

---

## Who Gets the Right to Go to School? The Italian Critical Workers' Affair

Chiara Gius

University of Bologna, chiara.gius@unibo.it

**ABSTRACT:** *This paper aims to provide a map of the public debate that unfolded in Italy following the decision to close all schools and education facilities in medium to high-risk areas for COVID-19 during the spring 2021 breakout. By analyzing news media accounts and institutional communications of that period, it will be argued that the lack of a socially shared agreement and of a proper institutional definition of whom and what should be considered 'essential' in the COVID-19 pandemic, initiated a fierce controversy over who should be entitled to the right to in-person education. In particular, this paper will examine three relevant aspects of what has been here defined as the Italian critical workers' affair (Boltanski, 2012): 1) the use of the institutional crisis done by the movements against distant learning in the attempt to defuse the effects of the closure; 2) the debate surrounding the right to education vs. the right for work-life balance policies; and 3) the role of school in mitigating social inequalities. Results suggest that in Italy, school access emerges as one of the central battlegrounds around which civil rights are currently socially reclaimed and renegotiated amid the state of precariousness dictated by the pandemic.*

**KEYWORDS:** *In-person education, Social justice, Work-life balance, Coronavirus*

### Introduction: The Affair Unfolds

In late February 2021, several Italian governors decided to close all schools and educational facilities after facing an alarming increase in COVID-19 case numbers and hospitalizations. In particular, on February 26th, 2021, Stefano Bonaccini, the president of the Regione Emilia-Romagna, decided to establish the 'dark amber' color code, unilaterally changing the 'traffic light system' that classified Italian regions according to their epidemiological situation. The new color served *de facto* to close all schools in Bologna, the capital of the Emilia-Romagna region, while keeping most businesses and economic activities open. This represented a significant shift to the approach set in place at the national level since the previous September over school closures in relation to the pandemic.

As a matter of fact, when school resumed after the initial lockdown, the Italian government committed to guaranteeing in-person learning for all pupils attending nurseries, kindergartens, elementary schools, and the

first year of lower secondary schools, also in the territories classified at 'high risk' of coronavirus transmission (or 'red zones'). Unsurprisingly the decision taken by Bonaccini immediately triggered the protests of the movement for in-person education and of the families affected by the measure. In a dramatic change of scenario, on March 2nd, 2021, the newly appointed Italian prime minister Mario Draghi backed up the Emilia-Romagna initiative. On that day, Mr. Draghi signed his first ministerial decree. The act ordered for all schools in the 'red zones' to switch to distance learning while giving local authorities the power to autonomously decide for school closure in specific areas of high contagion, even if the region as a whole was not being classified at high risk (Giannoli, 2021).

Albeit disposing of all school activities to be held remotely, the ministerial initiative did not address or modify the so-called 'Piano Scuola', a policy document regulating how schools needed to be managed during the COVID-19 health crisis. Accordingly to the 'Piano Scuola', schools and educational facilities had to remain open for all special needs pupils and/or for the children of key workers in case of closure. As such, the 'Piano Scuola' established a clear connection between essential workers and access to the school system during the pandemic period.

Following the ministerial decree, on March 3d, 2021, Stefano Bonaccini sent an official request to the government to clarify how the law needed to be enforced when it came to schools' attendance for the children of key workers. The following day, the director of the Department of Education answered the governor's interrogation clarifying that, according to the 'Piano Scuola', all the children of essential workers had the right to be admitted for in-person learning. However, the legislator lacked a proper definition of what categories of workers needed to be considered essential, leaving unanswered the question of whose children had the right to apply for in-person learning (Gieri, 2021). As a result, while waiting for a more strict classification, local administrators and school principals started creating public lists where families could certify their children's right to be considered for in-person education.

At the same time, movements opposing digital teaching tried to exploit the ambiguity in the definition as a trojan horse to hack the system. In particular, they urged all families who had at least one of the parents working in one of the many sectors considered essential at the early stage of the health crisis to apply for in-person education, aiming to vanish the closure effects (Boratto, 2020). Finally, pressured by the local governors, on the 6th of March, 2021, the government released a ministerial memorandum (note AOODPIT, 4 March 2021), establishing that the right of in-person education could only be extended to pupils with special needs, officially closing the dispute.

## 1. Exposing the Affair: Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This contribution aims to provide a map of the public debate that ensued after the initial decision of the Regione Emilia-Romagna to establish the 'dark amber' color and close all schools during the third wave of the coronavirus crisis. To do so, the study draws on a corpus that included newspaper articles, policy documents, field notes, and other selected primary evidence collected in February and March 2021.

It should be pointed out that who writes has followed the activities of 'Priorità alla Scuola', the Italian movement for in-person learning, since its foundation in early April 2020. As a mother of two and as an academic, my participation in the movement resulted from a double urgency. On the one hand, I wanted to push the legislator to find suitable solutions to restore all children's right to formal education. On the other, my support of the movement resulted from the frustration of realizing the negative impact that the school closure had on my career (Minello *et al.*, 2020). As such, this research moves from a very specific situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) on the debate over in-person learning.

As a result of my participation in the movement, I have often been granted early access to official documents; I am among the recipients of a reserved daily press review service; I have had the opportunity to discuss the events with local journalists and members of the institutions, and, since the early protests, I have been part of the WhatsApp chats of the movement both at the national and at the local level. Albeit I will not use any informal communication that occurred between me or other actors participating in the movement for the scope of this study, I am aware that my experience in the movement has played a relevant role in my interest in the subject matter, as well as in the way I have framed my research questions. As such, a central part of the research process was to conduct my analysis considering my insider/outsider (Bourke, 2014) position regarding the movement and the issues discussed. The corpus gathered was analyzed using an interpretative approach to reach that 'thick description' capable of unveiling the «stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures» (Geertz, 1973, 6).

The use of an interpretative analysis appears of particular importance as the research originated from an interest in what could be referred to as a 'sociology of justice', as proposed by the French sociologist Luc Boltanski (2012). In particular, Boltanski affirms that sociology should be interested in the 'question of justice' not just to investigate how the material or immaterial goods are partitioned by individuals in a given society, but also, by proxy, as a way of establishing the worth of people and things in that specific society.

What has been said about the denunciation of injustice produced by ordinary persons it's just as valid for sociologists. Bringing to light an injustice – that is, a division of material or immaterial goods that do not respect the legitimate order of worth among persons – could entail making

explicit the principle of justice to which the critique is linked and clarifying the definition – of what constitutes the value of things and people. (Boltanski, 2012)

The interest in the question of justice has become of particular relevance in contemporary societies as the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted an unprecedented reflection over which goods, services, and workers are to be considered essential to avoid societal breakdown (Weis, Magnin, 2021). More specifically, the necessity to define what types of productions should be preserved, who should be allowed in the public space, and what is at stake if some are excluded from public life, have probably been some of the most challenging questions opened by the COVID-19 health crisis.

However, at least in Italy, while institutions avoided finding a proper definition of what and whom should be considered essential, the disposition of the people towards restrictive measures, as well as the conditions under which the various periods of lockdown or quarantines had been organized, changed over time. In particular, after the initial lockdown in spring 2020, many people started growing wary of all the restrictions set in place by the central government, considering their right to be able to go back to their previous lives, whatever their occupation or position in society.

Hence, the March 2021 school crisis should be read as part of a situation of growing discontent, exposing a profound juxtaposition: on the one side, the local governors, who tried to protect public health while safeguarding business and economic activities over schools and educational facilities, on the other, the protestors of these decisions, primarily parents and other components of civil society (intellectuals, members of the unions, teachers, activists), who required in-person access to education to be considered a fundamental priority for the country.

The analytical tool used to investigate how the collective cause for in-person education has been linked to the idea of justice, was that of the 'affair' (Boltanski, 2012). As Boltanski wrote: «in affairs, justice is always at issue [...]. In affairs, the persons who protest do so because their sense of justice has been offended» (2012, 6). Affairs are usually constructed around a denunciation, a public assertion of injustice aimed at mobilizing support in favor of a claim, possibly calling for a restorative solutions:

To construct these problematics, I shall take denunciation as my object, and more precisely public denunciation, playing on the variations that affect the meaning of the term – for the word denunciation can designate, at one extreme, a social critique that points out injustice in its most general aspect without necessarily calling for reparations of a repressive order and, at the other extreme, an individual critique that targets an individual, in the sense of denouncing someone to the authorities for the purpose of having a sanction applied. (Boltanski, 2012, 169).

## 2. Terms of Denunciation

Three pivotal acts of denunciations appear to be at play in the public thematization of the affair just outlined: the economy's first solution to the crisis, the right to in-person education associated with the right to work, and the importance of in-person learning in mitigating social inequalities.

### 2.1. *The economy first solution to the crisis*

The central point of this denunciation is the idea that the political management of the coronavirus crisis favored the economy over the rights and the necessities of the people, in general, and over the right of pupils to get in-person education, in particular, as Gianna Fregonara and Monica Guerzoni (2021) wrote in the *Corriere della Sera*:

Closing schools is more straightforward than reopening them, as it is for bars, restaurants, swimming pools, or gyms. But if the economic establishments are (rightly) compensated, families are told to fend for themselves. Among political parties and local administrators, there is also who, looking at the GDP, would like to keep schools closed while leaving open business. Several ministers gave battle in the latest government meeting to link the stop of in-person education to the closure of shops and other economic activities.

The fiercest denouncers of this injustice have been all the different components of the in-person learning movement. For example, the most notorious slogan of 'Priorità alla Scuola', possibly the most prominent, organization promoting in-person education in the country, is: «the last to close, the first to reopen». Central to this denunciation is the state of neglect and insufficient funding that characterizes the educational system in Italy and the request for a restorative solution through the allocation of a large number of institutional and financial resources to public education.

The government won't change its course because schools are always the first to close. The situation is getting even worst than before because schools are being closed without applying any distinction. «Closing schools is still being used as a way to compensate the fact that all the rest is being left open» – said Costanza Margiotta, a professor of philosophy of law at the University of Padua and activist of the movement 'Priorità alla Scuola'. «The issue here is to consider school as an essential service, meet the requirements of protocols, organize public transportation and provide everyone with a vaccine. All things that are not happening. [...] The virus still circulates if schools are closed, but all the rest remains open» (Ciccarelli, 2021).

The pupils are the central victims of this denunciation, although the decision to close schools and educational facilities before other segments

of the economy is perceived as a failure of society as a whole, as Chiara Saraceno, one the most prominent sociologist of the family of the country, well points out in an editorial article published on the newspaper *La Stampa*:

Indeed, it is unclear what type of essential needs is satisfied by the opportunity to buy a bottle of wine or have access to a takeout meal in the face of the apparent secondary importance of educational needs I am not questioning the need, in a context where contagion is rising, of avoiding pupils sharing the same spaces for several hours, nor the necessity to prevent large gatherings at schools' entrances or on public transit – even if little has been done to make these places safe. Several other countries are adopting restrictive measures. But they are doing so with much more coherence: if closures are needed, then everything should be closed to avoid having schools becoming the only place unsafe, while youngsters and children could joyfully meet in the takeout facilities, in the parks, or in private homes despite official bans.

### *2.2 The right to in-person education/the right to work*

The second act of denunciation has the issue of work-life balance at its core. Among all the condemnations originating from the affair under consideration, this is the one in which the necessity to clarify who and what should be considered essential in the management of the COVID-19 health crisis emerges as being more crucial. Central in this denunciation is the idea that attending school in presence does not just offer an unmatched way for pupils to get educated: it also allows their parents to go to work to meet the end's means.

To decide whose children have the right to access to in-person education opens up to two significant injustices: the first one is to deny children their right to have access to in-person education based on their parents' profession, the second is to refuse to their parents the possibility to go to work. In this denunciation, school is intended as a societal responsibility and, especially for families with younger children, as a fundamental part of the welfare system, as Chiara Saraceno once again points out:

[Closing] nurseries and probably all kindergartens mean to leave once again on the shoulders of families, and in particular of mothers, the tasks of taking care of all the educational needs of their children, of their socialization and of the development of their autonomies. All processes that, especially in early childhood, need to be taken care of in spaces and relationships outside of the family. That without addressing the life-work balance problems that this situation generates, putting in jeopardy the work of those women who had been 'so lucky' not to have lost their job in the past few months.

The denouncers of this injustice were to the largest extent the parents of the children in the areas where schools were closing, who were often

required to organize themselves to accommodate the consequences of the closures in a very short time:

In the social media accounts of the [Lombardy] region, many have reported their disdain: «they [the government, ed] forgot to renew the possibility to access parental leave, and Fontana [the governor of Lombardy, ed] decides to close the school after having claimed for weeks that we deserved to be considered a yellow area» writes Stefania. «They complained of the central government, but they are as well making decisions on their own», Giuliana comments. And again, «if parents are at work, the children must stay with their grandparents? We should have been given the time to get organized» or «the rising of COVID-19 cases should be put under control, but couldn't they have acted sooner?». (Roberto Maggioni, *Il Manifesto*)

The children left at home and their families are identified as the principal victims of this denunciation. However, in particular, among the parents, women are addressed as victims of this situation. With the children at home, women often took up more family and domestic work than their male counterparts, reducing their professional working hours to support and take care of their home-schooled children (Alon *et al.*, 2020; Cook, Grimshaw, 2021; Minello *et al.*, 2020) as Rita Querzè well explains on the pages of the *Corriere della sera*:

In January, the special parental leave connected to the health crisis has ceased to exist. Mothers are forced to use their vacations to stay at home with their kids if they are quarantined, or if schools are being closed. A condition that will become more and more common in the next few weeks due to the targeted lockdowns that will be registered all over Italy. Men should also take this problem seriously, at least in theory. What happens, in reality, is that women take over 75% of care work. Of the 101 thousand jobs that have been lost since the beginning of the crisis, 99 thousand were performed by women in the most affected part of the economy. Now the risk is that the mothers that are still working will have problems in keeping their jobs.

### *2.3 The importance of in-person learning in mitigating social inequalities*

Central for the third denunciation is the idea that education is a fundamental right of children. Besides providing knowledge, opportunities for socialization, and autonomy to the pupils, schools and educational facilities also work as social equalizer. As such, reinstating distant learning means harming the most fragile sectors of the student body: those with fewer resources and without a solid network, thus reinforcing social inequalities. This denunciation makes wide use of data on the impact of education on social mobility, and finds its central claim in the idea that closing the schools enhances the danger of widening the school dropout rate, in a country that is already struggling to keep its

students in school, as Raffaella Milano, the director of the Italian programs of Save the Children reminds in a public note:

We are at risk of seeing a solid increase in educational poverty, an already relevant problem in our country. Besides losing learning opportunities, the difficulties faced in accessing online learning for children and teenagers living in the least-favored contexts could lead to a loss of motivation and in growing isolation that could easily lead to school drop-out, an issue that today in Italy already affects the 14.5% of the population in school age.

The denouncers of this injustice have been the members of civil society, led by those organizations specialized in children's rights advocating against the inequalities perpetuated by the digital divide. As for the victims, the pupils are the principal victims of this denunciation: stripped away of their rights and of all the opportunities that in-person education could offer to them, left alone to confront their problems with access, connectivity, and loneliness. However, also in this denunciation society appears to be on the losing side: dropping the battle over in-person education and school drop-out is a sign of a deep social and cultural impoverishment.

We need to face the type of culture that emerges behind certain declarations, almost pleased on what appears to be a defeat for society as a whole. We also need to face the misestimation that pervades the social function accorded to school and the tendency to consider instruction something of aleatory value, a bargaining chip for the political market. Closing schools is not considered a last resort that should be defended at every cost, as it happens in other countries, where in-person education is considered a question of principle. [...] The consequences and the inequalities produced by this situation over our children are there for all to see (Marco Imarisio, *Corriere della Sera*).

## **Conclusions**

The critical workers' affair follows several acts of public denunciation that were carried out in the early days of March 2021 by different members of the Italian civil society. The affair lies in a definition «politically negotiated and reflective of power, relations between capital and labor mediated by the state» (Stevano *et al.*, 2020), identifies several victims, and mobilized different resources at the private at the institutional level. More in general, the affair unveils a profound institutional crisis that has the request of justice at its core. In this scenario, access to in-person education has emerged as one of the central battlegrounds in Italy in the negotiation of civil rights during the pandemic. As a matter of fact, around the access to in person education civil rights have been socially reclaimed



and renegotiated amid the state of precariouness dictated by the pandemic.

## References

- Alon, T., Doepke, M., Olmstead-Rumsey, J., Tertilt, M. (2020). *This Time It's Different: The Role of Women's Employment in a Pandemic Recession*, [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w26947/w26947.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w26947/w26947.pdf). Accessed on 15 May.
- Boltanski, L. (2012), *Love and Justices as Competences*. Cambridge, UK, Polity Press.
- Boratto, L. (2020), *Migliaia di genitori che svolgono lavori essenziali o hanno figli disabili: Per noi la scuola deve restare aperta*, <https://www.lastampa.it/cuneo/2021/03/05/news/migliaia-di-genitori-che-svolgono-lavori-essenziali-o-hanno-figli-disabili-per-noi-la-scuola-deve-restare-aperta-1.39987410>.
- Bourke, B. (2014), «Positionality: Reflecting on the Research Process», *The qualitative report*, 19 (33), 1-9.
- Ciccarelli, R. (2021). *La scuola resta un ostaggio nel Far West delle regioni*, <https://ilmanifesto.it/la-scuola-resta-un-ostaggio-nel-far-west-delle-regioni/>.
- Cook, R., Grimshaw, D. (2021), «A gendered lens on COVID-19 employment and social policies in Europe», *European Societies*, 23 (sup1), 215-27.
- Fregonara, G., Guerzoni, M. (2021). *Adesso occorre difendere le famiglie*, [https://www.corriere.it/editoriali/21\\_marzo\\_02/adesso-occorre-difendere-famiglie-a379f39c-7b99-11eb-a9cc-1eebe11a6a7c.shtml?refresh\\_ce-cp](https://www.corriere.it/editoriali/21_marzo_02/adesso-occorre-difendere-famiglie-a379f39c-7b99-11eb-a9cc-1eebe11a6a7c.shtml?refresh_ce-cp).
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books.
- Giannoli, V. (2021). *COVID-19, firmato il primo Dpcm di Draghi: scuole chiuse in zona rossa. Stretta anche sulle zone ad alto contagio*, [https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2021/03/02/news/COVID\\_cabina\\_di\\_regia\\_con\\_draghi\\_oggi\\_il\\_nuovo\\_dpcm-289861667/](https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2021/03/02/news/COVID_cabina_di_regia_con_draghi_oggi_il_nuovo_dpcm-289861667/)
- Gieri, F. (2021). *Zona Rossa Bologna Scuola: Sanitari, Vigili e Autisti. 'I Nostri Figli in Classe'*, <https://www.ilrestodelcarlino.it/bologna/cronaca/zona-rossa-bologna-scuola-1.6093751>. Accessed on 10 May 2021.
- Haraway, D. (1988). «Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective», *Feminist Studies*, 14 (3), 575-99.
- Imarisio, M. (2021). *Scuole and governatori le parole di una sconfitta*, [https://www.corriere.it/opinioni/21\\_marzo\\_03/scuola-governatori-parole-una-sconfitta-d0dcab64-7c51-11eb-bc48-454efd4893c8.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/opinioni/21_marzo_03/scuola-governatori-parole-una-sconfitta-d0dcab64-7c51-11eb-bc48-454efd4893c8.shtml). Accessed on 5 May 2021.
- Maggioni, R. (2021). «'Arancione rafforzato', di colpo la Lombardia chiude le scuole», *Il Manifesto*, 05 March.
- Minello, A., Martucci, S., Manzo, L.K. (2020), «The Pandemic and the Academic Mothers: Present Hardships and Future Perspectives», *European Societies*, 1-13.
- Ministry of Education, (2020). *Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei ministri del 2 marzo 2021 and nota prot. AOODPIT del 4 marzo 2021, 343*.