



# Schools and the consequences of the pandemic

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*'For public education to become a pillar of a different developing model; for nothing to be as it was before'* (motto of the 8 June 2020 general strike in Italy).

The Covid-19 health crisis has rapidly morphed into a crisis of production - that is, of the economy - and of the entire sphere of reproduction. The economy as we knew it has stopped, while society and its reproduction take centre stage after decades of neglect. Social reproduction is understood here as implying mental, physical and emotional labour, and encompassing different services that are essential to the functioning and regeneration of human life (and labour power). How will this economic hiatus affect education, which is an essential component of social reproduction as it guarantees care and socialization of children and access to norms and knowledge considered necessary to fully participate in society? This article focuses on the impact of the health crisis on the education sector and the unions' response in Italy.

While Italy's clinical crisis is now under control, the country is starting to grapple with the social and economic consequences of the pandemic. It is clear that Covid-19 has attacked a public system – health and education in particular, but also research and innovation – weakened by years of neoliberal policies that have reduced its range of action and its capacity to respond to crises. While the labour force employed in the public sector has been reduced in numbers and made more precarious, a culture of 'costs before quality' has overturned the paradigm of cradle-to-grave welfare, which aimed to raise everyone's quality of life regardless of social class or place of birth, and in its place has imposed commercial objectives of cost containment and work rationalization on society. Education budgets have been dramatically reduced, causing overcrowded classes, deteriorating infrastructure and massive casualization.

## Schools closure

On 4 March, the Italian minister of education, Lucia Azzolina, announced that all schools and institutions of higher learning would be closed. At the time, Graziamaria Pistorino, from the national executive committee of the knowledge workers union, FLC-CGIL, pointed out: 'School moved to distance-learning platforms, in a spontaneous and uncoordinated way, while the ministry simply followed on. In fact the measures taken by government thereafter, such as the purchase of tablets for disadvantaged families, were only finetuning the offer of

distance-learning which the ministry considered as a reassuring solution, while teachers had started it only as a temporary response to the emergency'. Distance learning was carried out abruptly and without any preparation for teachers or pupils. Thousands of children found themselves studying alone, some without their books, which remained locked up in the schools.

The ministry has often praised distance learning without fully acknowledging the enormous challenges it entailed in terms of degrading knowledge and also amplifying gender, class and racial inequalities which go beyond the purchasing of devices. The various decrees of the president promulgated during and after the lockdown did not recognize the school in its entirety, regarding it rather as an avenue for acquisition of competences. This approach revolves around an image of schools that is bridled by a neoliberal vision, reducing access to knowledge to an individual operation aimed at increasing one's human capital to be sold in the job market. Human capital theories assume education as instrumental to productivity increases while they ignore the broader remit of education in society (Vally and Motala 2014).

Italian schools were already under strain from the above-mentioned cost-cutting policies and, according to Pistorino, the vagueness of government on the challenges of online learning may create a situation where the pandemic is used to normalize distance learning, even after the health crisis, as a panacea for the problems affecting schools.

## What are the costs?

Online learning has allowed teachers to be in contact, albeit digitally, with students and to continue some learning activities. Nevertheless, towards May, with the end of the school year approaching, many questions were yet to be answered, including: how do we evaluate online learning? Is school closure the best solution? How better can we protect health while continue teaching? Moreover, both in government documents and mainstream media, two issues were neglected: the risks of digitalization and the role of the school in society.

Regarding the former, technology has been assumed to be neutral whereas, in fact, online learning may gloss over structural problems and ultimately exacerbate inequalities due to, firstly, different access to help at home based on socio-economic background; secondly, the fact that, because of

common gender stereotypes, technology is used differently by boys and girls, and, thirdly, the exclusion of a considerable number of pupils by lack of data or wi-fi.

Meanwhile, large multinational companies managing distance learning have gathered very useful information on children, teaching content and grading, to the point where they can repack the information and privately offer educational support even in the absence of teachers (Mazzoneschi 2020). In the context of downgrading schooling to the acquisition of competences, this represents a major threat to the acquisition of critical knowledge and to the role of teachers.

The role of schools in society is broader than it appears in government decrees. Schools are sites of production of collective rather than individual knowledge, but also workshops for socialisation and caring and socio-economic levellers. The threat posed to schools and teachers, and the risk of exclusion, are amongst the main reasons unions are insisting on the need to rethink education beyond the emergency, as explained by the Manifesto for Inclusive Education (FLC-CGIL 2020).

### The unions' response

Unions are fighting for schooling to take place in presence and in safe spaces; they spearhead a vision of schools as unique places where, firstly, access to and production of knowledge come about through social relations, and secondly, where social relations are produced which have an enormous value in themselves. School is where children make friends, learn solidarity, and acquire means of resolving conflict; it is a place where diversity is lived, where learning to understand different cultures and new languages takes place.

The unique role of teachers is expressed in presence where, through observation and social relations, they stimulate pupils to contribute, each according to her or his possibilities. Teaching is a living job founded on theories but also on knowledge of other human beings with whom one shares a space.

This special place, which has survived decades of neoliberal policies, is now at risks of being relegated to a keyboard and a grading system - but, at the same time, Covid-19 presented an opportunity to scale up the struggle and finally free schools of homo economicus, who must accumulate notions in order to increase their 'human capital' to be sold in the market.

Trade unions in the sector are taking up this challenge, and have launched a national mobilisation since 13 May. Then, Pistorino says, 'Online classes took a break to allow workers in schools, universities, vocational centres to participate in online assemblies taking place throughout the country to discuss the future of learning.' Throughout May, several regional and national meetings occurred to take the discussion forward. Several attempts had been made to participate in government

platforms but the response was not adequate. At the centre of grievances is the fact that the right to education cannot be guaranteed due to low investment, widespread casualization in schools and universities, and timeworn infrastructure.

On 8 June, the majority of trade unions representing knowledge workers (Flc-Cgil, Cisl Scuola and Uil Scuola), supported by parents and community associations, embarked on a strike to defend the constitutional right to education. The demands of the unions are centred around the right of eight million students to safely access schools; in particular, stabilization of casual personnel, smaller classes (no more than 20 pupils) to guarantee social distancing, and investment in school buildings. Moreover, the unions are strongly criticizing the large increase in public funding to private schools in the Decree Rilancio [relaunch decree], currently being discussed by parliament.

After several weeks of mobilization, the unions have eventually been included in policy debates with government, and on 25 June the ministry requested an additional €1 billion investment in public schools to guarantee the return to class in September.

The unions appreciate the recent openings made by government, although they consider the investment to be as yet inadequate to guarantee the constitutional right to learning. As Pistorino put it, 'Learning is the basis of equality and development. Not only our government but the broader European and international community should take this pandemic as an opportunity to envisage specific interventions to strengthen access to and production of knowledge, the true engine of our society.'

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