Éducation comparée / nouvelle série, n°26-1, pp 21 - 50

SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF SCHOOLING IN PANDEMIC TIMES : COMPARING NARRATIVES IN POLICY DISCOURSE

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore les narrations à travers lesquelles quatre pays européens ont géré la crise de la pandémie de Covid-19 dans les écoles. Les auteures ont analysé les principaux documents institutionnels et normatifs publiés pour aborder l'urgence sanitaire pour la réouverture de l'école entre mai et septembre 2020. Le but était de révéler les différences et les similitudes entre les pays. Outre la cartographie des politiques, l'article donne un aperçu du pouvoir des récits et de la pertinence de la représentation sociale de l'école dans chaque pays.

MOTS CLÉS

École – Représentation sociale – Pandémie de Covid 19 – Étude comparative – Analyse du discours.

ABSTRACT

The article explores the narratives about school that have been developed in four European countries during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. It analyses the main policy documents issued to approach the health emergency in May-September 2020. The aim is to revealing differences and similarities among countries, as well as the findings from interviews with key informants. Besides mapping policies, the paper provides insights on the power of narratives and the relevance of the social representation of schooling in each country.

KEYWORDS

School – Social representation – Comparative study – Discourse analysis – Covid-19 Pandemic

Introduction

This article explores and compares the representation of schooling that emerges from policy documents related to the emergency measures put in place by four European countries to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. It analyses the narratives that shape the official documents elaborated by Italy, France, Spain, and England to regulate the closure and re-opening of primary schools. Our main argument is that, as the pandemic forced governments to issue documents that gave orientations to schools and families, similar measures were put in place all over the Europe, yet the documents also showed diverging narratives and representations of schooling. By adopting a discourse analysis approach, our research question is to understand the social representation of schooling in different countries.

The Covid-19 pandemic has challenged educational systems worldwide. As UNESCO (2020) has pointed out, such situation was totally new. Schools were closed in most countries and, when they reopened, they had to strongly change their daily practices and rules. They had to rethink themselves not only in their teaching activities, but also in the relational and emotional dimension. Therefore, the guidelines took into account different aspects related to school. Hence, these "pandemic documents" represent a magnifying glass on the understanding of the social representation that each country develops and sediments on schooling. By the social representation of school, we are referring to the widespread narratives around school that emerge from official documents. We consider official documents as a privileged point of view because of two reasons : they are the product of the existing relations in the societal field ; and they play a crucial role in reproducing social relation and integration of educational institutions with and into society. To this extent, they contribute to create and to reproduce the hegemonical understanding of the role of educational institutions in our societal field. As argued by Bourdieu, schooling is a mechanism of social reproduction and distinction : it reflects and shapes the power relations that operate in society (Bourdieu 1980). In this sense, schooling can be considered an institution with its regulatory mechanisms and a space of relations that interconnects with other spaces of political and social relations, corroborating or challenging a societal order. For the purpose of this research, we focus on official

documents on the school because they allow us to look at the stratification of meanings and narratives that are expression of broader power relations. Indeed, we are not interested in exploring the "objective" role of schooling, but instead the mainstream discourse around schooling as the main instrument to reproduce (or overturn) its social role.

Despite the difficulties in setting the boundaries of the notion of the social representation of schooling - both from an empirical and a conceptual perspective –, we consider it as mainly related to the centrality assigned to the educational institution on three dimensions : the pedagogical dimension, the relationship with the territories in which schools are inscribed, and the role in the socio-economic development of the country. The first dimension refers to the personal, individual level, and involves the effects that schooling is supposed to have on pupils' personal development. This level considers not only the curricula designed by educational authorities but also the relational and emotional dimension that plays a relevant role in school activities. The second dimension entails the local environment in which the schools are inscribed, and the role it gains in policy discourses. Schooling is at the core of local micro-system of relations : schools are workplaces for teachers and school-workers, daily life spaces for families, an emotional and meaningful space for children, and a community hub. They represent microcosmos that shape many local and family dynamics, for example by conditioning housing trajectories (Butler & Hamnett 2011) and mobility. Nevertheless, public discourses stress the multidimensionality of school differently. The third dimension concerns the long-term perspective and it has to do with the weight schooling has in political, public discourses and authorities. The importance attributed to schooling in different countries can be deduced in part from the organization of the national educational system, but it is also determined by the narratives produced around policy measures and reforms. The official documents that were produced to respond to the Covid emergency deal with these three dimensions of the social representation of schooling. Our research aims to shed light on each of them and on how they are tangled up. The comparison of the documents from four countries suggests that, despite the similarities on the measures, there are important divergences in the way through which they have been communicated, the actors involved

in the communication and the style of documents, which point to significant differences in the social representation of schooling.

Even if our research is exploratory, it can contribute to the academic debate in two ways. Firstly, it offers inputs to further understand the relationship between schooling and society, including what might happen beyond the pandemic era. Secondly, it can provide directions for further research on this topic.

The paper is organized as follows. The following section presents the theoretical premises of our research, namely grounded theory and discourse analysis. The third section outlines the methodology applied, while section four provides an overview on the similarities of measures and explores the differences in terms of broadcasting, actors involved and the style of policy documents. The fifth section is dedicated to discussing the emerging narratives. The sixth section sums up results providing also preliminary conclusions.

Theoretical Premises

The two main lens of analysis through which the research has been conducted are composed by grounded theory (Mattoni 2014, Glaser and Strauss 1965) and the critical discourse and frame analysis (Fairclough 2001 ; Snow 2004 ; Phillips and Hardy 2002).

Grounded theory assumes a crucial role in this research mostly for theoretical reasons. Indeed, it is not only a method for conducting qualitative research, but also a framework through which concepts are constructed and challenged. The rationale of this method entails that research questions and concepts emerging from empirical data (Mattoni 2014 : 21) define an approach instead of simply validating one. Grounded theory allows to "elaborate explanatory abstractions but very grounded in the empirical data" (ibidem), that is particularly valid in exploring new objects of study for which complete theories had not been yet elaborated. The adoption of this theoretical approach allowed us to deduce the three analytical dimensions composing the notion of social role of schooling directly from the document analysis instead of applying them a priori.

The grounded theory approach lays on the constructivist idea about the role of language and discourse in shaping realities (Johnson 2014) and, more so, in reproducing social relations. Jameson (1981) conceptualizes narratives as a key epistemological category through which we gain knowledge of the world but also through which the world is constructed : narratives are ways of presenting and re-presenting the world. To this extent, by exploring discourse we aim at inquiring on the public and social representation of schooling as created from the interconnected linguistic and narrative practices.

Discourse analysis consists both in a theoretical approach and a methodological one. It is based on a comprehensive theory of discourse, from Habermas to Foucault and Laclau and Mouffle (Atkinson et. Al. 2011) : discourse is capable of shaping reality. Notably, Bourdieu speaks of discourse as a "structuring structure" and also as a "structured structure" (Bourdieu 1980), which is the result of power relations shaping the social, economic and political fields. Document analysis reveals to be a practice able to shed light on social and cultural structures that are pervasive of school systems in each country. Linguistic forms and rhetorical operation are constitutive of the social world. Policy discourse, in particular, is embedded in institutions and organization and plays an important role in structuring the power relations between them (Fairclough 2001).

Nevertheless, not all discourses play the same role in a given social field. Those ones pronounced by authorities are performative, which means that they have the power to create social reality (Bourdieu 1975), for example the language of law. According to Atkinson et al. (2011), discourse determines what can be legitimately included in and what is excluded from political and policy practices. For the purposes of this research we focused mainly on discourses on schooling in official documents related to the pandemic crisis. The process of framing is usually associated with relatively stable repertoires, which are used to convince population to support alternatives they put forward (Beland 2005). In the cases here considered, the new and urgent situation forced the policy makers to find a balance between their usual quest for support and the need to implement effective measures to contain the spread of the virus. Then they had to convince population of their policy

alternative and used known repertoires (based on shared assumptions), while asking to accept very unpopular measures for the common good. In doing that, these documents reveal clearly how schooling is represented, its functions and its goals, the principles leading the organization of the school system as well its final scope. While the contents of these documents are characterized by the novelty introduced by the pandemic event (new rules, new habits…), the narratives usually confirm the rhetoric already existing, not only in pandemic times, showing the hegemonic discourse that contributes to support the institutional educational system.

Not only what is said is relevant to the construction of a narrative : omissions are relevant as much as what is made explicit (Sam 2019). This can easily emerge in the comparative exercise. Discourses are also able to create power relations (Foucault & Gordon 1980), shaping hierarchies and borders for the institutional categorisation and the management of populations. Official discourse usually ends representing those power relations that are the product of a historical, cultural, and social formation and, by consequence, are easily taken for granted (Luke 2019). As Ball (2015) points out, policy discourses provide us ways of thinking and talking about our institutional ourselves. "In other words, they form regime of truth" that offers the terms that make self-recognition possible. Indeed, policies as discursive strategies – set of texts, events, artefacts, and practices- speak to wider social processes of schooling, such as "the production of the student," the "purpose of schooling," and the construction of the teacher (2015, p. 2). What counts as school is made up of groups of statements that constitute the discursive formation of the school as a neoliberal institution. The pandemic situation overproduced discourse around schooling in which we can observe, as in a magnifying lens, the overall picture described above.

Methods

The research combined two sources for gathering data :

- Discourse analysis of public documents (protocols, guidelines) where measures and devices to be implemented for the reopening of schools are described (issued between March and September 2020).

- Interviews with key informants such as school managers and experts in each country.

Texts taken into consideration are likely to show the narrative about school as well as the adjustments requested to the local institutions, in terms of space and time management, practices, and behaviours, information and communication. Focusing on the way through which measures have been communicated and framed to be accepted, we can piece together expectations placed in school as they emerged from the narratives of each country. In this way, we can reconstruct the corresponding social representation of the role of schooling. According to the purpose of this article, we dealt mainly with two types of documents : official documents issued by the central governments or, if needed, by the local authorities in the four countries regarding anti-pandemic measures in schools (Annex 1). After a preliminary exploration of the documents, we compared the issues that emerged as the most relevant and common ones. In line with grounded theory, we did not make an a priori selection but we let be ourselves guided from the documents themselves.

The interviews with key informants such as school managers or experts allowed us to understand aspects of policies and discourses that cannot be fully grasped through the document analysis. The interviews also helped to contextualize the narratives within wider public discourses, and to check if the discourses around schooling emerging from the pandemic documents represented a turning point or a confirmation of a broader social representation of schools sedimented in time.

Among the key informants, we interviewed one school manager and one expert for each country, with a total of 8 interviews (Annex 2). School managers were interviewed to understand not only the impact of the issued measures on daily practices but also how the discourse shared by policy documents was embedded, interiorized and approved or, on the contrary, resisted or not accepted by schools. Experts' interviews aimed at understanding the educational ideologies and systems in which the policy documents were framed. The combination

of these two sources is likely to provide the comprehension of the social role of schooling that emerged during times of crisis.

Exploring pandemic documents

By exploring the policy measures in these four countries, three main issues were present in all the documents and were thus relevant to compare : the contents of the policy measures, the communication strategies, and the structures of each document. We looked at each of these three issues to reconstruct the social representation of the school as reproduced in public and political discourses According to the contents, the guidelines of each country are developed around four main dimensions : (a) space, (b) time, (c) information, communication, and training, and (d) recommended practices. In the documents, it is possible to observe substantial and strong similarities among the policy measures that have been adopted. Nevertheless, the frameworks in which these measures have been inscribed are strongly different. In documents and interviews, crucial distinctions emerge on the modes of communication of the policy measures, on the narrative of what the school community is and should be, and on the role of schooling in the process of policy making. In the next section, we further explore these similarities and differences.

Comparing the measures in four countries : Weaknesses and strengths

The four dimensions (space, time, information, communication, and training, and recommended practices) are the fulcrum through which safety is promoted in each country. As far as space and time are concerned, all the four countries have foreseen to work on them to create sorts of cluster (usually overlapping with the class) in order to trace contacts. Spaces have been reshaped usually through what has been called “light architecture” (i.e. creating separations though furniture) and have promoted the use of external areas. To the contrary, all the school activities that were presumed to be carried out in a closed space that could not be modified have been suspended. Time has been fragmented to avoid massive simultaneous arrivals or departure of students and families. In England, where schools re-opened in May 2020, time was also used to create alternate class attendance.

Space and time are crucial also in promoting new behaviours and practices. Indeed, they have followed the principles of social distance (except for nursery, kindergarten, and lower primary school) that can be realized through interchanging pupils in space or time. Hygienization is crucial in all countries. On the contrary, the use of masks has been approached differently : it is compulsory at different ages and for different groups of people. For example, England discourage the use of the mask for pupils and teachers in the same class, but this is not the case in Italy or Spain. This is largely explained by different understandings of the virus but also different understandings of the pedagogical and learning relationships between teachers and pupils. For instance, the Italian Piano Scuola, referring especially to the lower grades, states that "the organization of the various moments of the educational day has to be calm and respectful of the typical modalities of child development, so that children can express themselves with no constraints" (IT1). Nevertheless, looking at the practices, we found a common trend intertwining personal and collective practices, giving more importance to the latter ones ; for example, there is a prohibition for pupils to hug each other is not applied to pupils in the same class, but rather to pupils from different classes.

Another important commonality is related to the crucial role given to communication, information, and training, especially for teachers. This area has been declared to be a core issue and a pivotal point in all the countries. Despite its centrality, this point results to be controversial, because none of the guidelines specify the modes or the people that should take in charge the communication with families. At the same time, there are few indications for communication practices, and teachers training is widely left to schools, despite its evident and declared importance. Moreover, all the guidelines give much more importance to communication within the school, instead of taking care of communication with families and local communities. In this sense we find in all the documents detailed instructions about how to inform pupils about the paths to reach the bathrooms for example trough visual warnings, or explain students how to deal with sneezes and cough.

All these largely shared measures are based on a practice that is common to all the countries, which is the attempt to limit as much as possible the access to external people, including parents. The rationale is not just to limit the number of people simultaneously present in a closed space, but also to trace contacts in case of infections between workers and pupils. This hinders the development of extra-curricular activities that imply the presence of external professionals. All the guidelines share these sort of measures.

Differences among measures : comparing communication and structures in each country

Despite these similarities, we observed relevant differences in the modalities of communicating the measures. Time also got a crucial but controversial role. National governments approached the closure of schools in very different ways. Since the very first steps, the Italian government arranged the closure of schools for all the pupils notwithstanding the specific needs of school populations. To the contrary, in England schools were never closed for children of essential workers or with special needs, as well as for those ones with attested difficulties in following the class on-line. Moreover, exception made for Italy, the re-opening of schools occurred gradually for all the other countries.

Communication between schools and authorities represented a critical point in all the countries, even if with different nuances. In Italy, schools were closed at a national scale on March 9, but the first official document with detailed guidelines concerning the educational activities was published on June 24 (Piano Scuola 2020-2021, accompanied by technical reports of civil protection) foreseeing the opening of the schools in September 2020. This document was followed by another official text issued at the end of July and another at the end of August.

On March 16, 2020, French schools were closed, and the "Protocol Sanitaire" (Health Protocol) was released on April 19, which provided a set of very detailed guidelines for the re-opening foreseen on May 10 and on a voluntary basis. In France, the closure of schools, as testified by several interviews, happened without any warning, leaving families, teachers, and school managers in a sort of void with no instructions :

In March we received the instructions suddenly, in a very brutal way. On Thursday, the minister said that schools would be open, while on Friday he said that schools would be immediately closed. So we had to arrange things quickly. (Int FRc)

In the last two weeks of June 2020, the attendance became mandatory and by the end of July an official guide was issued by the Ministry of Education for returning to schools in September. Since the first moment, the Minister of Education was on the stage with other three main political actors, the President, the Prime Minister, and the Chief of the Health Office. He reached the educational community especially through his Facebook account (FRb).

England closed the schools on March 20, 2020. By mid-May, a Guidance was issued that established a gradual opening from June 2, starting with nursery and primary schools, and a complete reopening by June 15, 2020, including all school grades. On September 17, a second guidance was released with instructions for a full opening.

In Spain, schools were closed from May 13, and did not open until September 2020. Some autonomous communities decided to reopen before, such as Galicia, with a document issued on the April 22, 2020.

Besides the timing, communication strategies differed also in the accessibility to documents and their structures. Italian and French documents are downloadable from institutional websites. The Italian ones are structured as reports, while the French ones seem to follow a more schematic structure with several subtitles and bullet points indicating precise actions to be taken to contain the virus. The Italian document introduces several macro-themes discussing the role of education, such as to confront inequality and promote inclusion. England guidelines are accessible on the Department of Education website and the reader can easily navigate them according to the topics of interest. They are in fact structured as a list of topics to be clicked on. Moreover, citizens can be easily updated by signing up to a newsletter. Spanish documents are published in the official government bulletin (*boletin oficial del estado*) and are accessible in the government websites. Nevertheless, because of the large number of documents available at

the same link, finding them is not easy. The policy documents produced by the autonomous communities can be found in their own websites, such as that of the *Xunta de Galicia* (department of school, university and professional training).

Looking at the guidelines from an overall perspective, all the documents underestimate the importance of a prompt communication with the school managers and teachers, while they give much more room to the sensibilisation of families and pupils. Moreover, no specific guidelines are provided to help schools to deal with these novelties. We can infer that an overall strategy to face schooling in pandemic crisis is mostly missing in the official policy documents. Nevertheless, this shared trait is embodied in different narratives that enlighten different social representation of school and education in different countries. In the following section we explore these social representations.

From documents to narratives. Exploring the social representation of schooling in each country

France

Documents issued in France are characterized by a strong operative style. They provide very precise instructions to school managers, teachers, families, and students. This is translated into very detailed guidelines (i.e. handwashing instructions). As in France the school system is highly centralized, these documents were applied to each reality through a vertical approach, from the central government to the local schools. In the interviews, key informants reported that having such detailed information could be reassuring, but many school managers often found themselves in paradoxical situations when applying measures that were not suited to their context. This aspect sheds light on the highly hierarchical system that characterizes France and the very reduced autonomy that school managers have. Because of their functional goal, documents are very schematic, divided into thematic cards. In the first document issued in April 2020, *"Protocole sanitaire. Guide à la réouverture et au fonctionnement des écoles maternelle et élémentaires"* (FR1), some general principles are repeatedly recalled at the beginning of each thematic card, and there are abrupt shifts to explain the broader inspiring rationale at its core. The re-opening of

schools in May, even if not compulsory, was accompanied by the slogan that "we have to make every single student come back to school," in the name of the struggle against inequalities (FRb).

Since the attendance in May was not compulsory, many families decided not to send their children back to school, because of a sort of "cacophonia" in the messages that were sent by the President and political actors (Fra). Suddenly, from one week to another, the school was opened again to reduce the risk of strengthening education inequality, but there was no new information on the pandemic trends, and this was confusing to many families. By June 2020, when the attendance returned to be compulsory, families were stressed and tired, and accepted to send their children to school (FRb). At the end of July, a second document appeared (FR2) that collected the guidelines for the re-opening of schools in September. This text is directly accessible online and it is friendly to readers. These documents emphasise the inclusive goal of education, confirming the rhetoric already present in previous policy documents. Indeed, as pointed out by an interviewee "since the '90s, the success in school for everybody is the most quoted slogan in French educational system" (FRb). The repetition of the word "tous" is significative. Some highlighted sentences recall the idea that education has to be for everyone : "*Tous les élèves reprennent l'école dès le 1er septembre*" (All students will start school on Sept 1), "*Protéger tous les élèves et les adultes et assurer l'éducation pour tous*" (Protecting all students and adults and ensure education for everyone). These are the subtitles introducing the last two documents mentioned above. On this purpose it is also provided "*le livret pour le familles*" (the handbook for families) (FR3) stating :

> *C'est avec vous et grâce à la responsabilisation et la vigilance collectives que nous assurerons l'éducation pour tous, en protégeant les élèves comme les adultes. [It is with you and thanks to your responsibility and the collective supervision that we will ensure education for everyone, protecting both students and adults.]*

Beside these slogans (such as "ensemble, nous réussirons," that is "Together, we'll make it"), the document is four-pages long, with images and bullet points, and it appears as a very simple and immediate document, explaining what will happen to students during their school

days, and the recommended practices and behaviours to protect them and the community.

This kind of document signals a strategical communication policy that places families with their children at the centre of the community in the challenge of containing the spread of the pandemic. Along with corroborating a rhetoric on schooling, this type of communication also reveals the sedimented representation of education as a central asset in societal development. Indeed, more pedagogical materials are provided here, with a recognition for the teachers who "ensure the face-to-face courses." The narrative of French policy documents provides the representation of a school whose first goal is to be inclusive and must guarantee education for everybody. School is narrated as strongly embedded in the community, a school which shares the responsibility towards the collective or the common good (in this case about the containment of the pandemic) with the families.

The principle of equality (*égalité*) is at the centre of the educational system in France, and this is so embedded in the discourse that has made it difficult to tackle the issue of educational inequalities, at least in two ways. The research of equality has been translated into a vertical management foreseeing a uniform setting for everybody, regardless of the local and individual features. This has made unfeasible any kind of individualized path, underestimating that the measures ran the risk of creating more exclusion for individuals and in different territories. The trade-off between narrative and reality is testified by this interviewee :

> *The political discourse is so wide, so general, that it has to work for everybody, and in fact it does not work for anybody.* (FRa)

From this and other interviews, it emerged that the issue of inequalities has gained attention in the media, at least for a short period, but it has not lasted long, since it has been replaced by the pressure of citizens to return to work. The issue of conciliation, in fact, prevailed over the topic of inequalities and attracted the attention of the public opinion and the political interest.

An interesting and unexpected consequence of the pandemic is linked to online teaching. Despite its limits, this modality has broken the hierarchical relationship between teachers and students, which is

particularly strong in the French upper secondary school, according to one of our key informants (FRb). This relationship is in fact characterized by a high degree of rigidity and formality, and it tends to "create a strong scission and to prevent the creation of a community" (FRa), with negative consequences on the pedagogical relations.

In this sense, on the one hand, in France the pandemic policy documents are the result of a shared and strong social representation of schooling, but on the other hand they have opened possibilities and new paths for different representations, less linked to the equality umbrella and more dependent to the needs of families and the relationships between school and families.

Italy

The first document issued in Italy is "Piano Scuola" (School Plan). It is a very dense text containing not only guidelines but also the general values in which the policy measures are inspired. The guidelines emphasize the agency of schools :

> *the role of school will be essential in applying the guidelines to each specific context, to define concrete and feasible solutions taking into account the complex scenario of variables*. (IT1)

The Piano Scuola strongly emphasized the relevance of the cooperation between different territorial actors, alongside with the concept of subsidiarity and educational co-responsibility. The idea that lies behind the text is a common vision sustained and realized through the implementation of measures suitable to the territorial differences. This first document was accompanied by a technical document (FR5) edited by the Civil Protection Agency and written by a Technical and Scientific Committee. This text goes far beyond the first one, offering guidelines for the resumption of school activities including a premise that states the relevance of schools in fighting inequalities (with figures on the different forms of disadvantages). Also, this text recalls the role of schools and their autonomy :

> *The indications here provided can only be of general nature to guarantee the coherence with the essential measures for containing the pandemic, representing mostly a list of criteria to be contextualized in the specific school realities. Schools will play a pivotal role in placing the indication in the specific contexts…in the certainty that only who lives and works daily in schools with competence and passion can drive to the definition of concrete and feasible solutions.*

The pandemic is depicted rhetorically as an opportunity for change :

> *It will be needed to transform the difficulties linked to this historical moment into a trigger for a new beginning and innovation*. (IT1)

Rhetoric narratives are evident also in the references to school workers as key actors in defining successful measures and to the role of schools in hindering inequalities and promoting inclusion.

The premise also collects data about the pandemic and recommendations from Unesco and other organizations, especially to legitimize the closure of school buildings. This is followed by a chapter about the scholastic sector in Italy, with data on teachers, students, building conditions, and so on. This is very peculiar to the Italian case, since nothing similar has been found in the policy documents in the other countries considered in our analysis. Policy measures were not presented and explained in a schematic way, but on the contrary, they were contextualized and often put in relation with more structural features of the school system. While this can be interesting from an academic and scientific point of view, it makes the text hardly readable and not immediate for comprehension and translating it into action. This is not surprising considering the public debate on schooling in Italy, which often detaches educational structural features and problems from broader social issues.

The IT1 document issued at the end of June 2020 mostly addressed primary schools and the upper cycles, giving very limited attention to kindergartens and totally neglecting nurseries : 0-6 childcare services were still in a limbo concerning timing and modalities of the re-opening in September. Once again, this is not surprising as Italy does not consider early childhood education as part of educational policies but as part of welfare policies. Therefore, no common strategy or universal access have been developed in Italy for kindergartens. In Italy, there is

a widespread representation that childcare is a personal, familiar business. A document called "Guidance document for the resumption of in-presence activities of kindergartens and primary schools" was published at the end of July 2020. This document (IT2) is very similar to the previous one, with some exceptions regarding the peculiar emotional and relational needs of 0-6 students. This document stresses particularly the pivotal role of the alliance between families and childcare services in monitoring the spread of the virus ; parents were expected to sign an "educational co-responsibility pact."

After one month, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education published a document entitled "Operational indications for managing Sars-CoV-2 cases and outbreaks in childcare and educational services and schools". Even in this case, the main issue considered was the timing. It was launched on August 21, 2020, just two weeks before the re-opening of nurseries and kindergarten and three weeks before the re-opening of schools. As our interviews highlighted (ITa), this strict timing left several services and schools unable to start in adequate conditions at the established day. Nevertheless, this document appears as the less rhetorical one : it is detailed and answers to the need to organize activities in childcare services and schools in order to follow the indications issued by the previous document and, in addition, how to deal with Sars-Cov-2 cases. Therefore, it is widely usable by school managers and teachers. This part is followed by the core of the document, which makes recommendations for the managing of different scenarios considering the manifestation of Sars-Cov-2 among students, teachers, or other school workers, at school and at home, and their test results.

The final chapter stresses the relevance of information for families and training for teachers. Actions are suggested to reach families, and there is a reference to a platform where courses will be offered for teachers. The training here concerns the so called Covid Referee, which are teachers in charge to deal with suspected or confirmed Covid cases. In relation to online teaching training, according to our key informant (ITa), each school was in charge, under the reception of ministerial funding, of buying and providing teacher training. It is noteworthy that this training was not mandatory and it clashes with three features of the

Italian school system : the high turn-over of teachers, especially during the first days of school, the age of teachers, who are in a great number reluctant to learn new modalities of teaching, and the lack of skills needed to fulfil the task of school autonomy from a great part of school managers (ITa, ITb).

However, in Italy the late arrival of indications and the considerable autonomy of school managers has left more room to individual initiatives. The issue of arranging the space to respect social distancing has been addressed through creative solutions, giving the impossibility of implementing structural changes to the building because of time and funding constraints. One example comes from an interviewed school manager who has invented, alongside with his staff, the "additional classroom." This room is used for those classes where the physical distancing rule can't be followed due their size. A couple or more students are moved into this additional class where a computer for the online teaching is set, and they can follow the class. Students rotate in attending the additional class so that everybody attends the frontal class almost as always. These initiatives seem to be quite spotless and not supported from a central authority, but on the contrary are threatened by the high fragmentation characterizing the school system :

> *Narratives about school in Italy is characterized by a lot of rhetoric, but unfortunately there is no a project and a vision for building a coherent discourse about education. Teachers are not aware about their role ; they are not able to represent themselves as a category of workers or as a potential intellectual lever for the country.* (ITb)

Spain

In Spain, the official policy documents appear bare and lack operative prescriptions. This is because primary schools are overseen by the autonomous communities, which have been the main authorities during lockdown. The large part of the national documents is devoted to explaining the relationship between the government, the autonomous communities, and the schools, stressing the attention on the collaborative nature of the policy measures. Documents often mention the "territorial cooperation" as an important resource for facing school issues during the pandemic. This point is addressed when

documents suggest to school managers how to find the hygienic materials (masks, soap, disinfectants) that are to be placed in school spaces in case that the national provisions would be not enough. This assumes the relevance of making effective and efficient the autonomy of the schools. Indeed, while the large independence of the schools could be framed as positive because it allows managers to effect policy measures that match the needs of the schools (ES1), the lack of a central organization risks that it ends up being disorganized and scattered. In this sense, the Spanish documents communicate the attempt to outline a shared framework to deal with the pandemic.

Despite the vagueness of the guidelines, the languages and the mentioned issues point to the main features of the Spanish narrative around schooling and the prevailing representation of the role of schools. The policy measures that the autonomous communities, and in turn the schools, are pushed to implement are related not just to the safety of children and teachers according to the pandemic but also to ensure their right to schooling. Differently from other countries, in Spain the documents stress the attention to the right of pupils to receive a high-level instruction despite the changes in modalities. Indeed, according to the guidelines, efforts should be made to not penalize pupils because of the new methodology. As can be read in the texts, "[i]n no case pupils can be penalised because of the difficulties related to the changes in academic methods". It is interesting to note that the online school is defined as a "methodological change" rather than a substantial one. In this sense, while pandemic changes are given a considerable space, these changes are approached as temporary ones.

Nevertheless, due to the emergency, documents underline that the health of pupils, families and teachers is a top priority in onsite schooling, which is the best option to guarantee the right to schooling. (ES1). Indeed, the guidelines suggest rescheduling the program in order to take care of the broad difficulties of pupils rather than to cover all the didactic goals. Teachers and managers are invited to take in charge those pupils for whom online schooling is more challenging. This indicates that, in a first stance, the kind of difficulties considered are mainly those related to the possible technological gaps among pupils rather than to differences in socio-economic backgrounds and physical and psychological discomfort. Indeed, the first set of issues are often

made explicit in the text, while the socio-economic background is almost never mentioned. Also, few words are spent to push for a fast re-opening of the school, at least for specific categories.

Since education is mainly in charge of autonomous communities, we explored the documents issued by the authorities from Galicia, in the northwest of the country. Indeed, this autonomous community was one of the first to reopen school buildings. This document shows a completely different trend, even if the protocols developed by the autonomous communities are compulsory for the schools. On the base of the very operative issues that are presented, the document seems to be made for school managers -indeed they are hard to find on web for common citizens-, and the recommendations are provided without justifying or explaining the reasons of the policy measures to readers. It mostly offers a compendium of best practices for organizing the presence of children at school. For example, it recommends staggering the entry of pupils in the schools, or how to manage the classes to reduce contacts among students. The writing style is concise, and the document easy to consult because it is organized in short sections.

Concerning the contents of the documents, some interesting points emerge. First of all, a large attention is dedicated to the safeguarding of school workers. Documents spend many words giving insights around the management of vulnerable workers, the protocols to put in place once a pupil gets sick and how to manage the right of teachers to not work or work in a completely safe environment. This aspect covers the largest part of the text ; on the contrary, few pages are dedicated to set guidelines for online schooling. Nevertheless, documents deal with online schooling according to a very delicate issue : the privacy dimension that needs to be guaranteed for teachers and pupils. This issue is not mentioned in the national documents, and it seems to be absent also in other countries' guidelines. In the Galicia document, the point is addressed also when a pupil or a teacher gets Covid-19. According to the document, schools must guarantee privacy to the infected people. A second remarkable aspect concerns the recommendations on the modes through which schools must communicate with families. The Galicia guidelines are much more focused on giving inputs to schools for making clear to parents the protocols adopted by the schools, instead of telling families how they

need to relate to the school. Indeed, the prescriptions for individual actions are presented at the end of the document.

England

England's national guidelines are orientation documents, presented as a "framework for school leaders" that "does not create any new legal obligations." Nevertheless, it is to be read also by parents and citizens that are out of the educational provision. As said above, the documents are easy to find and news can be received by e-mail after subscribing to a mailing list. It can be considered a broad but operative document that, besides explaining the rationale at the core, sets the purposes and practices to reach them. The document says clearly that during the pandemic, a more specific approach is demanded from the school managers, who are better situated than the national government for knowing their districts' needs. Nevertheless, the suggested guidelines to deal with the emergency are preceded by some broad reflections on the rationale of England's policy measures. These premises are an outline of the social representation of schooling that is prevalent in that country.

Despite the very operative nature of the text, an extensive, initial part of the document is dedicated to point out why the return to school for all the pupils is crucial. Unlike other countries, the explanation of the "reasons why" is crucial in England. The sanitary issue has a very marginal role in relation to the negative aspects of closing school buildings. Based on, and quoting, recent studies, English guidelines corroborate the possibility to open the school for all the children because there is no evidence of the effective risks of Covid-19 in the school. On the contrary, the bad effects of online schooling are demonstrated and evident. Indeed, in developing the anti-Covid policy measures, the document always gives priority to the educational dimension, saying that this aspect could never been put at the second place. To reaffirm the priority role of pedagogy and education, in various parts of the document there are sentences like this one :

> *protective measures for children and staff, which also ensure that all pupils receive a high quality education that enables them to thrive and progress. […] Returning to school is vital for children's education and for their wellbeing. Time out of school is detrimental for children's cognitive and academic development, particularly for disadvantaged children.*

Yet through the document, the main reason to keep schools open are economic, rather than pedagogical ones. Indeed, the benefits of getting back to schools are described as a priority for all the country. First of all, the closure of schools caused problems to the working families and this, in turn, worsened the economic endurance of England. Therefore :

> *For many households school closures have also affected their ability to work. As the economy begins to recover, we need to remove this barrier so parents and carers can return to work.*

According to this perspective, the English document is the only one in which school is explicitly recognized as having a role in allowing parents to go to work. In this sense, its educational and pedagogical role is assumed as intertwined with its care function. What is particularly interesting of this document is the long-term approach to explain why to open school is important, a level that is almost absent in the other countries, which are mainly focused on the extraordinary, short-term dimension. Indeed, the text clearly says that :

> *Lower academic achievement also translates into long-term economic costs due to having a less qualified workforce. This affects the standard of living that today's pupils will have over the course of their entire life.*

Thus, personal level is immediately connected with the collective one. Accordingly, it is stressed that school is important for all the children. Policy documents in England relate the education of pupils to the economic development of the country, being the only one in all the selected countries to state it so clearly.

Contrary to the national guidelines of the other countries, in England lesser specific attention is dedicated to the disadvantaged pupils. The issue is not approached in a specific way, but it is mentioned to reinforce the need to deal with pandemic without closing schools again. Nevertheless, we can witness some controversies between the narrative

and the implementation. Despite the great role that schooling is considered to have in the socio-economic life of England, no additional funds are given to schools to manage the emergency. We can read that "*There are no plans at present to reimburse additional costs incurred as part of that process*."

According to the specificity of measures, the document appears less detailed than the policy documents of the other countries. Indeed, it does not list a set of best practices, but it suggests a broad approach to guarantee a safe presence at school for all people involved. In this framework, a large part is dedicated to the synergies that need to be created at the local level to manage the emergency times, as done by Spanish governmental documents. The text stresses the importance of constructing a collaborative environment between schools, parents, school workers and trade unions. Accordingly, documents devote some space to make clear the role of supply teachers and the modes through which they can be engaged. The document also points out the right of teachers to work from home in case of health problems. Relevant space in the guidelines is dedicated to the transport of children to school, pointing out the need to separate public transport from school transport. This suggests the awareness of linkages between schools and surrounding environments. Finally, a possible inconsistency between the narrative and the implementation level can be seen in these guidelines. The document explicitly says that schools are not given additional financial instruments to remain safely open. Therefore, the document shows a broad approach to schooling that emphasizes its relevance mostly on economic terms, but it is not possible to grasp the concrete or real will to implement this declared approach.

Concluding notes

Through the discourse analysis of policy documents, we can highlight four analytical dimensions that allow for a comparison among the four countries considered in our research. First, the balance between the right to education and the right to health : all documents had to solve the tension between these two rights. Second, differences appear also in the way some exception were applied to particular groups of students and families. Third, a very relevant issue, even if not always openly

discussed, was the degree of autonomy of school and the structure of governance. Lastly, in the communication dimension there were divergent strategies that speak to different representations of schools and communities.

The contents of the policy documents can be mapped along these four dimensions, depicting different understandings of schooling and its role in the broad social field. In the following table we provide a summary of these differences :

		Italy	France	Spain	England
Right to education/right to health		Balancing	Balancing	+ Right to health	+ Right to Education
Differentiation and exceptions		None	Schools could be opened for some disadvantaged categories	Starting from May some autonomous communities re-opened the schools	Schools have always been open for certain categories (low income and CWSN)
Autonomy		Autonomy is stressed as the basis for flexibility and efficiency.	No autonomy. School managers are forced to apply national prescriptions.	Practices are set by autonomous communities. School managers have a small room for decisions.	School managers are responsible for practices and specific measures.
Communication	Lack of operativeness and clarity, richness of details and background discourses.	Very operative, schematic and detailed documents.	Governmental documents are general and written for insiders. Galicia's documents are detailed and operative, easy to be read, but not specifically addressed to families of pupils.	Interactive, easy to be found and read, and very direct in explaining the rationale.	

The comparison of the texts makes visible a different representation of schooling and its role in the wider society. More in detail, there appear to be differing expectations and priorities regarding the school system. Looking at the different positioning of the documents in relation to the four analytical dimensions, we outline specific narrative typologies for each country.

The high levels of rhetoric of Italian documents provides a message of *universalism and inclusion*, with school playing a role of democratization of the whole society. These trends emphasise a common vision and

make scarce room for territorial differences. These ideas clash with the complexity of the documents and with a lack of a communication strategy towards schools and families. While the approach of French documents is more pragmatic as a dissemination strategy, the central notion of their narrative is *equality* : equality not only for all families but also between schools. The neglect of local diversities and differences is one of the specific traits of the French approach. The Spanish approach is, instead, characterized by what we have called a sort of *conservatism* : it is the only country, in fact, that prioritized the right to health over that to education. Moreover, pandemic changes are addressed as methodological changes and not as substantial ones. Finally, English documents focus on the role of schools as drivers for economic growth. The relevant rhetoric is the need of re-opening school for the sake of the country's economy in the short and long term. This goal emerges also in the communication strategy ; documents are easy to be found and to be read for families, which are supposed to be the workers of the country.

It is noteworthy that these narratives are mostly political strategies to legitimize the policy measures implemented. The effects of these documents on the policies have been controversial and, although our analysis does not shed light on this issue, our interviews suggest at least a considerable gap between the political approach and the local implementation. To this extent, this research aims to be a first step into a broader analysis of the social representation and role of schooling in each European country that goes beyond the narratives, and we hope that further steps be taken in this direction.

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Annex 1. Analysed documents

Id doc	Issue date	Original title	Translated title	Issued by
FR1	April 2020	Protocole sanitaire. Guide à la réouverture et au fonctionnement des écoles maternelle et élémentaires	Health Protocol. Guide to the re-opening and functioning of kindergarden and primary schools	Ministry of Education and Youth
FR2	July 2020	Rentrée 2020. Modalités pratiques	Re-opening 2020. Practices	Ministry of Education and Youth
FR3	July 2020	Livret pour le parents	Brochure for parents	Ministry of Education and Youth
IT1	June 2020	Piano Scuola 2020-2021	School Plan 2020-21	Ministry of Education, University and Research
IT2	July 2020	Documento di indirizzo e orientamento per la ripresa delle attività in presenza dei servizi educativi e delle scuole d'infanzia	Guidance document for the resumption of in-presence activities of kindergartens and primary schools	Ministry of Education, University and Research
IT3	August 2020	Operational indications for management	Operational indications for management of Sars-CoV-2 in schools and childcare services	Ministry of Education, University and Research with Ministry of Health, Health Superior Institute
ES1	April 2020	Orden EFP/365/2020, de 22 de abril, por la	Orden EFP/365/2020, de 22	Ministry of Education and

		que se establecent…	de abril, por la que se establecent…	professional formation
ES2	May 2020	Resoluciòn pola que se reinicia a actividade lectiva…	Instruction for getting back to school	Xunta de Galicia, Conselleria de education, universidade e formacion profesional
EN2	July 2020	Actions for schools during the Coronavirus Outbreak -guidance for full opening schools	Actions for schools during the Coronavirus Outbreak -guidance for full opening schools	Ministry of Education
EN2	May 2020	Supporting vulnerable children and young people during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak - actions for educational providers and other partners	Supporting vulnerable children and young people during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak - actions for educational providers and other partners	Ministry of Education
EN3	June 2020	Coronavirus (COVID-19): implementing protective measures in education and childcare settings	Coronavirus (COVID-19): implementing protective measures in education and childcare settings	Ministry of Education
EN4	July 2020	Actions for schools during the Coronavirus Outbreak -planning guide for primary schools	Actions for schools during the Coronavirus Outbreak -planning guide for primary schools	Ministry of education

Annex 2. Experts' interviews

ID interviews	Role	Country
FRa	Lectures in Sociology	France
FR	Lecturer in Training Science	France
FRc	School managers	France
ITa	School manager	Italy
ITb	Expert	Italy
ESa	Expert	Spain
ESb	Expert	Spain
ENa	Expert	England
ENb	Research fellow	England