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Equity in education: a general overview

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to provide a general overview of the issue of equity in education.

The aim is to obtain a historical-chronological description of equity in theory, policies and practices.

The analysis has shown how equity is widely discussed in the international debate. Different conceptions can be detected, namely: a) equity as inclusion; b) equity as meritocracy.

It seems to be necessary to continue the debate in order to focus on coherent and shared policies, practices and observations concerning scholastic systems.

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1. Introduction

Research in the field of education is asked to tackle various topics, involving reflection at various levels depending on the issue being studied.

At least two possible routes can be followed: firstly, that of studying the individuals, the actors, who “live in” the scholastic world, and therefore teachers, pupils, parents and families, and many others; and secondly, studying the scholastic world as a whole, therefore including all research that can be defined as “system research”.

Study conducted on equity in scholastic systems falls into this second research group, which aims to consider the situation at the macroscopic level, and which provides a general overview of the scholastic system in terms of its relationships with other spheres.

To a greater extent even than education, equity is related to various aspects of the life of a community: in fact, reflecting on equity means focussing on the issues of social segregation, racism, gender or status discrimination or on other forms of potential discrimination.

The scholastic environment provides various interpretations of the concept (which will be considered below): the concept is associated with access to school and to resources, to the quality and to the diffusion of knowledge, but it may also refer to the institutional responsibility of governments and of the school to compensate for the inequalities that exist outside the scholastic environment, in such a way as to guarantee better opportunities for disadvantaged individuals or groups of individuals.

Many researchers in the field of education (Bottani & Benadusi, 2006; Giancola, 2009) agree on the fact that the issue of equity is a crucial topic for the study of education systems. Meuret (2006) states that “It can therefore be said that, for the quality of education policies, but also for the quality of the political debate on education, it is important to evaluate the equity of the scholastic systems” (p. 41). General opinion, in both Europe and in the United States, has moved toward focussing more on the task and responsibility of the school in deciding the future of the community, and, in line with a general change in the outlook for the condition of children, there is a stronger conviction that the concept of justice must be applied to all citizens irrespective their age. In relation to this, in a 2004 study, Meuret cites a number of surveys and research projects conducted in the first few years of new millennium, including those by Fauconnier and Deloy (2000) and Hutmacher, Cochrane and Bottani (2001).

This paper is part of a more extensive research project, lasting for four years, with the final aim of publishing a report on the state of the indicators in public school in Ticino (see Berger, 2005 and Cattaneo, 2010). In this research project, equity is one of the topics that have been identified in order to study the indicators of the scholastic system, and, among other aspects, includes the issues of inclusion, selectivity, guarantees of the right to study and equal opportunities.

With the final goal of providing a detailed, in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the equity indicators in the Ticino scholastic system, it was decided to first conduct an in-depth theoretical study, with the following specific objectives:

- identify the various conceptions of equity, also in relation to specific local practices;
- obtain a general overview of the concept of equity, in both the academic and the institutional spheres.

Having established that the general objective is to study equity in education systems in greater depth, it was decided to move forward along two parallel paths.

On the one hand, the documents published in the last 10 years by the international institutions on the issue of equity in education systems were gathered together and analysed, in terms of the theoretical and conceptual presuppositions that have been taken as guidelines both in order to develop recent policies and to analyse current systems.

On the other hand, an analysis of the international academic publications recently published on the issue of equity was conducted. This analysis was limited to the most recent publications, and was executed by means of meta-search-engines of the thematic data banks “Academic search complete” and “Psychological and behavioral sciences collection”. The key words “equity” and “education” were used together for the search.

In addition to the articles published in the academic magazines, the analysis also considered a number of different documents (articles, books, papers) published not only recently by parties (research bodies, but also individual authors), that, as experts, have studied equity in education, winning the respect of the scientific community and of the scholastic sphere.

Equity or equality?

Various authors have contributed to the debate on equity, emphasising that the very concept can be interpreted in different ways, and how these ways are related closely to the paradigmatic outlooks and underlying stances on fundamental issues such as rights and social justice.

Benadusi (2006) proposes an analysis retracing the issues that, over the years, have been the focus of debate on the scholastic system, in particular:

- the concepts of efficacy and efficiency, adopted in the 60s and 70s
- the issue of quality, which emerged in the 80s and 90s
- and finally, the equity approach, which began to emerge in the late 90s and in the first few years of the new millennium

While efficacy, efficiency and quality refer to neo-utilitarianistic outlooks (in both philosophical and economic terms) of the distribution of the “education” asset (Benadusi, 2006), the concept of equity is often placed next to, and sometimes superimposed on, that of equality, although it is now necessary to differentiate between the two, considering equity as a development of equality. In relation to this, Benadusi (2006) states: “[...] with the term equity the intention is not that of casting aside, but rather of problemising and relativising the concept of equality, which in the past has often been articulated in a non-problematic manner [...]” (p.22).

The debate on the comparison between equity and equality had already been highlighted earlier by Sen (1982), who, in reference to the concept of equality, asked the question: “Equality yes, but of what?”, setting the problem of having to understand where the concept of equality finishes and where that of “fair” inequality begins. In other words, in the past and also today, it has been asked if quality must be “of outcomes” or “of treatment”, or if equity corresponds to a concept of “fair equality in the distribution of the final asset, which is combined with a fair inequality in the distribution of capital goods” (Benadusi, 2006, p. 23).

The issue of equality is also not new in research on schools: starting from the theory of cultural capital proposed by Bourdieu and colleagues ((Bourdieu & Passeron 1964; 1970; Bourdieu 1966; 1979a; 1979b; 1989), which according to Barone (2005) is “[...] the most well-known and widely accepted sociological explanation of the primary effects” (p. 173), various authors have focused on the problem. Barone himself (2005) cites a number of authors who have moved toward studying the relationship between social origin and the allocation of academic qualifications (Erikson & Jonsson 1996; Farkas 1996; Goldthorpe 2000), and others have put scholastic success in relation to social origin (Boudon 1979; Gambetta 1987; Schizzerotto 1997; Gasperoni 2002).

However, what emerges from the most recent studies referred to below is that the concept of “equity” must include, and at the same time transcend, that of equality, taking up position at a level that is more abstract and of broader conceptualisation. Understood in this way, the concept of equity also includes that of social justice, and frees itself from being limited to the practices of “equality”, which, theoretically, are not necessarily “fair”. While the principle of “equality”, promoting the same treatment for all, “would guarantee the continuation of initial inequalities associated with different starting points” (Maitzegui-Onate & Santibanez-Gruber, 2008, p.375), the term “equity” acknowledges the existence of unequal treatment in education processes, in order to “make equal” groups from disadvantaged starting points. At the political-institutional level there is a coherent stance regarding this trend: for example, in the work conducted by the European Gerese project (*Gruppo Europeo di Ricerca sull’Equità dei Sistemi Educativi* – European Research Group on Equity in Education Systems), the initial prerequisite was specifically to broaden the perspective of a concept restricted to equality, to a more extended concept of equity, based on the principle that equity “[...] includes certain types of equality, but distinguishes between fair and unfair equalities and inequalities, also taking into consideration other important criteria, including those of liberty and responsibility” (Bottani & Benadusi, 2006, p.11).

In the Gerese research group design, the equity indicators refer to at least three dimensions: inter-individual inequalities, inter-category inequalities and the portion of pupils below the minimum threshold (Benadusi, Fornari & Giancola, 2010).

A more complex view of the issue is therefore proposed, one that is not limited simply to the concept of “equality”, but which extends beyond this, also incorporating the concepts of efficiency and quality, irrespective of what are known as the external factors of inequality (socio-economic and territorial origin). In this sense, the fundamental idea is that education is a basic right, and that the fair distribution of “educational assets” must be safeguarded; if equity is not present in the educational system, people could be deprived of numerous opportunities for choice, therefore failing to achieve their full potential (Maitzegui-Onate & Santibanez-Gruber, 2008).

Benadusi effectively summarises the possible interpretations of equity into six different ideas: pure meritocracy, equal treatment, inter-individual equality, minimum threshold, equality between social groups (or of opportunities) and advantages for the disadvantaged (2006).

In an article on access to education in multicultural societies, other authors (Maitzegui-Onate & Santibanez-Gruber, 2008) propose considering the different conceptions of equity that have been formulated recently in the debate on the school. These include:

- opportunity – or legally recognised rights;
- access – to school;
- treatment – or educational models and measures;
- results – or opportunity for success.

The paper entitled “Equity in education. Thematic review”, which reports the study of the Swedish case regarding the application of the principle of equity in the scholastic system, proposes a view of the issue that resembles the one proposed previously in the literature (Tomlinson, 2001). The outlooks referred to are coherent with the classifications proposed elsewhere:

1. Equity as “equal opportunities for all”
2. Equity as “equal treatment for all”
3. Equity as “equal results for all”.

The interesting aspect of this contribution is that it proposes a pragmatic view of the concept of equity: in fact, it appears that in the Swedish system these three outlooks do not originate from a paradigm choice, and that they are not mutually exclusive, but instead appear to express the numerous strategies that the scholastic system can decide to implement in the pursuit of a general principle of fairness and equality.

The three concepts of equity are therefore translated into three strategies, which are implemented simultaneously in order to pursue one single objective, and they are not conceptually contradictory. These strategies entail a series of practices that, at the local level, are implemented both inside and outside the scholastic system. The aim is always compensatory in nature: once the most significant problems of the local/national situation have been identified, appropriate countermeasures are sought.

The equal opportunity strategy refers to the idea that opportunities in education depend on a multitude of factors associated with the backgrounds of the pupils (material resources, well-being, parental support, health, cultural background), so the compensatory strategies must also differ. The Swedish situation cites examples of the pre-scholastic period being integrated into the primary educational system by means of policies that are not of a compulsory nature but that provide support material for difficult cases. Pre-scholastic education involves issues such as socialisation, language learning and integration when these dimensions are deficient. Similarly, the policy of integration of other services (not closely linked to the scholastic sector) in an educational outlook fulfils this same requirement.

Greater integration between welfare policies and those associated with the school and education is also supported by some other authors (Connell, 1993), who note that there is a traditional separation between the legal and social welfare sectors on the one hand and education issues on the other, while a more coordinated approach would make it possible to combine resources and objectives more efficiently.

The strategy of equality of treatment responds to the principle that it is necessary to avoid all possible forms of discrimination, in the education sector, that are harmful to people, particularly with reference to the mechanisms of discrimination that are deeply rooted or implicit in the system. For example, one possible method consists of regulating the exercise of rights more strictly, particularly the right to education; alternatively, strengthening communications and relations with the community, particularly with the families of pupils, may open the door to improved reciprocal understanding and greater social integration. Insisting that teachers develop specific expertise in terms of discrimination and integration is a strong indication of an anti-discrimination strategy promoted at the institutional level.

The strategy of equality of results is directed toward the objective rather than toward the process, which enters into play when the preventive and compensatory measures implemented in order to guarantee equal opportunities and equal treatment are not sufficient to guarantee equal results for all. In this case, the principle of positive discrimination is applied, involving the possibility of preferential treatment for minority or disadvantage groups. The policies and practices implemented with this view often entail powers of discretion delegated to the teaching staff, or, more generally, the promotion of differentiation practices when teaching the various subjects.

Reflecting on how equity in education has developed in the policies and programmes of OECD Countries, Marginson (2011) notes the coexistence of different, and sometimes contradictory, strategies and objectives underlying national and international policies.

From a conceptual aspect, there are two possible strategies: try to increase the participation – in absolute terms – of those from socio-economic groups that until now have been under-represented in the scholastic system, or focus on the proportional distribution, in the levels, of students from different social groups; it is not always possible to pursue and reach both objectives simultaneously, and they, in turn, mask different theories and conceptions of theories.

In relation to this the author utilises the two theories of justice put forward by Sen in “The idea of justice” (2009). The first theory refers to the concept of *hypothetical social contract*, the reference authors of which are Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Emmanuel Kant, as well as John Rawls. This theory proposes an approach to justice that Sen defines as “transcendent institutionalism” (p.5, cited in Marginson, 2011), which is utopian in nature. The second tradition of justice, according to Sen, is that proposed by Adam Smith, the Marquis de Condorcet, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx, which Sen defines as “realisation-focused comparison” (pp. 6-7, cited in Marginson, 2011) and which he views as realistic rather than utopian.

However, Marginson says that “whichever approach to equity is preferred, the ultimate rationale of any strategy for the enhancement of social equity, in higher education and other sectors, is its potential to advance human freedoms. Freedom is the regulative value in this discussion” (2011, p. 28). Unterhalter (2009) is of the same opinion, giving an analysis of the concept of equity based on the historical-linguistic evolution of the meaning assumed by the term “equity” in English, referring to an idea of equity “from below” (p. 417), understood as “[...] a way of thinking about equity that is associated with a belief about people’s access to powerful knowledge [...] the importance of everyday relations of respecting each other, whatever our differences”. The author places this specific idea of equity alongside the idea, referred to above, that it is closely related to the concept of liberty: “Equity from below seems to align with the emphasis in the capability approach on agency and process freedom and in Sen’s interest in deliberative democracy” (p. 417).

Other authors (Alegre & Ferrer, 2010) relate the issues of social and educational equity, viewing it from the opposite aspect, and therefore asking if, and to what extent, the organisation of scholastic systems can affect social segregation, since this directly influences the learning opportunities of students. The factors involved in scholastic organisation are cited as including institutional differentiation, the presence of private schools in the local area (Dronkers & Robert, 2008, cited in Alegre & Ferrer, 2010), the level of diversification of the scholastic network (Gammarnikow & Green, 2003) the regulatory system in which parents make their choices, and selection procedures in general (West, 2006).

The documents published by the international organisations that are mainly involved in social welfare and education issues (OECD and UNESCO) discuss the issue of equity by turning to a conception of the problem that is coherent with the considerations made above:

1. equity in learning opportunities and in results (“PISA 2009 results: overcoming social background”, 2010; “Equity and quality in education: supporting disadvantaged students and schools”, 2012);
2. equity in compensatory measures for resources: study support (“Education at a glance”, 2011);
3. equity in the access to education: participation in primary, secondary and tertiary education (“Education at a glance”, 2011);

4. equity as inclusion (“Equity and inclusion in education”, 2010).

In a publication commissioned by OECD for a review of the issue of equity in education, the author (Levin, 2003) highlights some aspects of the status of policies for equity in education; briefly:

- the focus is not on the results that are desired in terms of equity, but on the level of tolerable “inequity” for each nation or institution;
- equity is measured along two axes/dimensions: a) the extent to which the education provided is sufficient and adequate; b) the extent to which, in addition to participation, the educational systems guarantee success for all, including minority groups;
- from a historical aspect, there have been two main approaches to equity policies: the first, focused on equality of opportunities and therefore on the issue of access to education; the second, focused on equity of results. Although both approaches have directed education policies, in recent years there has been a gradual leaning toward the approach aiming at equity of results.

In the paper written by Sherman and Poirier for UNESCO in 2007, although the authors consider the existence of different theoretical frameworks for the study of equity (for example, citing the definition of the European Commission, the proposal made by Demeuse, Crahay and Monseur (2001) and the various studies published in the United States and in other Countries), they choose to adopt the view proposed at the beginning of the 80s by Berne and Stiefel, which distinguishes between:

- a) horizontal equity: equality of treatment for those who start from the same point;
- b) vertical equity: educational differentiation to bring everyone to the same level;
- c) equal educational opportunity (*EEO*): compensatory measures regarding the lack of resources or the existence of disadvantageous situations that prevent the possibility of the same results being achieved.

Based on a reinterpretation of the most recent institutional policies for the equity of the scholastic system (for example, UNESCO, Institute for Statistics, 2007), Maitzegui-Onate & Santibanez-Gruber (2008), note the existence of these same three principles of equity, namely:

- a) horizontal equity: equality of treatment for those who start from the same point;
- b) vertical equity: the series of compensatory measures directed toward minority groups or toward groups at risk of disadvantage (such as, for example, women, ethnic minorities or the less affluent social classes);
- c) equal education opportunity: the series of initiatives designed to ensure that everyone has the same opportunities for success, starting from different conditions and resources.

Conclusions

This paper highlights how the issue of equity has effectively become significant in the debate on educational systems.

The conviction that the concept of equality must replace that of equity has become increasingly consolidated over time, at both the institutional and at the academic levels, and also the belief that educational systems must adopt an overall and global view of the problems with which they are faced.

The proposal of a multidimensional view of the concept is undoubtedly the one that is more accepted and more easily adaptable to a dual requirement: on the one hand, the political-institutional need to translate, into policies, practices and praxis, a basic principle of modern societies – the principle of justice; on the other hand, the theoretical-academic need to provide a clear, and at the same time inclusive, interpretative key of the potential meanings that the principle may assume.

Various proposals are put forward here, but the one that seems most effective in terms of translating the principle into concept, and then the concept into praxis, is that focussing on the pragmatic dimension of equity in the school, since it offers the possibility of including a view anchored to a basic principle but, at the same time, adapted to the requirements and the constraints of the school, the community and the social context.

This paper does not pretend to offer a full and exhaustive analysis of the current debate on the concept of equity. One of its limits is that of not having given space to the body of work and research, at both the institutional and academic levels, dedicated to translating the concept into indicators for the measurement of equity, or to the implementation of these into real local school situations. However, it is felt that an in-depth study of such applicative dimensions might be marginal to the main scope of this study, which is to understand and discuss the meaning of the concept of equity, in theory and in practice.

The research and studies cited here frequently reach the same conclusion: equity cannot be debated without interrogating ourselves about the nature of the subject being discussed; i.e.: the diffusion of knowledge, and of the elements typifying the system of knowledge – i.e. school and teaching. As Bottani points out “If there were no direct ties between scholastic systems, the acquisition of knowledge, the development of understanding and the diffusion of information, the issue of educational equity would probably be less burning than it has become. Equity in the distribution of and access to information has become a crucial prize at stake for the public education service” (Bottani & Benadusi, 2006, p. 172).

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