Childhood, School and Social Times: the case of Early School Enterers in Italy*

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Summary. *In the application of the Italian Law 30/2003, since s.y. 2003/04, parents can opt to enroll their children in the first year of nursery and primary school in accordance with more flexible age requirements, accepting children whose third/sixth birthday falls on or before April the 30th of the given year (previously, the cut-off date was 31st December . In addition to this reform, since 2006 nursery schools have introduced so-called "spring classes" for children aged two. All these innovations augment the heterogeneity within the classroom, along with an increase in parental choice and freedom. Hence, if the number of early enterers is to increase, a new relationship between childhood, school, and social times will inevitably take place. With the intermediation of parental choice, traditional time-markers are losing their importance, and the children's development process will be less standardized than in the past. The essay offers a picture of the "de-standardization" of schooling in Italy as it stands today, by assuming it to be the end result of a long-term transition (from a centralistic vision to a more autonomist conception), which has provoked a rupture in the principle of uniformity as applied to the educational system, and it still fosters a more personalized and privatized view of children's education. The main effects of early school entrance on Italian schools are outlined (in terms of enrollment rates at a regional level using data from the Miur – Ministry of Education) and used to analyze how different stakeholders are carrying out the reform: the positions of those in favour of (parents and principals) are compared to the positions of those against the reform (teachers and education specialists) with the help of qualitative data (also by Miur). Going beyond the opposition between contrasting social interests, it is worth questioning which sort of cultural change is likely to occur if children can be considered ready to go to school independently of age; and who has the task/right to decide on their school readiness and to assess the consequences of an early school experience. In conclusion, the essay aims to sketch a child-centered point of view, over and beyond the defensiveness of adults' fears and projections.*

Foreword

The Italian school system is undergoing a significant transition as a result of the Law Decree n.59/2004 which, with the aim of regulating the Law for the reform of primary and pre-primary education (Law n.30/2003), allows for "children whose 3rd/6th birthday falls on or before the 30th April of a given school year" [1] to be enrolled in the first year of nursery school (art. 2) and in the first year of primary school (art. 6, comma 2). This extends by 4 months the age range represented in the classrooms, compared to the previous law which only allowed entry to younger children born on or before December 31st of a given school year. On the one hand, it means an increase in heterogeneity within the learning group (on the basis of a "new" category, that of age); on the other hand, it implies a reinforcement of the discretional sphere of families, who are now entitled with the right to enrol their children as *early school enterers*. The law thus introduces a principle of parental freedom in the Italian school system.

It was clear to the legislator that this would be a great change: it is not merely a minor reform that could create organizational problems for school registries and classroom formation, nor a post-hoc formalization of a well-know – if not so widespread – practice among upper class families, but rather represents a new way of conceptualizing the *relationship between school and childhood*, unburdened by those socio-temporal markers that previously standardized the growth process and oriented choices. Previously parents only had to choose "where" to enrol their children. With the new legislation they will also have to choose "when" it is best to do so. The new norm, in fact, is to be introduced "gradually" (articles 12-13) and in the first year of probation (s.y. 2004/5) schools would only accept children born on or before February 28th (limiting the age difference to a maximum of 2 months). This transition was adopted in light of the possibility that an evaluation of the organizational and educational effects of early school entrance would take place; which, however, was never implemented in a systematic and rigorous fashion, as is often the case in a school system so often subject to reformatory decrees and innovatory sprees rather than rational transitions and constructive *ex post* reflections (Ferratini, 2008). We could say that, almost a decade later, the implementation of early school entrance has *de facto* taken place and

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[1] All children whose 6th birthday falls on or before 31st August of a given school year, on the other hand, are subjected to mandatory enrolment in primary school.

this merits further attention, also with reference to the sociological categories I will now turn to.

I will consider the introduction of early school entrance as the result of a process of fragmentation of school uniformity that has deep roots and which has advanced with greater impetus in the last 15 years via a "politics of autonomy". In sociology this is interpreted by some as the decline of the "institutional programme" of centralized systems (Dubet, 2004) – thus as an indicator of de-institutionalization (Colombo, 2006) – by others as the fall of the statist myth of "School as One" and the affirmation of the principle of privatization in education (Glenn, 2004). This rupture has a lot to do with the frictions which often develop, on the local level, between school bureaucracies and the issues which are part of the socio-cultural heritage of every institute; that is to say, with the delicate relationship between *schools and local community* (Colombo, 2001), which often emerges in everyday praxis in the form of tension-conflict or alliance-cooperation between *teachers and parents*. After a brief socio-historical review, I will try to offer a picture of the current entity of the phenomenon and its declinations in the Italian school system, in order to understand how *stakeholders* operate in this scenario: parents, teachers and school managers, each with implicit theories and interests, with specific principles to defend, who clearly take on different points of view on the use of this institution. However, over and beyond the politics of drawing schools closer to the needs of the users (for those who are favourable to early school entry) or of fear that the quality of teaching or the search for common learning standards will be dispersed (for those who are against), one ought to ask what are the implications of recognizing that children, whatever their biological age, are mature enough to face entry into the school system. Who is burdened with this responsibility? How can we evaluate the consequences this decision may have on the children and on their condition? I will thus try and delineate a child's point of view on early school entry, as compared to standard entry, and try to understand if early school entry can be considered as the rise of a new phenomenon, namely the development of a child-centred culture; or, on the other hand, if it is to be considered as an indicator of a new social demand on children.

Time Control and School Autonomy: Historical Roots and The Scenario of a De-Standardization

In order to understand the need to standardize the age of school entry, we need to look to the past. As M. Archer argues, European school systems are the result of historical evolutions ("structural evolutions"), which brought emerging power groups and new political élites, during the XIXth and the XXth century, to refute the educational control previously exercised by the clergy and the aristocracy, in favour of an organic structure for the scholarization of the masses. The characteristics ("emergent properties") of some of the modern systems are (Archer, 1979, It. transl. 1997: 339): unification (central administration), systematization (eg., national exams), differentiation (multiple services), specialization (curricula graduated by competence level). Nationalization has required a massive effort towards the standardization of education: public schools at all levels developed in order to guarantee the greatest correspondence between the needs of the State and that of society, with the intent of producing the "universality of collective life", as J. Meyer called it. That is to say, a civil order common to all social strata, who are thus subjected to "new channels of control and manipulation" (Meyer, 1977).

Organizational uniformity and equality of treatment are thus the joint principles that, in Italy, characterize the reform of elementary school since the Napoleonic structure (cf. Monauni, 1812), the *Imperial Regio* School Code during the Reign of Lombardy and Venetia (1827), and finally the Casati Law (1859), considered the prime instrument in the new State's determination to "make the Italian people". For a long time the nationalization of the education system continued to focus primarily on the later stages of schooling (eg., the Gentile Reform (1923) which disciplined the education of young people putting accent on lyceums) rather than on the earlier stages. Many organizational aspects of elementary schools (from school calendars to class training and multiple classes to teacher salaries), for instance, were left to the local authorities' management. Only with the Royal Decree of 1st July 1933 did all schools pass under State control and organization and there was a turn towards a real standardization of the educational system. It is useful to remember the reason for this: "across the whole nation the condition of elementary schools was rundown and degraded and for the first time people began pressing charges, especially against the condition of schools in the South (…), where there weren't always buildings adequate to host a school, so choices fell on what was available; teachers were underpaid or, in the worst situations, not paid at all. In this condition of neglect the solution adopted was radical and thoroughly challenged: entrusting all the organization of local schools outside major cities to the State" (Ragazzini, 1997: 88).

The standardization of education thus took place not only in order to respond to the mandates of "techno-functionalism" (Collins, 1997: 199ss) – i.e., the need to obtain, on a vast scale, a qualified work force with basic alphabetization skills and expected levels of specialization according to the rules of credentialism (Collins, 1979) – but also to eliminate those inequalities that characterized the destinies of entire segments of the population. Later, the same objective led to the great reforms for mass scholarization of the 60s and 70s (universal access to middle school, five-year cycle for all high schools, liberalized access to University, participating committees for school management, etc.).

The fact that all children enter very similar schools at the same time, therefore, ensures a formal equity of treatment and non discriminatory school-time; but, especially, it implies the accountability of the school service (and, consequently, of the State as the provider of the service) towards quality and equity. This is true even if the evaluation of the egalitarian effects of this treatment will take place only later, when numerous other variables will act as an obstacle to the equality of results. Many actions will go in this direction: free school services, ministerial programmes, compulsory education, the length of the school year, free concessions on school textbooks (only in elementary schools). Plus the norm on age requirements: it's the State who establishes the minimum age for access to a given educational cycle and to middle and high school exams.

Many of these norms, however, have recently seen quite radical changes. This may represent a tangible sign that those principles, of which the norms were the indicators of, either: a) are being pursued in an alternative fashion or, b) have been corrected in light of the social and cultural change which is taking place and which has given way to more or less explicit critiques on the non-intentional consequences of a uniform system – primarily the lack of sensitivity towards cultural differences and the demands of the family (Glenn, 2011). De-standardization also concerns many areas of the organizational life of the schools. Firstly, that of contents, with the introduction of ministerial programmes with national indications for personalized curricula (following reform Law n. 20/2003), the introduction of the POF (acronym for Piano dell'Offerta Formativa which roughly translates as Educational Offer Plan), the liberalization of quotas up to 20% of the school year time dedicated to the so-called "local curricula" (Law n. 59/1997). In terms of the mandatory length of educational routes, various normative elements have also been introduced between 2003 and 2007 in order to define the new formula ―for "duty/responsibility" in education, ratified with the 2007 Budget Law for

the next 10 years, but with varying degrees of respect for the principles of discontinuity and personalization. Finally, we can consider the establishment of full-time elementary school (Law 820/1971) and extended time in middle school (Law 270/1982 and further rulings) as *de-standardizing rulings*, which have *de facto* introduced the principle of electives in some educational activities, further reinforcing families' freedom of choice. This spirit is fully maintained in the recent Decree of the Ministry of Education n. 254/2012 (*Ruling on national indications for the curricula of primary and nursery schools*).

The loosening of the school (direct or indirect) temporal control on individuals in education sanctions a U-turn with respect to the *ideology of "one school for all"*, reinforcing the actions of decentralization and de-standardization initiated with the Law on School Autonomy and, partially, also by the Law n.62/2000 on the Comprehensive System. It is not only the drive of an élite (parental associations, parents of students in non-state schools, independent unions, etc.) which is demanding more flexibility in the public educational system. The most diverse social classes and especially new cultural groups (i.e., first and second generation immigrants, the children of multicultural families, parents of children with special needs) are becoming the spokespeople for greater pluralism of/in school actions, starting from a call into question of the pedagogical uniformity exercised through norms of exclusion (Colombo, 2013a). Indeed, if independent schools are better equipped than state schools in the creation of made-to-measure educational routes and curricula, this implies a significant flag in public schools' ability to represent those specific interests, with a decline in its ability to generate "prevalent definitions of citizenship" (Meyer, 1977). The defense of real (not just bureaucratical-organizational) school freedom and of the value of pluralism thus requires a non-superficial interest in early school enterers (but also in those who have seen setbacks and who took advantage of the new "flexible" norms upon entry), as indicators of a change in the educational demand facing all schools, state funded or otherwise.

Early School Entry in Italy: Data and Trends

On the basis of the norms on which it is founded, early school entry was fully enforced in 2009/10, with Dpr n. 89/2009. In quantitative terms the

phenomenon is still limited, at least in relation to other countries – such as the US – where de-standardisation of school entry times is intrinsically related to the decentralization of the school system[2]. Different countries in Europe also have an early school entry policy, defined in various ways: from "preparatory years" to "pre-primary education" programmes in nursery and kindergartens (which can be optional like in Belgium or Denmark or mandatory as in Greece), with school entry between the ages of 5 and 7 (Eurydice, Ansas, Miur, 2012). In Holland, for example, mandatory primary school begins at age 5 and there is the opportunity (taken up by 99% of families) of anticipating to age 4.

In Italy, the most recent census of early/late students among different school stages refers to the school year 2009/10 (Miur, Sistan, 2011), the baseline year of the reform. The Ministry of Education (henceforth known as Miur, the Italian acronym,) offers qualitative data on schools, gathered using a sampling approach during two attempts at monitoring the application of the National Indications for curricula (2004 and 2011). Using these two sources I will try to open the "black box" of schools and of those classes and sections with early school enterers.

In 2009/10 early school entry to primary school was chosen for 8.6% of children, whereas for 2,4% the choice was for late enrollment. Pre-school early entry concerned 14.8% of 2 year olds that took part in the "spring sections"[3] or were enrolled in the first year of nursery school before turning 3. These are considerable numbers, given also that they were registered only a few years after the application of the norm on early school entry, which alter our idea of "regular" entry. Indeed, the rate of *regularity*, today is calculated on a student's education career as a whole (2-20 years and beyond), and concerns only 8 out of 10 students. In 2009/10 "regular" students were estimated to be 79.3%, whereas the remaining 20.7% ("non-regular" students) can be split into early (6.4%) and late (14,3%) school enterers. School de-standardization, therefore, is on the increase and we can see "regular and non-regular routes" represented graphically in figure. 1.

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[2] In the USA every State has the possibility of establishing the age of entry in primary school independently, with a range that goes from age 5 – Wisconsin and Maryland – to age 8 – Washington and Pennsylvania.

[3] The "spring sections" are groups of children aged 24-36 months, admitted to attend the infant school only in those schools by the Law 296/2006 (art. 1 c. 634) since s.y. 2007/08. These classrooms can be jointed to infant services or infant schools , both managed by the state, the council or independent services (in agreement with the Council).

Let us also note that the early entry trend decreases with progression in education and what increases, conversely, is late entry, reducing the overall regularity of educational careers. With relation to the age of students and not of classes (Miur, Sistan, 2011:57), what emerges is that early school enterers (which are approximately 9% of each class between the ages of 5 and 9) diminish as age increases, with a significant quantitative "jump" between ages 11 and 12, when they go from 7.5% to 4.2% of their age class. On the contrary, late enterers have a distribution which grows with age: at age 7 they represent 2.1% of their peers, and go on to become 29.3% of their age class at 18 (almost 1 in 3).

What emerges from the graph is also that, whereas some early school enterers end up "evening up" with their peers at the end of middle school (as a result of difficulties during their school career where they "lost" the advantage earned with early entry), another important group of early enterers seems to show continuity across the temporal axis of secondary school. Indeed, the rate of early entry rises slightly from 2.9% in the first year of secondary school to 4.1% in the fifth and final year, as a result of the recalibration between regular and irregular students due to early exits and repeat grades (during upper secondary school the rate of non-admission is 13.7%[4] and the risk of drop-out is estimated at 1.24%[5]). The incidence of the breakdown and re-composition of school times across (mandatory and non-mandatory) educational attendance thus appears to be significant enough to put into question the concept of a "standard" school career.

The choice for early enrollment following the 2003 reform encompasses a fair number of children in the 2-3 and in the 5-6 age ranges. The data from the Miur confirms that it has had a direct effect on *the rise of enrollment in primary and nursery state schools*, compared to previous years. For government-run nursery schools the rise in enrollments in 2009/10, compared to the previous year, went from 2.8% to 5% of children aged 2, that is to say from 57.6% to 59.1% of enrolments overall. This shows a considerable increase of State presence in a strategic sector of lower education, which confirms that the choice of non-state schools is

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[4] This data refers to the academic year 2010/11. Cf. Istat, 2012:178.
[5] This data refers to the academic year 2011/12. Cf. Miur – Urp 2013: 15.

often determined by the absence of equivalent and available opportunities for users who, when faced with an offer which is both more extensive (in terms of age range) and more widespread (in terms of territorial distribution) appreciate state-based educational services. Moreover, in terms of lowering birth rates, nursery schools registered a sharp rise of registration from 2008/09 to the following year (1.8%), also in the South of Italy (1.6%), an area which has traditionally always expressed a lower demand for preschool services and which, unfortunately, has always lagged behind in terms of place coverage for nurseries and kindergartens, especially government-run (Istat, 2011). The introduction of "spring sections" in the South represents a real response to the request of many families, and especially of women, for a high-quality educational alternative for children of pre-school age. Since 2007/8 there has been a rise – nationwide - in the establishment of all those offers that anticipate school entry for children.

In primary school enrollments also rose (0.1%) as a result of early school entry (which subtracts a small percentage of children from nursery school but without causing registration deficits for the aforementioned reasons). Among these, those enrolled in the first grade are the group that determines a rise in all the macro territorial areas (1%), with positive variations both in state and non-state schools, which indicates that the opportunity for early entry is seized transversally across different categories of users. Early school enterers are 48,600 in total (88% are enrolled in state schools), with variable incidence rates according to *school type*: they are 8.1% of students registered in state schools and 15.3% of those in independent schools, where the tradition of early admission was already consolidated. There is a sharp *difference between regions*: in the North (where early entry is much less popular) and in the Centre the incidence rate is 3.5% and 6.5%, respectively, compared to 14.6% in the Islands and the South. Another important variable is *student citizenship*: among those who enrol in compulsory education one year in advance there are a significant number of students with non-Italian citizenship: in 2011/12 foreign-national early enterers were 2800 in total (145 more than the previous year), with a constant growth of 0.1% per year. In first grade early school enterers represent 4.8% of all enrollments among foreign nationals. In subsequent classes there is a downward trend along the axis of educational careers (in line with the general trend) with is a significant rise in *late entry* for this subgroup, singled out by the Miur because of the proportions of this phenomena during secondary schooling (at age 12, 40% of foreigners are lagging behind; at 18 the proportion rises to 77.4%, cf.

Miur, 2012a: 21) confirming a structural inequality which affects these students in particular (Miur – Fondazione Ismu, 2013: 77).

Therefore, we must recognize that "open" timescales, both due to personal choices and to difficulties along the way, can modulate the relationship between family, child and school environment across different and distinctive lines, more or less bound to social imperatives and preordained values scales. It thus becomes fundamental to understand how these transitions are predisposed, received and experienced by children, by families and by school staff.

Early School Entry in Italy: Impacts of the Reform

The results of the first year of the Miur Resource Project offer the first account of the impact of early school entry in primary schools that included children that anticipated school enrolment in 2003/4[6].

Regional reports show how early school entry trials brought an *implicit demand which had previously been neglected* to the attention of teachers and school managers. The immediate response was positive: in many regions school representatives declared they were "already prepared" for the new uptake, without significant territorial distinctions; the usual practices of information transfer from one school to the next were used, "simulations" of classroom life (early socialization) with children aged 4 and 5 were adopted; the first classes were formed according to the principle of "equi-heterogeneity" (the same quota of diversity on all classrooms) according to birth quadrimesters; one-to-one meetings with parents were intensified, etc. Few schools, however, seized this occasion as an opportunity to implement organizational and educational renewal strategies.

Nonetheless, teachers expressed the most worries for the rise in heterogeneity in the classroom and the consequent class management difficulties this would entail. In Lombardy, for example, where for years many schools have been practicing in the first grade the same "flexible" educational organization used in kindergarten, the fear that parental pressure may lurk behind early school entry remains, and with it the request to give more weight to the educational advice and counselling offered by

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[6] 506 schools, distributed across the 18 Italian regions with ordinary statute, participated in the study.

preschool teachers. Moreover, teachers fear that once they've had a chance to observe children's reactions to early school entry they will be in charge of "filtering" those situations deemed to be more "at risk" and of advising parents to change their minds. On the other hand, however, there is a recognition of the intrinsic value of the new norm, which not only ensures teachers' greater effort towards child-centred learning but also paves the way for a *"negotiatory" conception of the relationship between schools and families*, where the extension of freedom on the parents' part corresponds to greater responsibility and more active participation on their behalf (Bonanno, 2003: 552).

From Liguria a set of significant context-based critical elements emerged: the economic motivation at the basis of the choice for early entry for some families (preschool costs are indeed less sustainable than those for primary school, a relevant issue for immigrant parents, for example) preludes the creation of a *"weak" choice*. Other issues come from parents' ambivalent attitudes: sometimes narcissistic (seeing the positive projection of their desires in their child), other times ideological (a sort of child-centred or adult-centred fanaticism, depending on the case). On the educational side, there are ambiguities: if there are no clear criteria to separate children who are "ready" for primary schools and those who are not[7], the teachers' role is also delicate and risky. Moreover, there is a lack of common definitions for entry requirements: sensory-motor, psychomotor, linguistic, cognitive, social, etc. Some schools demonstrate the lack of a mature "organizational thought" on early school entry (Botta, 2003: 443) and end up adopting solutions that reveal their implicit *assimilative* assumption: that it is the child who must adapt to the new regime and not the other way around. Finally, there is an argument against the creation of overly homogeneous classrooms, composed only of 5 year olds: a "segregative" solution to the problems raised by diversity, that we can consider a regressive *anomaly* in the public educational system.

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[7] An interesting debate developed in the USA on the concept of "school readiness", which counterpoises the functionalist and the constructionist vision of the child who is ready for nursery or primary school: "The concept of school readiness typically refers to the child's attainment of a certain set of emotional, behavioural, and cognitive skills needed to learn, work, and function successfully in school. Unfortunately, this common philosophy of "ready for school" places an undue burden on children by expecting them to meet the expectations of school. A more constructive way to consider school readiness is to remove the expectations from the child and place those expectations onto the schools and the families. Young children have wide ranging needs and require support in preparing them for the high standards of learning they will face in elementary school" (Rafoth, 2003).

In Emilia Romagna the phenomena of early entry in primary school is less widespread, as a result of the high social consideration that preschool services have in this region. Early entry as an innovation introduced by the reform has not raised intense debates: teachers put an emphasis on the *exceedingly "subjective" motivations* that lead families to such a choice, from convenience to recourse to expert advice, and the overall idea that emerges is that parents are burdened with too many responsibilities. Parents, on the other hand, aren't able to say whether functional strategies to meet the needs of early enterers have been introduced in their children's school and many of them do not believe that schools "encourage" early entry. This indicates a sense of inadequacy of the teachers themselves (Bergonzoni, 2003: 228).

The report from Piedmont cautions that behind the choice of anticipation there are *"mistaken parental attributions"* towards the child: high expectations are accompanied by reputation-based objectives ("If everyone is sending their child to school a year earlier, why should my child be any different? I don't want others to judge him as immature"). Among early school enterers there are many cases where there is a large age divide between parents and child (older parents) and others where the child receives a lot of attention from adults (children with no siblings), which explain why certain children are able to learn to read and write alone and end up getting "bored" in preschool. In these cases, however, the gap with their peers is more psycho-social than cognitive in nature: the younger children manifested excessive tiredness, the need for more time between activities, difficulties in spontaneous relationships, constant demands for attention, to mention but a few; whereas no learning-based problems emerged (Reffieuna, 2003: 128).

In Friuli Venezia Giulia early entry has also not had widespread diffusion. Teachers do not agree on its effects: there are cases where there has been a positive integration of the younger child in his/her new environment, but also cases where there has been a "rejection". Teachers highlight a specific difficulty on the parents' part in recognizing any possible mistake regarding the choice of anticipated entry: they evaluate the impact on the child more in terms of social comparison with peers than in terms of single case appraisals. What is confirmed is the *exclusion of parents in the decision-making process*: neither preschools nor receiving primary schools have any activities aimed specifically at them and they are rarely contacted by a member of the school staff to discuss this choice. The relationship between school and families becomes more intense only after the enrollment, but with the risk of turning into an evaluation on the child's school readiness. Many, however, argue that the result of early entry

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depends mainly on "what is done before" school entry: for example, the preparation strategies adopted by children and parents, the regular monitoring of development, and the organization of the classroom in nursery school (Michelini, 2003).

In many regions of the Centre and the South the introduction of early entry took place without any formal or substantial changes, proof of the fact that anticipated entry is considered common practice. The opinions are polarized: parents are the most favourable and teachers the most sceptical. Once again we find a difficulty among primary school teachers in establishing if the single case is "suitable" for early entry. Cognitive aspects are easier to evaluate, whereas psychosocial prerequisites – and often sensory-motor ones – are more of a challenge, with the risk of attributing wrong diagnoses in terms of difficulties observed among younger children which, rather than structural in nature (like learning difficulties), are merely developmental. Moreover, there is a fear that all educational activities will have to be slowed down in order to support these children (Abruzzo). In Sardinia a slight distinction emerges among teachers' opinions: they are more favourable to early entry if the child has already been schooled, that is to say if there has been at least some attendance – albeit inconsistent – to nursery school; if this criteria is not met it is considered to be a "ruthless" choice (Pisano, 2003:230).

In Molise it is *parents* who express *doubt and scepticism* on early entry, on the basis of two main arguments (Iannacone, 2003:60): on the one hand, they fear that, faced with the rise in heterogeneity, teachers will end up splitting the class in two levels, made up of those who are going "forward" and of those that are "behind" compared with a hypothetical standard of profit. On the other hand, they express a preoccupation for their new responsibility as parents, and fear impacting negatively and precociously on their children's development. For this reason there is a significant number of parents who have adopted an intermediate solution: allowing 5 year olds to participate as "auditors" in the first grade and enabling them to take the admission exam for second grade only at the end of the first year.

The results from the subsequent Miur report (December 2011) on the application of the Rulings for the reorganization of the 1st cycle of education (Dpr 89/2009) enable both a quantitative and a qualitative test of the full implementation of the reform (Miur, 2012b). Approximately 8500 nursery schools (57.7% state run) and approximately 6000 primary schools (86.1% state run) took part in the study and filled in a "school questionnaire" (Fig. 2).

Primary schools accept anticipating students in higher percentages than nursery schools (the national figure is 91.8% for primary vs. 78.2% for nursery schools) and in both cases state schools seem to have better performances compared to private schools. This confirms the central role of the public sector in the offer of a pre-school service characterized by the less coercive, "relaxed forms" (Ragazzini, 1997:147), which had formerly been considered typical of the private sector. From this report, moreover, the territorial divide in terms of diffusion of early school entry appears more marked: for nursery schools it goes from the minimum registered in Emilia Romagna (49% of state school and 67% of private schools), Tuscany, Lombardy and Liguria, to the maximum registered in Basilicata (96.6% of state schools and 94% of private schools). For primary school it goes from the minimum registered in Sicily (84.2%), but also in Veneto, Calabria and Marche, to the maximum registered in Umbria and Basilicata (both at 97.6%). The state component, all in all, seems to weigh more, in terms of school cover for early entry, precisely in those macro areas (the South and Island) where traditionally early school entry was offered by non-public services. We can hypothesize that, as a result of the reform, there has been a *transition of users* from one type of service to the other, as well as from one educational level to the other: nursery schools – especially independent ones – have certainly been affected by the decrease in enrollments as a result of the early entry flow in primary school.

To the question of whether the school had predisposed a dedicated welcome project/service for early enterers, almost all participating schools answered affirmatively: 96.5% of nursery and 88.6% of primary schools had done so.

Finally, schools were asked to judge the presence of early school enterers on the basis of an attitude scale: do they see it as a critical element (-3) or as a resource (+3)? In Fig. 3 we can see the responses to this variable by territorial macro-areas.

We can see how the favourable opinions on early entry are a minority (only 16% consider anticipating children "a resource" with different degrees on intensity), whereas unfavourable opinions are much more frequent across the macro areas (54.5%). Once again we find that the greatest interest towards this opportunity can be found among schools in the Centre-South

or the Islands, compared to schools in the North. Overall, from the point of view of those working in schools the usefulness and efficacy of early entry remains controversial and many teachers and school managers continue to avoid encouraging it despite the fact that the reform has now been implemented.

The last national survey on learning (Invalsi, 2013) has further estimated the influence of early school entry on the performances of students. Early enterers who completed Italian and Mathematics tests in various school stages represent 1.3% of the total, with a greater incidence in the regions of the South and the Islands, across all school levels. Due to the small size of this subgroup the significance level of differences with other groups (regular and late enterers) is reduced. The results present a picture that is not readily interpretable: early students, on average, place themselves slightly behind regular students in terms of results, except on Italian tests in grade 6 (where early students outdo regular students by 5 points, with a good level of significance) and in grade 7 (where early students surpass regulars by 1 point, a non significant difference) (Invalsi, 2013:111). In grade 8 Italian tests the 7-point disadvantage is significant. In Maths tests the performances of early enterers remains behind that of regular students, with a negative difference ranging from 1 to 7 points, depending on age. The disadvantage which has statistical significance is -7 points in grade 2, which supports the hypothesis that between the ages of 6 and 7 there is a particular developmental jump in concrete operational reasoning which is at the basis of this particular discipline. The Invalsi study, moreover, indicates that early enterers' not completely negative performances appear to be due not to early school entry choice but to the socio-economic selection that seems to be at the basis of the educational achievements of this subgroup. Given that, on average, those who anticipate school entry tend to come from families of higher socio-economic status than regular students, it is likely that this class advantage could go and compensate any possible deficits in cognitive achievement (Invalsi, 2013:112).

Early Entry between Practices and Politics: Looking for the Child's Point of View

The gradual, albeit not homogenous, diffusion of early entry interrogates the main stakeholders of educational practices (parents and teachers) and of childhood policies (school managers, service coordinators and policy

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makers) and induces them to consider with greater attention the arguments it has generated.

Early entry might correspond to a new type of *gentle* (or *modular*) *transition of children* from a "school-free" infanthood (referring to the age of preschool) to a later stage subjected to the "organizational power of the teacher" (compulsory schooling). Thanks to early entrance, tailored educational forms and times are offered both inside and outside the family, where various significant figures could alternate on the basis of "negotiation" strategies in order to best support a child's growth and his/her social and cognitive development. Yet, from what emerged from the data analyzed, this appears quite rare; the reform took place despite the fact that educators are still acting –according to binary schemes derived from standardized education and schooling (before/after, inside/outside, public sphere/private sphere). We have seen how early entry highlighted a constant, albeit not dramatic, contrast in opinions between *defenders*, supporters of a *kid libber* approach, that stresses the idea of a competent, self-taught child, precocious in all areas of development because already immersed in global knowledge, on the one hand; and *sceptics*, closer to the positions of *child savers* who prioritise the right for a child to be protected from the risk of nervous overload, on the other. Between these two fronts there is an ample *neutral zone*, which encompasses quite a few supporters also among members of school staff (approximately 30% of those that completed the questionnaire), who probably underestimate the problem because they believe it to be statistically irrelevant.

If the arguments in favour of early entry appear based on an *achievement-centred* school, which no longer represents a standard route because the current school system cannot assure the linear career and easy school-work transition it once did, the arguments against early entry seem to ignore that children of the new millennium increasingly develop a "cognitive suitability" (Ausubel, 1968:75) independently of age and that learning, even in its first phases, is a "permanent" activity that does not depend on the degree of institutionalization. Quite on the contrary, schools can only perform better as a result of different learning needs, from *gifted children* to those with *special needs*, represented in the classroom (Eu Commission, 2007).

It is not the precociousness of children's cognitive development which is in question – increasingly recognized as more dynamic in relation to the varied environments, lifestyles, and multiple languages it is exposed

to (in the familial, urban and multimedial context)[8], albeit still conditioned by the risks of deprivation and poverty, particularly for some sectors (Belotti & Moretti, 2010) – rather, what is at stake is the *ability of the schools to mediate the external complexities* according to the most up-to-date institutional mandates[9]. Given the new National Indications, "Italian nursery and primary schools have learned to recognize and give value to widespread teachings that take place outside its walls, in the various contexts where children and young people grow and through *new media*, constantly evolving, to which they also participate in different and creative forms" (Belotti – Moretti 2010:21). If this were true the front of scepticism against the presence of early school enterers should not appear so conspicuous. Rather, the voluntary entry in school of younger children should rouse the plaudits of teachers towards families that anticipate the "de-privatization" of their children. This should represent a sign of the faith parents place in the work of a real "flesh and blood" community of public learning, which doesn't replace but rather integrates both the role of the family and that of the media, to which children are already over-exposed whether aged two or five. Instead of fearing the disorganization in the classroom that may be caused by children of different ages, teachers should appreciate the family's desire for *early socialization*.

Let us borrow an expression coined by R.K. Merton, "anticipated socialization", with which he meant to indicate the (adult) individual that, wishing to be part of a group he believed to be superior, begins to behave according to the norms and the values of that reference group (Merton, 1949), developing dynamic adaptation abilities and, at the same time, improving the "mobility" (internal-external opening) of the group itself. Schools, with the introduction of children of different ages, gave a clear sign of wanting to represent the best environment for young and very young children, who should be able to find in the teaching model an adequate response to the multiple needs determined by the unpredictable evolution and exposure to stimuli from "multiple intelligences" (Gardner, 1983). A global response, not just in terms of training, but that is at one and the same time moral, social and experiential.

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[8] In developmental psychology see the neo-cognitivist school and the concept of positive interdependence and authentic learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1987).

[9] Helping the child build *identity, independence, skills* and citizenship, in a balanced mix according to the level of education, is the current mandate of the school system, according to Miur, 2012c:29-30.

Perhaps both teachers and parents struggle to adopt a truly constructionist perspective on the educational task[10]. Perhaps their assumptions are based on the idea of a standardized school, without realizing to what extent this no longer coincides neither with factual reality nor with childhood needs. Opposite reasons seem to shape their attitudes towards early entry yet what emerges as a common theme is the fear of not being sufficiently able to control the children's development compared to the past. In the parents' case, they want to be able to anticipate school entry assuming that school time *should* regulate a child's day and better prepare him/her to *compete socially*; whereas the needs of the child (at age two like at age five) are focused around the construction of a positive relationship with others and with his/her environment, the differentiation of self and the development of independent thinking. In teachers' case, they ask families to *respect institutional times*, of which they feel they are the (sole) gatekeepers, and they do not appreciate the fact that the institution "incorporates" the free choice of users without asking for their binding opinion. At the same time they fail to recognize the need for a deep renovation in education practices, without which their professionalism and social reputation run the risk of jeopardy in future years, turning even more burdensome a job already weighed down by disproportionate expectations. Finally, they do not give due value to the resource early learners can represent.

Over and beyond enabling us to overcome stakeholders' clashing logic, assuming early entry as a new policy *for* childhood means bringing the child as a separate entity back to centre stage, as an active subject – albeit not yet an *agent* (able to defend his/her own interests) – in the developmental process. In practice, it means refining the observation of a child's mode of being in society, not only to establish if he/she is ready for school, but also whether school is ready for him/her. Using W. Corsaro (2005)'s guiding concept of "interpretative reproduction", for example, we can discover that among younger children there is a spontaneous fusion (or confusion) of levels of priority between play and study ("Once an early enterer raised his hand during Maths to ask: Teacher when is playtime? As if we were still in nursery school!"[11]). This could overturn school *timing* in favour of a greater complementarity between the two approaches, regaining

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[10] The reference here is the interactionist-communication model among Italian sociology of education (cf. Fele & Paoletti, 2003; Besozzi, 2006) and to constructivist epistemology (Kelly, 1955) with its educational applications in Italy (Varani & Carletti, 2005).

[11] Part of an interview conducted by Alice Borroni during an empirical study for her final year project (Borroni, 2013) in the primary state school in Lesa (Novara, Piedmont).

both interest and motivation. Or, noticing that early school enterers have above average adaptive resources ("Many early enterers have a good command of language, they have already started reading and writing and often this compensates for shorter attention spans or the need for more movement" [12]) could stimulate teachers to improvise new lesson schemes ("It happened a few times that I had to change topic or even discipline in order to obtain and maintain the attention of the anticipating child" [13]).

Overall, as I have attempted to do in this analysis, in order to adjust *flexible scholarization policy* in favour of children (and not in favour of adult's pre-conceived ideas) we need to deconstruct the justifications that preside over the formulation of judgments of children's school readiness, based on biographical – but also and especially social conformity – standards. We need to reconstruct a set of motivations that connect the child's developmental process with the family environment, and the latter with the idea of an "holistic" and non-sectorial school. Finally, we need to consider that the transition to de-standardization offers new occasions to understand the world of childhood and its enormous potential for interaction, communication, and community.

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[12] Cf. note 12.
[13] Cf. note 12.

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