and politicians used this case as a flag to stress the negative effects of multiculturalism and immigration policy in Italy.

In a conflict over two definitions of “Italianness”—civic or ethnic—the Ministry circular letter ended up supporting the second and even reversed a long-lasting position on intercultural education and migrant inclusion. Charged with symbolic consequences, it had little impact and was unable to reach the goal it stated—not even in the school where the issue was raised.

Nothing changed there, since the parents’ association raised a claim at the Administrative Court and obtained an exemption, while other claims were raised elsewhere for discrimination.

#### CONCLUSION: GOVERNANCE IN A FRAGMENTED INSTITUTIONAL SYSTEM

Both the implementation of RS-VET and the targeting of PIBs share some common problems, which affect the governance of education and broadly conceived welfare policies.

In governance terms, we can see that these problems are consistent with a welfare model affected by a traditional gap between insiders and outsiders. It has an extensive, passive form of subsidiarity, where families and local actors (public and private) have pivotal roles in supporting people in need, though without adequate institutional support (Ferrera, 2005; Kazepov, 2008).

First is the problem of **territorial fragmentation**: differences in the provision of services, infrastructures and resources is not just a North/South divide (even though that gap is still a fundamental problem) and also has a micro-dimension.

The problem also refers to new, unclear, and ambiguous relations between the state and its regions, within the framework of the principle of subsidiarity. More than ten years after the 2001 Constitutional reform, the regionalist change is dangerously stuck at a crossroads: the central state is not yet a federal authority with proper coordination tools. Regions are not yet the protagonists, due to incomplete transfer of powers, especially as far as finances are concerned.

The actual output is wavering between neo-centralist attempts, which are going to fail, considering the new Constitutional framework, and dangerous regional leaps to fill the gaps in state measures on their own, with a further fragmentation that challenges equal rights.

Second and related is the issue of **coordination**. School autonomy and the federal constitutional reform redistributed competencies, power and responsibility, though with inconsequential resources. This paved the way to a “decentralization of penury” and blame-avoiding strategies in the state’s retrenchment (Kazepov 2010; Mény & Wright 1985). Central authorities can devolve responsibilities but not enough resources, which keeps the budget under control and allows the blaming of local authorities for not being effective. Local authorities can blame central ones for not endowing them enough and can go on playing hide-and-seek with likely positive effects, in electoral terms, but at the risk of jeopardizing the effectiveness of involved institutions and measures.

What clearly emerges is the shifting borders of citizenship towards increasingly exclusionary policies characterised by ambiguity and cost-cutting tendencies, in which the buck is passed to local authorities, who will be blamed more and more for whatever does not work. Thus, the unsaid turning point is the real ability of the state to be enabling at the territorial level and to guarantee a minimum set of nationwide standards.

Surprisingly enough, the interviewed stakeholders criticized actual autonomy and decentralization, while suggesting further devolution as a solution. The stress on local network-building underrates the path-dependency of unequal development and performances of local institutions.

In other words, local actors are required to pool resources that are not available, thus leaving the weakest locales to their own destinies through a micro-local fragmentation—a true postcode lottery. In this respect, school and local autonomy can turn into inadequate tools, if not properly matched with institutional empowerment, capacities, tools and resources to cope with the devolved tasks.

Third is the problem of **de-synchronization**. In many policy areas, reforms are increasingly addressing specific policy fields without considering the coherence of the overall system. RS-VET shows the problem of inconsistent reforms in the compulsory age of education and of the secondary cycle; PIBs face a late acknowledgement of their conditions in a comprehensive system on the ropes, under retrenchment and not attuned to new social risks.

Thus, this analysis of some reform trends in the Italian educational system show how common pressures (e.g. the destandardization of life courses, and the problems of relevance of educational and training paths) may find territorially specific answers and difficulties according to governance functions, and the degrees of variability (and inequality) allowed by state institutions. If Italy shows a complex set of governance problems

due to traditional and new weaknesses in institutional performance, territorial unevenness and state-making, it is worth noting that issues raised about coordination, de-synchronization and tolerated inequality may be at

stake in different reforms of educational and welfare institutions throughout Europe, as an outcome of similar institutional pressures (e.g. budget constraints and neo-liberal priorities).

## MED INSTITUCIONALNO FRAGMENTACIJO IN LOKALNO DISKRECIJO: UPRAVLJANJE PREHODOV V ITALIJANSKEM IZOBRAŽEVALNEM SISTEMU

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### POVZETEK

Članek se osredotoča na prehod iz osnovnošolskega (ISCED 2) na srednješolsko izobraževanje (ISCED 3), pri čemer izpostavi specifičnosti italijanskega okolja s pritiski na izobraževalne in blaginjske politike. Italijanski izobraževalni sistem je pri naslavljanju tega splošnega priznanega problema še posebej zanimiv zaradi sledečega:

- obvezno šolanje ne vodi nujno k pridobitvi kvalifikacije, kar povečuje tveganje za fragmentacijo življenjske poti
- izobraževalni sistem za otroke stare od 12 do 14 let (ISCED 2) je s svojo nejasno funkcijo najšibkejši člen sistema izobraževanja, saj povečuje razkorak med deprivilegiranimi skupinami s slabimi učnimi dosežki in privilegiranimi skupinami
- dokaj zgodnje izobraževalno usmerjanje oz. fragmentacijo izobraževalnega sistema spremljajo relevantne oblike razredne in manjšinske diskriminacije.

Te dimenzije so analizirane skozi perspektivo vladanja, ki je značilno za oblikovanje izobraževalnih politik v Italiji. Poseben poudarek je namenjen institucionalni in teritorialni fragmentaciji, ki vplivata na moč in učinkovitost politike. Zaradi pomanjkanja koordinacije in procesa decentralizacije, ki so značilni tudi za izobraževalne institucije, lahko prostor, ki je dopuščen lokalnim praksam, fleksibilnosti in lastnim presojam ogrozi skupne pravice in privede do negotovih izidov ('postcode lottery').

Ta problem je v članku analiziran s pomočjo analize politik, intervjujev z nacionalnimi nosilci politik in informatorji ter z lokalnimi študijami primera. Uvodu, kjer so opredeljene glavne značilnosti italijanskega izobraževalnega sistema, sledi analiza fragmentacije, ki izhaja iz več kot desetletje trajajočih nedokončanih izobraževalnih reform. Primeri izhajajo iz implementacije novega sistema poklicnega izobraževanja in iz vključevanja otrok imigrantov v izobraževalni sistem. Posledice fragmentacije so predstavljene skozi analizo njenih škodljivih učinkov na pravice deprivilegiranih skupin.

**Ključne besede:** Vladanje, poklicno izobraževanje, Italija, prehodi, imigracija

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