

Educational crisis plans: explaining access policy-making in Italy (1996-2023)

Astrid Favella (La Sapienza Università di Roma)

The secondary school segment is a fundamental junction in students' life courses. At its beginning, and at its end, the key challenge for policy-makers in a country subscribed to the system-level objective of inclusion, is that of widening participation, supporting access and successful completion. Access policies are indeed crucial in supporting transition, enabling opportunities for schools in diverse territorial areas and diverse households.

Transition alone, as a working concept, is a contested term: different theoretical frameworks in the literature are associated to normative assumptions about length of transition into new school system segments and, consequently, related policy interventions.

This study considers the politics of policy-making regarding access and transition to upper secondary education in Italy, examining policies both at national level (such as formative/school duty regulations; school guidance policies; track change policies) and at regional level (such as schools merge regulations, financial support policies).

Concerning the beginning point of secondary school, empirical studies in educational research problematize "transition in transition", as transition to high-school is being experienced by individuals that are themselves in the transition of adolescence.

On the finishing end of secondary school, empirical studies notably foreground how, at the end of secondary school, "tracking effects", namely due to the attended pathway, have still a strong influence in accessing university for young adults.

The scope for intervention in aiding access and transition to secondary education is then massive: however, in the Italian context, the ex-education Minister Berlinguer, as reported in the Education Annals of 1997, noticed how until then no substantive intervention had been devoted to "orientamento"- "school guidance policies". According to the ex-Minister, who started a "revolution" in the school system triggering the autonomy reform, through which schools would gain more didactic and organizational autonomy, school guidance policies should be part of the curriculum as they were not just "informative", but truly "formative" in so far as they had the potential to have each student reflecting on their own inclinations and hence choose the school pathway that would best suit them. This is one of the key features of the Italian "integrated education system".

This paper then embraces the timeframe 1996-2023, and investigates the implementation of the afore-mentioned access and transition policies both at national

and at regional level, asking the research question: “What are the mechanisms underlying education policy access reforms/legislative interventions?”.

Legislative interventions to be explained in the timeframe, range from law n.30/2000, the "cycles" reform containing initiatives on access, to the recent PNRR education reform foreseeing the introduction of mandatory hours devoted to school choice guidance/reflections in the curriculum.

The research design considers firstly the national level. Following the methodology of Comparative Historical Analysis, throughout the main reforms of the scrutinized years, a descriptive section traces changes in the implementation of access and the intertwined skill-formation policies, to then explain their advent through process tracing, via document analysis and elite interviews with politicians, bureaucrats, and interest groups involved.

The same operation is conducted at regional level, considering a multiple comparative case study with the northern region of Emilia-Romagna, the central Lazio and the Southern Campania.

Understanding the politics of policymaking from the perspective of access, allows to shed a light on which symptoms of segregation are dealt with, how, and why; and which ones are left behind.