

Chapter 12

Equity and Excellence in Education: SDG 4 of the 2030 Agenda in the Italian Context – Public Education Policies and Their Impact

Valerio Ferrero

University of Turin, Italy

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the policy commitment enshrined in 2030 Agenda with respect to schooling's role for social justice and equity as a horizon of pedagogical meaning for educational action. The reflection unfolds in three steps: (1) construction of a theoretical-conceptual framework on social justice and equity, with attention to classical and non-traditional factors of inequality; (2) analysis of the idea of equity promoted by 2030 Agenda, with particular reference to Goal 4 on quality education placed in relation to Goals 5, 10, and 16; (3) focus on the Italian context through a thematic analysis of public education policies developed to achieve Goal 4 and a literature review to understand their effect, with ameliorative proposals to increase equity in the school system. This chapter delves into 2030 Agenda's strategies for equity; the focus on the Italian context may also prove useful for those school systems with similar characteristics and issues.

INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015) is an indispensable reference for the 193 UN members who have signed it, committing themselves to building a more just and inclusive society in terms of sustainability, well-being and prosperity, with reference to people and the entire planet. It takes the form of a political responsibility to develop policies that move in the direction indicated by the document. Specifically, in this chapter we focus on the fourth goal of the 2030 Agenda, related to the need to ensure quality education for all.

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Equity and Excellence in Education

Firstly, we will construct a theoretical-conceptual framework useful for guiding the actions of policymakers, school leaders and teachers under the banner of equity. Starting from the indispensable role of schools in achieving an ever-higher degree of social justice (Ferrero, 2023a; Hardiman et al., 2007; Hytten & Bettez, 2011), we will orient ourselves among the different strands of equity to position ourselves among those most consistent with this ideal. In this sense, we will be careful not to give in to interpretations that risk opening to social reproduction dynamics because they do not take into account how different starting conditions reverberate on educational pathways and to a compensatory pedagogy according to which there is a norm to strive for, with the commitment to equity being activated only as a result of a worsening of the *status quo*. However, reflection on social justice and equity in school systems cannot disregard a serious analysis of what can generate inequities in pupils' educational pathways: alongside the socio-economic and socio-cultural *background* of pupils (classical causes of inequality), non-traditional factors of inequality emerge (Ferrer-Esteban, 2011; Ferrero, 2022; 2023b Granata & Ferrero, 2022), i.e., inequalities originated by school systems themselves due to their organizational culture and operating choices. The use of this interpretative category is crucial for at least two reasons: (1) in order to understand how schools provoke inequality dynamics for the educational action of teachers (*micro*), for the organization of individual institutions (*meso*) especially in contexts of school autonomy, for education policies (*macro*); (2) in order to investigate the school and intervene in the dynamics that generate inequalities.

Secondly, we will concentrate on the fourth goal of the 2030 Agenda by analyzing what urgency determined its origin and what is planned for its realization. In general, in several areas of the world, many children do not access primary education and a considerable amount of young people lack basic skills in reading, writing and mathematics, with a slight majority in the female population (OECD, 2022; UNICEF, 2021). It is precisely for this reason that the fourth goal aims to ensure that every person has access to primary and secondary education and the achievement of adequate and concrete learning outcomes, with the possibility for all to access tertiary education (Agbedahin, 2019; Gabay & Ilcan, 2018); the goals also concern the achievement of gender equality in terms of the skills and competences acquired for the exercise of citizenship and the leading of a fulfilling life. Public educational and social policies on school building and curricula, financial support for schooling and teacher education are indispensable actions for the realization of this goal. Given the interconnectedness of the goals of the 2030 Agenda, it is useful to see the interrelationships with Goals 5, 10 and 16: the issue of equity in education is absolutely connected with gender equality throughout society, with the reduction of inequalities and with the institutional organization of school systems. The analysis will be careful to capture the *micro*, *meso* and *macro* aspects related to the realization of the goal (Boeren, 2019).

Thirdly, we will propose a focus on the Italian school context in order to understand how the commitment to equity enshrined in 2030 Agenda is being implemented. After an *excursus* on the history of the Italian education system and its indispensable role in the realization of the democratic project enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic (Cartabia & Lupo, 2022; Ferrari et al., 2019), we will propose a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019; Peterson, 2017; Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016; Terry et al., 2017) of the main public education policies developed in Italy to improve the equity of the education system since the signing of the 2030 Agenda. Precisely through the theoretical lenses described above, we will analyze the effects of Italian public educational policies with respect to equity in the education system thanks to a traditional literature review (Li & Wang, 2018; Rozas & Klein, 2010; Snyder, 2019): the strength of non-traditional factors of inequality in curbing the impact of educational policies in terms of equity will be noted.

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