

Freedom in Education: Private vs. Public?

A Few Considerations on the Italian Case

Luisa Ribolzi*

People raised in a community are given values and a way of life that they can reject or revise when they are older. . . It may mean that a child has an idea of what it means to live a life guided by deep-seated values. . . As a teenager and adult the person can look at other ways of life and compare them to his or her own. A child who is given many different options about how to live and often chooses differently, however, will not experience any way of life deeply enough to have a basis for comparison (Spinner-Halev, J., 2000, *Surviving Diversity: Religion and Democratic Citizenship*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 65, quoted in Glenn, C., *Schooling in Post-secular Europe*)

I would like to start from a general consideration. In my opinion, identifying freedom of education with the conflict between public and private is not only restrictive, but is actually a real error. In addition, the definition “public, or state school” is inaccurate: in contrast with “private school”, this term is used as an equivalent of “state-owned school”, or also “school in which there is no possibility of choice”, while the most correct orientation in educational research consists in considering “public, or state-owned” a school that supplies a public service in order to meet the educational demand of society, regardless of any ownership.

37

That being stated, I think it is important to underline that the models of choice are basically two. In Italy, these two models have been defined for a long time: “choice of the school” and “choice in the school”, and precede the distinction between public and private:

- Families can choose to send their children to a school, whether a public or State-school – if and when state-schools are not all alike - or a private one;
- Families cannot choose the school, but in the school assigned to them, basing for example on their residence, they can choose the class, or the teachers for their children¹.

The elements which allow freedom of choice are basically three: existence of differentiated schooling options, equal economic conditions, parents’ possibility to cooperate in the formulation of school programs by monitoring and checking their fulfilment. Obviously, freedom of choice is denied when families cannot choose either the school, or the class, or the teachers, and cannot even actively participate in the school government². In other words, freedom in education is not only the possibility to send children to a school chosen by the family, and not by the State or the municipality. This is the most important thing, of course. But freedom is also the possibility for a family to choose teachers in a given school, and the possibility to participate in the school, both in formulating a shared educational

* Professor of Sociology of Education at the University of Genoa.

1 There is a third possibility, the so-called *load shedding* (M.LIEBERMAN, *The Case for Voluntary Funding of Education*, Rebuilding America’s Schools Report n.2, The Heartland Institute, n° 37, May 1991) when the State is not the producer of education, and families “pay from their own income for the education of their children”. In Lieberman’s opinion, families have “more likely to insist on performance from their children and from their schools”. But in its pure form, it seems a provocation rather than a possibility. We may discuss whether education is a state function or not: market supporters think that a state school could neither reduce iniquities nor enhance the sharing of common values, which are the main issues of the common school.

2 In some cases, this kind of participation may be exerted “by proxy” when a school has been chosen. This situation is more frequent than is thought in the case of religious or denominational schools.

program and in assessing its results. Obviously, there is a severe limitation to freedom if school attendance is not free.

Concerning Italy, the uselessness of free choice has been supported for decades, since the centralist model aimed to obtain that all state schools were alike in terms of quality and provided education, even if it was clear that, in practice, things were quite different. As regards equal conditions, the non-funding of the acknowledged private schools, which are paid by families, or the extremely reduced funds they have available, represent for economically disadvantaged families a considerable restriction to their freedom of choice. On the contrary, somewhat ironically, families' participation, though in a theoretical form rather than a real one, is provided for in state schools, and is optional in private schools (at least for their becoming acknowledged).

To remain within the public schooling system, recognizing or introducing the possibility to choose among different state schools by escaping territorial constraints³ can be considered a real cultural leap, because it introduces two principles: families' legitimacy in choosing the educational model they consider more consistent with the values in which they believe, or more appropriate for the purposes they want to attain; and competitiveness among schools, which aims at improving the quality of schools and the students' competencies. Even in the absence of the private sector, a first form of educational market is introduced – a core issue in the debate of the 1990s – in which it is stated that, due to its characteristics of common good, education is never provided in a perfect market, but rather in a regulated or quasi-market⁴.

Therefore, the possibility to choose a school does not only protect a civic right, but also makes equity grow, since it improves students' learning opportunities

- directly, since a school that can be chosen is more likely to meet the educational demand of those who have chosen it;
- in a mediated way, since the possibility to choose among different options, rather than being obliged to enrol their children in a particular school (even if a good one), increases families' motivation to participate in it.

38

Research evidences tend to prove that where families' greater participation is reported, schools do not only improve from the point of view of learning, but also from the point of view of students', teachers' and families' satisfaction, because a virtuous circle is formed among choice, motivation, participation and quality. The chances that schools achieve these characteristics are greater when both families and teachers belong to the same functional community *à la Durkheim*, as in denominational, or religious, schools. If there is freedom of choice, there are greater possibilities that families' educational view may coincide with the view of the school. The possibility to create an educational style is added to freedom protection, as well as a teaching community could more likely make students' successful outcome, because the sharing of values and goals generates a real social capital⁵. Families' freedom of choice, as families can thus exert a natural right, has also the effect of improving, within in the teaching/learning process, especially non-cognitive results, such as public spirit, trust, and cooperation⁶. Freedom does not end as soon as a school is chosen. This

3 Concerning the negative consequences of the so called *catching areas* in places reporting a considerable housing segregation, French sociology has developed the concept of “spatial capital” as an element of social capital (S.Loudiyi, V. Angeon, S.Lardon, *Capital social et développement territorial. Quel impact spatial des relations sociales?* ESO/CNRS, Juillet 2008)

4 G.WALFORD (ed.), *School Choice and the Quasi-market*. Oxford Studies in Comparative Education, vol.6,n.1, Symposium Books, P.O. Box 65, Wallingford

5 e.g. COLEMAN J., HOFFER T., KILGORE S., *High School Achievement: Public, Catholic and Private Schools Compared*, Basic Books, New York, 1982; COLEMAN J., HOFFER T., *Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities*, Basic Books, New York 1987. Bryk enhanced the so called “Catholic school effect” of the schools with a strong and shared educational program (BRYK A.S., HOLLAND P.B., LEE V., *Catholic schools and the common good*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Ma, 1993).

6 See WOLF P. et al. “Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Report,” in <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20104018/pdf/20104018.pdf> (July 19, 2011); WITTE J. et al., “Student Attainment and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” March 2011, in http://www.uaedreform.org/SCDP/Milwaukee_Eval/Report_24.pdf

choice should be considered the starting point of a path in which, at a certain point, a student, becomes a conscious actor.

In Italy, though families' participation is considered essential in words, the freedom to choose a school is actually not considered a citizen's right, but rather a personal matter, due to a series of historical reasons. The centralistic model had the purpose of standardizing in public (state) schools citizens' education, since they originated from about ten different states, from the point of view of culture and language. Only through the recognition of school autonomy (Law 59/1997), which allowed schools to freely devise and formulate different programs, it was possible to include private schools in the national education system (Law 62/2000). Anyway, the bias towards private schools still remains strong⁷.

Concerning in particular parents' right to take care of their children's education also in "non-chosen" schools, their participation decreased to a small minority, depending both on ideological reasons (the prevalently Marxist orientation of the educational literature fostered a central control over education), and on the progressive reduction of families' participation in the formal aspects of the school. It has not been understood that talking about families' participation means going beyond the structural aspects, in a situation of reciprocity and cooperation, in which parents rationally act in relation with the others. As a consequence, the possibility families have to accomplish in a free and responsible way their educational task by guiding their children until the moment in which they are able to consciously choose on their own, is very limited in Italy: if a family chooses an acknowledged school, because of the economic conditioning reasons mentioned above⁸; if a family chooses (or is forced to choose...) a State school, because its ability to act is restrained, and students' assignment to a class is often made at random. The possibility itself (on paper, at least) to make a choice among different state schools is limited, since "good" schools are swamped with requests, and they barely have place for the students who live in the reference neighbourhood.

So, what can families do? Resuming Hirschmann's classic distinction between exit and voice⁹, they cannot go away, unless they have the necessary financial means at their disposal (and in this case, it seems hardly tenable, in my opinion, that it is a free choice). They could then try to have their voice heard, but in this case, they would be hampered by their being scarcely accustomed to cooperation. Family associationism is a recent phenomenon in Italy, and the ability to put a lobbying action into effect is still limited. However, I think that through this kind of solidarity it would be possible, among other things, to reconstruct some form of social trust, which reevaluates the possibility to act for the common good. Strengthening freedom and responsibility in the relations between families and school can also promote civil participation.

Finally, freedom of choice does not mean freedom to decide whether children are a "property" of their families, of the school, or of the State. It is important to protect the families' right to raise and educate their children within a system of values in which they believe, but it is not possible to tackle this matter as if it were a conflict of powers. Some people do not agree on the positive meaning of "inherited worldviews"¹⁰: they consider them conditioning, and they think the State has to fight them to help people independently growing. As a matter of fact, children "belong" to themselves, and adults, all adults, have the task to help them growing up, and they should not assert their right to use them "protecting" from others ideologies. A right that, on the other hand, is difficult to defend, if we consider that, in our western society ruled by communication, it is impossible, in practice, that a child may grow up without coming into contact with different systems of beliefs and values. Galston adds:

- 7 Even if *bogus schools* are a strong minority, there is still a bias against private schools, which are considered a place where rich families send their less performing children (BERTOLA G., CHECCHI D., OPPEDISANO V. (2007), *Private School Quality in Italy*, IZA DP No.3222, dec.
- 8 In 2009, a research conducted by a parents' association in Catholic schools (AGeSC *Scuola Statale e Paritaria: numeri, costi e ... risparmi*, <http://www.agesc.it/default.asp?id=389#b433>) estimated that the State saved more than 6,245 million euros paid by the families that were sending their children in those schools, leaving them a grant of about 500 millions, i.e. less than 1% of the public expenditure for education.
- 9 HIRSCHMANN A.O., *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Ma, 1970
- 10 GALSTON, William A. 1991. *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp.253-54

“The greatest threat to children in modern liberal societies is not that they will believe in something too deeply, but that they will believe in nothing very deeply at all. . . . Rational deliberation among ways of life is far more meaningful if (and I am tempted to say only if) the stakes are meaningful, that is, if the deliberator has strong convictions against which competing claims can be weighed. The role of parents in fostering such convictions should be welcomed, not feared”¹¹.

Parents play this role at home, during free time, but above all, in the school space, both through the opportunity to choose a school, and – if the choice of a particular school is not possible - through their participation in the educational project, as we told before. To use two terms borrowed from sport, I believe it is necessary to move from playing in defence to playing into attack: it is not sufficient to defend parents’ right of choice and participation/involvement, it is necessary to promote it. Families are at the same time producers and consumers of education, or prosumers¹², and educational policies should encourage parents to choose, in a dimension of responsible parenthood, not only in the existing circumstances, but also creating new opportunities. This is not only an individual right: this right must be bestowed to the functional communities, i.e. to the groups to whom parents and sons give a great deal. Families’ freedom of choice expresses itself in their ability to “make their children free”.

11 *Ibidem*, p.20.

12 This term was coined by Alvin TOFFLER (*The Third Wave*, Bantam Books, New York 1980) by combining the words *producer* and *consumer* and is normally used for interactive media.