

School for Social Justice: Pedagogical Reflections on Equity in Education in Gramscian Perspective With a Focus on the Italian Context

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Abstract

The role of school for social justice is supported internationally (Connel, 1993; Hytten & Bettez, 2011; Pearson & Reddy, 2021): everyone must be included in democratic participatory processes (Bauman & Tester, 2002; Gerwitz, 2006) and have the cultural and political tools to change History (Bell, 2007; Hackman, 2005). Taking equity in education (Rawls, 1972; Nussbaum, 2013; Sen, 2009; Kanor, 2021) as a horizon of pedagogical meaning means ensuring excellence for all and the acquisition of the capabilities to exercise citizenship. Focusing our analysis on the Italian context, old and new inequalities reverberate on students' educational pathways (OECD, 2022; INVALSI, 2022). Social reproduction is still active, but non-traditional factors of inequality emerge (Ferrer-Esteban, 2011; Ferrero, 2022; Granata & Ferrero, 2022): they are produced by school culture and the structure of the school system and cause unprecedented forms of injustice. Re-reading the challenges of this context through the philosophical work of Antonio Gramsci (1919; 1975; 1996; 2022) is useful to give depth to the reflection, given the topicality of his thought: schooling should not crystallize social differences but be a vector of emancipation to guarantee people equal cultural and political dignity. Schooling make it possible to transcend forms of subalternity and hegemony, even those that are presented as traditional and therefore socially accepted: it is necessary to make people aware that there is nothing natural or predetermined about social organization, that it is possible to unhinge existing relations of dominance and power in favor of a more democratic and fair social order.

Keywords: Antonio Gramsci, Social Justice, Equity, School, Inequalities

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Introduction

The school's contribution to the realisation of the democratic project is inescapable for our Constitution (Ferrari et al., 2019), according to which excellent education and training for all is an indispensable condition for a more just, cohesive and inclusive society. In this sense, Article 34 outlines the idea of a democratic school that is attentive to guaranteeing everyone the opportunity to develop their potential, talents, aptitudes and aspirations; Article 3, which is not specific to schools, also emphasises how the state must assume a decisive role in reducing inequalities between citizens and guaranteeing them equal access to democratic participatory processes. A school that is an instrument of social justice is thus outlined (Cavaliere, 2021) thanks to an educational action that assumes equity as a horizon of inalienable pedagogical sense (Granata, 2016).

If the democratic project is an itinerary never concluded and to be built day by day responding to ever-new challenges, social justice is also an ideal never fully realised (Bauman & Tester, 2002), which requires a constant commitment so that each person is included in democratic participatory processes (Gerwitz, 2006) and exercises self-determination despite the interdependence that binds human beings (Bell, 2007). Access to knowledge and the acquisition of skills to critically analyse what is happening are essential elements for being actors in history, identifying and opposing forms of injustice and oppression (Hackman, 2005).

The school's commitment to social justice only becomes concrete if it acts under the banner of equity: the polysemy of the construct requires terminological discernment and subsequent positioning. Interpretations that are too oriented towards meritocracy (Nagel, 1991; Savidan, 2007) and negative freedom (Colombo, 2012; Van Hees, 1998) risk opening up to social reproduction dynamics, as they do not take into account how the different starting conditions reverberate on school paths; these two strands consider the results achieved without giving importance to the processes and paths that determine them and do not question the role of the school context in arriving at a precise *outcome*, reading those who do not achieve positive results in terms of a predetermined level as disadvantaged. The other three strands, namely equality of opportunity (Bourdieu, 1966; Rawls, 1971; Roemer, 2000), ability (Nussbaum, 2013; Sen, 2009) and social inclusion (Kanor, 2021; Taket et al, 2013), make it possible not to give in to a compensatory pedagogy according to which there is a norm to strive for and not to activate the commitment to equity only as a result of a worsening of the *status quo*; pluralism is thus understood as an everyday experience and the urgency of breaking the interdependence between students' *backgrounds* and educational paths is affirmed, emphasising the role of schools so that all realise their aspirations having acquired the necessary skills to lead fulfilling lives.

The positioning within the last three interpretations is a choice with a strong ethical value (Milani et al., 2021) that allows for the elaboration of a theoretical-practical definition of equity that interweaves the intercultural perspective (Fiorucci, 2020; Granata, 2016; Tarozzi, 2015) with the developments of *post-colonial studies* (Ashcroft et al., 2013; Burgio, 2022; Young, 2020) and intersectional theory (Crenshaw, 2017; Hill Collins, 2019). There is a need to ensure excellent education for all in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, aimed at acquiring the skills necessary to exercise citizenship understood as active participation in social, political, cultural, economic life on the local and global levels. Diversity must not turn into inequality: there is no norm to adhere to and pluralism is an opportunity to enhance people's strengths (Zoletto, 2020), without differences being read as factors of disadvantage.

The Constitution and the laws deriving from it promote this idea of equity, but in students' everyday experience it still remains an ideal that is difficult to realise (Crescenza, 2021; Crescenza & Riva, 2021; Gavosto, 2022). The dynamics of social reproduction, already denounced in the 1960s even beyond Italy's borders (Bourdieu, 1966; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964; Don Milani, 1967), are still active (Gentili & Pignataro, 2020; Giancola & Salmieri, 2020): children replicate their parents' school and life trajectories. If socioeconomic and sociocultural *status* represent classic factors of inequality, new ones emerge today, defined as non-traditional because it is the school itself that creates them due to its organisational choices and its functioning (Ferrer-Esteban, 2011; Granata & Ferrero, 2022). The ethnography of education has long emphasised the distorting effects in terms of equity of school culture (Gobbo, 2008; Goldring, 2002): everyday educational practice, organisational aspects at the school level and national education policies generate dynamics of inequality. In fact, these non-traditional factors are numerous and, acting under the radar, difficult to detect: their diversity from one context to another requires lenses of investigation and specific actions to overcome them. Classical and non-traditional factors combine, giving rise to unprecedented forms of injustice that affect all students and bend their schooling in a direction of inequality (INVALSI, 2022; OECD, 2022).

It is therefore urgent to bring back to the forefront the reflection on the role of the school for social justice: thematising the issue is a precise ethical commitment, even more so in a historical moment in which various emergencies (pandemic, geopolitical crisis, economic crisis) intersect, exacerbating social inequalities (CENSIS, 2022; ISTAT, 2022). It is not just a matter of transmitting to the younger generations technical skills that they will be able to spend in an increasingly competitive labour market, but of seeing the school as a laboratory of citizenship in which to acquire those fundamental skills to lead a life in which one's own voice can be heard, free from ideological conditioning and in possession of the cultural tools that represent a common heritage that each person can interpret and help to make grow.

Rereading Antonio Gramsci's ideas on schooling and education¹ from a pedagogical perspective seems absolutely useful to understand how a school system that acts in the name of fairness with a view to social justice leads to the development of an increasingly aware and democratic society: there can be no progress for the state without the personal growth of each citizen in terms of critical spirit, creativity and moral awareness.

For a democratic education: culture, school, freedom

The pedagogical use of Gramsci's work certainly highlights his commitment to overcoming forms of subalternity (Baldacci, 2017). Before delving into the reflection on Gramsci's thought on schooling, it is important to consider the philosophical tradition and the historical-cultural context in which his work takes shape. Gramsci places himself in the framework of Marxism, understood as a philosophy of praxis that allows for the interpretation of reality with a view to a radical transformation of capitalist society and a rupture of the relations of political and cultural hegemony in terms of the intellectual and moral direction through which a social group exerts power over the entire civil society (Petronio & Paladini Musitelli, 2001). On a historical level, Gramsci elaborated his thought after the defeat of the labour movement in the early post-war period and during the advent of the fascist regime (Canfora, 2012; Mordenti, 2007). The current historical, cultural and social background is certainly different, but the pedagogical reinterpretation of Gramsci proves to be important if we

¹ This paper offers excerpts from Gramsci's work. Translations are by the author.

consider the persistence of forms of subalternity, inequality and hegemony that it is crucial to overcome.

The relationship between culture, political power and emancipation assumes a particularly prominent place in Gramscian reflection (Benedetti & Coccoli, 2018): every human being must have the tools to deal with the problems that arise on the socio-political level thanks to his or her historical and social awareness. Culture is therefore something dynamic, which opens up to change that can be achieved through a search for solutions that should not only concern some, but all people.

This word immediately conjures up [...] the image of the book and the coffee table. [...] Culture is not the possession of a well-stocked warehouse of news, but is the capacity our human mind has to understand life, the place we hold in it, our relations with other men. He has culture who has consciousness of himself and of the whole, who feels the immanent relationship with all other beings, what diversifies him from them and what unites him to them. [...] So that to be cultured, to be a philosopher, anyone can be. It is enough to live as men, that is, to try to explain to oneself the reason for one's own actions and those of others; to strive every day more and more to understand the organism of which we are a part; to penetrate life with all our forces of awareness, of passion, of will; never to fall asleep, never to become lazy. (Gramsci, 1919, p. 1)

A fairer and more democratic society cannot disregard the participation of everyone, no one excluded, in the construction of a common and shared cultural heritage and the acquisition of the ability to read reality, to place oneself in historical-social processes and to place oneself in an equal relationship with other human beings, in a continuous tension between the valorisation of one's own uniqueness as the promotion of pluralism and the affirmation of formal and substantial equality between people (Dei, 2018). The view of culture as the "organisation of oneself" and "awareness of one's historical and social agency" (Benedetti & Coccoli, 2018, pp. 47-48) clearly fits into Gramsci's philosophy of praxis, in which intellectual activity has concrete reverberations in people's everyday lives and can alter power relations between them (Crehan, 2003). Culture understood in this way brings individuals closer together, preventing them from running the risk "of not knowing how to come out of their cultural shells and measuring the foreign² with a yardstick that is not their own" and fostering a gaze capable of "seeing difference under equal appearances and not seeing identity under different appearances" (Gramsci, 1975, p. 928).

School assumes a crucial role in the acquisition of these indispensable skills to live as free people (Baldacci, 2017). For Gramsci, it must educate and not simply instruct: it is a lexical choice that is not accidental, that wants to mark the urgency of overcoming a school system organised only to transmit notions that are not always useful for orienting oneself in the contemporary world in favour of a school whose aim is the integral formation of the person, highlighting the crucial role of teachers (Burgio, 2003).

It is not entirely accurate that education is not also education: to have insisted too much in this direction was a grave error of idealistic pedagogy and one can already see the effects of this in the school reorganised by this pedagogy. For education not

² In the pedagogical and more appropriately intercultural sphere, we could replace the Gramscian expression 'the foreign' with 'the *other*': cultural diversity is not just a matter of geographical origin but encompasses multiple variables. It is crucial not to reduce the complexity of pluralism.

also to be education would require the learner to be mere passivity, a ‘receptacle mechanism’ of abstract notions, which is absurd and, moreover, is ‘abstractly’ denied by the advocates of pure education precisely against mere mechanistic education. The ‘certain’ becomes ‘true’ in the consciousness of the child.

But the child’s consciousness is nothing ‘individual’ (and even less individualised), it is a reflection of the fraction of civil society in which the child participates, of the social relations as they are interwoven in the family, in the neighbourhood, in the village... The individual consciousness of the vast majority of children reflects civil and cultural relations that are different and antagonistic to those represented by the school curriculum: the ‘certain’ of an advanced culture becomes ‘true’ within the frameworks of a fossilised and anachronistic culture, there is no unity between school and life, and therefore no unity between education and upbringing.

Therefore, it can be said that in the school, the education-education nexus can only be represented by the living work of the teacher, insofar as the teacher is aware of the contrasts between the type of society and culture he represents and is aware of his task, which consists in accelerating and disciplining the formation of the child in accordance with the superior type in struggle with the inferior type. If the magisterial body is deficient and the education-education nexus is dissolved in order to resolve the question of teaching according to paper schemes in which educativeness is exalted, the work of the teacher will be even more deficient: we will have a rhetorical school, without seriousness, because the material body of the certain will be lacking, and the true will be true of words, precisely rhetoric. [...] In reality a mediocre teacher may succeed in getting his pupils to become more *educated*, he will not succeed in getting them to become more cultured.’ (Gramsci, 1975, pp. 1541-1543)

It is impossible to clearly separate the instructional aspect from the educational one: the point is to avoid a divide between what is learnt at school and what is needed to interpret contemporaneity (Baldacci, 2019). Instruction is thus a fundamental but not exclusive part of education: it is up to the teacher to overcome this dichotomy, not reducing the teaching and learning process to pure notionism or empty rhetoric (Baratta, 1999) and building a “close and founding” relationship with the pupil (p. 47).

An effective school for democracy

A school system that crystallises and accentuates social inequalities without making changes to overcome *status* differences and build a fairer society certainly cannot be said to be equitable and democratically oriented (Saragnese, 2019). As we saw in the opening, even today our schools fail to be a *great equalizer* (Bernardi & Ballarino, 2016) that allows everyone to realise their aspirations and take an active, conscious and satisfying part in democratic processes. One hundred years ago, Gramsci strongly denounced how the structure of the Italian school system, which we pointed out as a non-traditional factor of inequality, produced cultural hegemony and subalternity.

In today’s school³, due to the profound crisis in the cultural tradition and conception of life and man, a process of progressive degeneration is taking place: schools of the professional type, i.e. concerned with satisfying immediate practical interests, are

³ This writing dates back to 1932.

taking over from the formative, immediately disinterested school. The most paradoxical aspect is that this new type of school appears and is preached as democratic, when in fact it is not only destined to perpetuate social differences, but to crystallise them in Chinese forms.

[...] It is not the acquisition of management skills, it is not the tendency to form superior men⁴ that gives the social imprint to a type of school. The social imprint is given by the fact that each social group has its own type of school, destined to perpetuate in these strata a certain traditional, directive or instrumental function. If this pattern is to be broken, it is therefore necessary not to multiply and graduate the types of vocational school, but to create a single type of preparatory school [...] that leads the youngster up to the threshold of professional choice, forming him in the meantime as a person capable of thinking, studying, directing or controlling those he directs. (Gramsci, 1975, p. 1547)

A school that acts *according to* and *for* democracy should guarantee an educational pathway of optimal quality for all, without the deception of an ‘easy school’ (Benedetti & Coccoli, 2018, p. 174) that in reality stratifies social and cultural differences by making them understood as traditional. We realise the relevance of Gramsci’s reflection especially if we think about the division of pupils into chains in the second cycle of education and the presence of young women in STEM degree courses and young men in degree courses leading to educational and care professions (Benadusi & Giancola, 2020; Ghigli, 2019). In the first case, the children of parents with low or medium-low socioeconomic and sociocultural *status* tend to choose secondary education paths that do not open to an academic future (regional vocational courses) or that do not have it as an immediate consequence (vocational institutes), in contrast to the children of families with medium-high or high *status* who instead prefer technical institutes or high schools. In the second case, there is a strong gender segregation: young women prefer educational and care professions to engagement in STEM subjects, in contrast to young men. This result is the result of school experience: already during the primary school years, boys perform better in mathematics than girls, who instead score better in Italian than their male peers (INVALSI, 2022).

According to Gramsci (1975; 1996; 2022), in fact, an exclusively professional education inhibits people’s creativity and potential, reducing human beings to means, experts in specialised knowledge incapable, however, of orienting themselves in the world; on the contrary, an exclusively humanistic education is a failure because it does not provide children with those skills that allow them to situate themselves in contemporary times and adapt to sudden changes (Benedetti & Coccoli, 2018). In essence, a school that does not guarantee excellence to all and, in Gramsci’s words, the possibility of being part of the ruling class and controlling it cannot be said to be democratic: a real expansion of educational opportunities is not achieved by expanding the offer of technical and vocational schooling, but by eliminating the barriers that prevent everyone from improving their living conditions with respect to their initial family *status*.

An important point in the study of the practical organisation of the unitary school is that concerning the school career in its various grades in accordance with the age and intellectual-moral development of the pupils and with the aims that the school itself

⁴ A less pronounced and more topical lexical choice could be *people with highly specialised skills*: in continuity with Gramsci’s denunciation, a school that is too focused on providing students with training that is spendable on the professional market risks neglecting the more properly educational and cultural aspects.

wants to achieve. The unitary school [...] should aim to introduce young people into social activity after having brought them to a certain degree of maturity and capacity for intellectual and practical creation and autonomy in orientation and initiative. The setting of the compulsory school age depends on the general economic conditions, as these can force the demand on young people and boys to make a certain immediate productive contribution. In other words, it transforms the budget of the ministry of national education from top to bottom, extending it in an unprecedented way and complicating it: the entire function of the education and training of the new generations becomes from private to public, because only in this way can it involve all generations without group or caste divisions. But this transformation of scholastic activity demands an unprecedented enlargement of the practical organization of the school, i.e. of the buildings, of the scientific material, of the teaching staff... The teaching staff in particular should be increased, because the efficiency of the school is all the greater and more intense the smaller the relationship between teacher and pupils, which poses other problems that are not easy and quick to solve.” (Gramsci, 1975, p. 1534)

Gramsci’s reflections on a unified and democratic school focus on issues that are still relevant today, such as public spending on education, class size, the number of teachers and their training, and school construction. A genuinely democratic school ensures that all children can become leaders, so that even those who do not occupy that role will have the thinking and analysis skills to understand what is happening and the ways in which those in positions of public responsibility use power (Baldacci, 2017; 2019; Baratta, 1999; Borg et al., 2002): the division between leaders and subordinates is overcome thanks to education and, in particular, thanks to culture as we defined it in the previous paragraph.

Conclusion

Italian school reproduces and produces inequalities among students: in general, for children who come from families with low or lower socio-economic and socio-cultural *status*, school success often remains a chimera. The current historical, social and cultural context has obviously changed compared to the years in which Antonio Gramsci developed his philosophy of praxis within the framework of Marxism; his ideas on education and schooling are certainly affected by the climate of the time, however their reinterpretation is useful today as our school system is far from being that *great equalizer* sanctioned by the Constitution and has old and new criticalities that Gramsci’s view helps to put into perspective in order to see the implications on a social and cultural level.

In essence, a democratically oriented school guarantees all people a common path of education and emancipation that allows them to find space and voice in their everyday reality. This idea of equity as an indispensable instrument of social justice can be found in the reasoning of Gramsci, who advocates the need for equal cultural dignity of individuals: everyone must know how to be an actor in History, identifying power dynamics and power relations and exercising his or her own judgement with respect to the ways in which the ruling class performs its duties of responsibility. The school can only counter cultural hegemony and subalternity if there is a priori an organisational effort to make it truly adherent to the social context in which it operates: ultimately, inequalities between students are reduced by overcoming the gap between what is learnt at school and what is needed in life.

In this sense, a school that is 'open to all' is obligatorily unitary, inclusive: the division into branches and directions opens up choices on the part of families and students that are not always aimed at indulging inclinations and aspirations; the existing social order is thus reproduced, with children replicating their parents' educational and professional paths. It is not only a matter of giving a new structure to the school system, but above all of acting on the level of teacher training, on their number, on the ways of *doing school*, on learning environments, on public spending on education that should be seen as an investment for the growth of the state.

At a time of severe crisis in the school institution, which is unable to be a social lift, Gramsci's reflections, which predate the Constitution and thus the birth of the democratic republican school, echo in their topicality and represent a perspective of meaning to look at in order to imagine a school that is truly 'open to all', which breaks down dynamics of cultural hegemony and subalternity that lead to social, political, economic and cultural impoverishment. The attempt not to bend to market and productivity logics but to have social justice as the ultimate goal is a complex task to be taken on at a systemic level, as individual schools, as teachers and headmasters: it is the only way to break power dynamics and power relations and build a genuinely democratic society.

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