# Continuity and discontinuity at school: institutional tensions and pedagogical trajectories in the Italian education system

*Continuità e discontinuità a scuola: orientamenti istituzionali e traiettorie pedagogiche nel sistema educativo italiano*

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abstract

*This paper outlines the debate concerning the ongoing fragmentation of the school experience for 3- to 14-year-old students in Italy, despite the setting up of Istituti Comprensivi that bring groups of nursery, primary, and lower secondary schools together under a single management structure. When discontinuity is intentionally planned, it helps teachers to stimulate growth and development in children. At the same time, building relationships between people and schools in such a way as to facilitate continuity can also be a deliberate strategy for fostering learning and growth. We focus here on the causes of continuity and discontinuity in students' learning paths and in the present curriculum (based on the 2012 National Curricular Guidelines), approaching the topic from an institutional perspective and drawing on the results of a qualitative study of teachers' practices and perceptions to point out both the tensions and the trajectories inherent in the current model.*

**Keywords:** *Educational (dis)continuity, Primary school, Lower secondary school, Trajectories*

Il contributo presenta il dibattito sulla frammentazione dell'esperienza scolastica di studenti tra i 3 ai 14 anni nella scuola italiana (scuola dell'infanzia, scuola primaria e scuola secondaria di primo grado) nonostante siano stati istituiti gli Istituti Comprensivi. Le discontinuità, se pianificate e agite intenzionalmente dagli insegnanti, sono scelte con lo scopo di supportare e facilitare la crescita e lo sviluppo dei bambini. Allo stesso tempo anche la costruzione di legami che consentano continuità, tra le persone e le organizzazioni scolastiche, è progettata con gli stessi scopi. Il nostro focus è sulle cause delle continuità e delle discontinuità nell'apprendimento degli studenti e nel curricolo (Indicazioni Nazionali 2012) attuale da una prospettiva istituzionale e tramite risultati di uno studio qualitativo sulle percezioni e sulle pratiche degli insegnanti. Lo scopo è mettere in evidenza sia le tensioni che le traiettorie attuali.

**Parole chiave:** Continuità/discontinuità educativa, Scuola Primaria, Scuola Secondaria di primo grado, Traiettorie

# Continuity and discontinuity at school: institutional tensions and pedagogical trajectories in the Italian education system

## 1. Desired continuity, perceived discontinuity: the question of transitions

In this paper, we review the development of the concept of continuity in Italian pedagogy and illustrate the forms in which it is embodied, examining the tensions and "trajectories" currently emerging within the unified school system for children and adolescents aged 3 to 14 years. To this end, let us first define what is understood by continuity and discontinuity in education. First, defining continuity requires us to integrate the notions of personal development and institutional action, progression and institutional continuity. More, specifically the concept of continuity may be defined from an outside perspective – in terms of the structuring and organisation of education cycles – or from an inside perspective – in terms of the development of the pupils living out this school experience (Calidoni, 1985). From the internal point of view, we think of continuity in terms of a progression. Progression describes pupils' educational experience and the ways in which they develop their skills, knowledge and understanding in increasingly challenging situations. At the same time, continuity is related to the way the educational system facilitates and structures experience to provide pupils with a sufficient level of challenge and enable them to make progress within a recognizable curricular landscape (Braund, Driver, 2005). If we explore students' beliefs concerning the relationship between the idea of continuity and institutional organization, we realize that the theoretical notion of continuity and declared legislative purposes can be distant from institutional reality. Indeed, international research (Braund, Driven, 2005 shows that – despite attempts to implement vertical curricula, lower secondary students are typically asked to repeat activities already done

at  primary school, in the same kind of learning context and using identical procedures.

Despite numerous institutional projects aimed at bringing teachers from the different school cycles in contact with one another, with a view to connecting school contents and activities across the different levels of schooling, secondary school teachers do not habitually take students' prior learning experiences into account or build on them to design new learning pathways. Rather, lower secondary school teachers are sceptical about the learning attained by their students at primary school and the grounding provided by primary school teachers, which they sometimes even describe as scientifically flawed. Therefore, they "start from scratch" when planning their lessons (Braund, Driven, 2005). Specifically in relation to the Italian school system, a joint Italian-Brazilian study on continuity and discontinuity in the 0-10 system (Walburga Dos Santos et al., 2015) suggested that continuity across the education system is weak, both due to a lack of strong relationships between teachers of different levels and also because teachers in general do not have an adequate background in developmental psychology. Furthermore, this research showed that the most critical years for students are the first year of each new level of schooling, which have been termed "years of transition": The discontinuity driving the crises associated with years of transition is due to the tendency of primary, and especially secondary, teachers to force conceptual leaps in the first year of the new cycle, as well as expecting students to quickly perform to a more advanced standard, particularly in terms of producing memorized knowledge and acquiring executive competences. For example, there can be a shift from spaces used to create centres of interest to spaces that are rigidly laid out using furnishings such as desks; from a more intimate relationship with a smaller number of teachers to the encounter with a larger group of adult figures whose relational styles can be detached and impersonal; from a close relationship between school and families to contact that is increasingly intermittent and, above all, more bureaucratic and emptied of its original meaning as a space for discussion and dialogue concerning the students' educational path. The plurality of educational models and teaching-learning approaches characterizing the various education cycles is perceived as an advantage when it matches students' evolving needs and potential

for development, but becomes an obstacle to learning when the students do not fully understand the reasons for these differences, when students are not made aware of the aims of the educational programme, and when demands are made of the students that are not fully in line their current stage of development. Last but not least, there is a major gap between the macro-system (national education plans or objectives set by the Ministry) and the objectives of microsystems in terms of local school curricula, as observed by Walburga Dos Santos et al. (2015). Despite changes introduced via the Law on School Autonomy, schools still seem to oscillate between the pursuit of the distant objectives of the macrosystem and excessively fragmented microsystemic goals (in terms of individual teachers' exercise of professional independence in the classroom).

## 2. Toward a mixed system: national governance, local autonomy

Nonetheless, the 1980s and 1990s saw many new developments within Italian pedagogy and changes to the school curriculum. First, a new field of research yielded interesting results which in turn has prompted a stimulating debate. Studies in this field drew on a Vygotskian perspective, according to which the "prehistory" to teachers' practices and decision-making is the children's previous experience and knowledge. Rather than equating continuity with the absence of change, such a perspective views it as a progressive series of changes, throughout which the current and potential knowledge and skills of the pupils guide the gradual modification of the educational offering; in other words, there is discontinuity, but it is built into an essentially continuous framework. This line of inquiry suggested that opting for educational continuity does not mean believing in absolute stability, denying radical change in the form of leaps, or fearing the role of that which is unforeseen, new, or frustrating. Rather, it means better monitoring the ways in which differentiation is implemented and in what sequence, within institutional configurations that must simultaneously ensure aspects of both continuity and differentiation in keeping with Dewey, research on continuity points to a view of teaching (and teachers) as "mediators between the child's individual experience and

systematic human experience as expressed through the different cultures" (Pontecorvo, 1989, pp. 14-15). Hence educational continuity is given by carefully sequenced progressive differentiation, within institutional frameworks that simultaneously offer both continuity and differentiated contents and methods. According to this new perspective, the institutional framework should facilitate a better match between children's developmental processes – which are subject to a strong degree of individual variation, in terms of the modes, pace and extent of development (given intra-individual variability in the cognitive, emotional, and socio-emotional domains) – and specific learning contexts and situations (symbolic and cultural systems, educational methods, the organization of time and space in learning environments). Furthermore, the concepts of prerequisites or preparatory work on which the Italian school system was (and largely still is) based, now appeared inadequate and impractical, because individual development was no longer seen as proceeding through strictly ordered and cumulative stages, as suggested by the early work of Piaget. Rather, the new perspective advocated an ecological and systemic approach in which transitions at the individual level or transitions between learning contexts would be the object of special educational attention; the outcome would be an approach to curriculum design and educational planning that – via gradual and well-defined changes – would certainly pursue prescribed target outcomes, but modulating them to match individual needs. Hence, rather than general levels of development, this perspective envisaged key phases unfolding within specific cognitive and symbolic systems. Only in the 1990s, however, did these inputs from educational psychology research translate into institutional change, via legislative and structural measures designed to bring about the implementation of a unified and continuous curriculum. This institutional move to promote continuity was both stimulated and facilitated by the notion of school autonomy. Beginning in the late 1990s, the concept of "School Autonomy" underpinned the reform of the Italian education system and the reorganization of Italian schools (Law 59/1997, Article 21). "Organizational autonomy" refers to the freedom of individual schools to adapt the school calendar, define the overall timetable and the time allotted to individual school subjects, and flexibly allocate teacher resources

across any given education cycle. In parallel with this "school autonomy", the central state system formally provides curricular guidelines, general organization and recruitment support, and is the legal employer of school staff, in fulfilment of Article 3 in the Italian Constitution which establishes, among other principles, that it is the duty of the Republic to remove any social or economic obstacles that in practice limit the freedom and equality of citizens, or impede their full development as human persons; in a democratic society, this rests on the provision of schooling for all. Nevertheless, individual schools retain considerable administrative and organizational independence.

## 3. Strengths and weaknesses of the unitary curriculum in the *istituti comprensivi* ['comprehensive institutes']

During the period under discussion, the Italian school system underwent an extraordinary institutional reform, going from being a segmented system split into three levels – preschool (23,336 schools in Italy); primary school (18,013 schools in Italy); lower secondary school (8,270 schools in Italy) – to a unified system in which the *Istituto Comprensivo* gathered groups of pre-primary, primary, and lower secondary schools together to form unified organizational and administrative units (5,028 Institutes in Italy). The history of the "comprehensive institute" began almost by chance in 1994, in the context of a law on the protection of mountain areas (Law No. 97 of 31-1-1994), but the redefining of education units continued throughout the 1990s. Integration among the different school cycles within the *Istituto Comprensivo* often remains a formal aspect that does not necessarily translate into a unified educational agenda and curriculum. We might say, to borrow the words of Cerini, that the *Istituto Comprensivo* is more like a federation (Cerini, 2018) of nursery, primary and lower secondary schools, three educational institutions that maintain their own individual identity, within a model based on a unified teaching staff and educational design teams. As things stand, we can confidently suggest that the *Istituti Comprensivi* play a key role in encouraging the exchange of ideas and a reflexive approach among teachers.

In parallel with these organizational reforms in the area of "school

autonomy", European directives and consequently Italian ones called for a curriculum based on the acquisition of competences rather than the accumulation of knowledge.

Competence is understood here as an intelligent, conscious, and metacognitive use of knowledge and skills as well as the ability to transfer them to new situations. The new curriculum has a spiral structure, and each level of schooling is viewed as in continuity with the others. The main features of the unified, competence-based curriculum are:

– Unity: consistency between curricula across the different levels of schooling;
– Specificity: emphasizing the specific role and mandate of each level of school;
– Flexibility: catering for the educational needs of individuals and groups, including through the provision of optional and extra activities.

These reforms of both educational institutions and educational culture offer greater flexibility for adapting to different learning situations. As stated earlier, the present model does not emphasize prerequisites for learning or preparation for learning. Rather, an ecological approach is recommended that proceeds through graduated steps towards standard learning goals, which have been modulated to suit individual needs and the specific learning environment. Design is the new core concept that replaces the previous planning perspective, while national curricular guidelines replace programs. New keywords that recur in the international literature and the regulatory documents include: complexity and competences, metacognition, and technological innovation (Gambula, 2009). However, despite the fact that terms such as continuity and "vertical" connections are key components of the pedagogical lexicon in Italian schools, teachers' satisfaction with the concrete repercussions of these concepts is very limited (Cerini, 2012).

Today, many comprehensive institutes have begun to set up their own working groups in vertical curriculum design, which bring together teachers from across the different levels of schooling that work in the same disciplinary area or field of experience. Such initiatives

usually represent a novelty for the members of the teaching community, who are often interacting with one another for the first time. They often lead to the identification of a graduated and orderly sequence of specific learning contents and objectives, ranging from the simplest to the most complex, and distributed over the 3 to 14 years age range. The joint drafting of the unified curriculum can represent the construction of a new cultural model, or remain an exercise in fulfilling a bureaucratic requirement. Cerini (2008) listed the difficulties that come in the way of vertical curriculum design:

– The fact that the teachers at the different levels of schooling have followed markedly different professional development paths, not only in terms of their initial training, but also in terms of their leading skills and areas of expertise
– The fact that teachers find it challenging to practice active and experiential methods of teaching-learning that require frequent revisiting of learning contents
– The formal requirement for teachers to conduct assessment given their lack of familiarity with assessment tools
– The impact of teachers' beliefs and stereotypes concerning the different levels of schooling and different modes of childhood learning.


## 4. Current challenges and direction for future professional development

From a multisystemic perspective, learning is built beyond the predefined times and spaces, therefore, it can be activated and simultaneously supported by different contexts of participation within and outside of education (Tuomi-Grohn, Engestrom, 2003). This learning perspective includes dialogical and socio-cultural theories (Valsiner & Van der Veer, 2000; Wertsch, 1991), the theory of historical-cultural activity (Engestrom, 1987, 2001) and ecological development theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The learning process is located, i.e. influenced by the individual's life contexts and specific learning situations, but at the same time it evolves dynamically in a completely individual way through the encounter with situations, activities and interactions

not necessarily prefigured in a curriculum. In this regard, the conceptualization of learning through contexts, widespread in the literature on the crossing of boundaries, is enlightening.

(see for a review by Akkerman, Bakker, 2011). Based on the third generation of the theory of historical-cultural activities (Engestrom 1987, 2001) and from situated and socio-cultural approaches to learning (Lave, Wenger, 1991), this literature provides a key to multi-layered reading of learning and interaction between contexts. At a systemic level, contexts are defined as practices or systems of activities that are culturally and historically informed, but continuously (re)created and in transformation thanks to the intentions and activities in progress, and therefore to the sense (De Vecchi, 2010) that people find effective for their engagement (Engestrom, 2009).

This theoretical framework bases the main challenges also in teacher education:

– To develop an evolutionary vision of the student by comparing beliefs of learning during different ages of life.
– Building pathways of continuity and bidirectional discontinuity in which, according to the logic of "doing differently" and not of "doing things first".
– New idea of school based on dynamic idea of competence, an ecological conception of the curriculum, from a co-evolutionary representation of the teaching-learning process.

To answer to these challenges, the international research has conducted new studies connected to the lifelong learning cultural debate. By using the term 'learning lives' (Erstad, Sefton-Green, 2013), the curriculum has been analysed and transformed in the idea of "trajectory", by which the objective become to explore learning as a trajectory beyond situated educational contexts, such as classrooms and schools, or other non formal learning contexts . The notion of trajectory, "provides analytical means for understanding learning activities across time and space. Learning and participation trajectories are closely linked to identity as a 'capacity for particular forms of action and hence a capacity to interpret and use environmental affordances to support action' (Edwards, Mackenzie, 2008, p. 165)" (Estad, 2015, p. 11). Crossing bor-

ders is a process of establishment of continuity of action and interaction between the different social components and cultural practices to which a person belongs. Multi-system perspectives recognise that learning evolves beyond the predetermined time of curricula and is organised in individual school settings and that it can be triggered and supported by different contexts of people's participation (Bronkhorst, Akkerman 2017). From a perspective of upward continuity, there is the space linked to the activity that the teacher plans for his pupils, but it also exists a time that is declined in different ways: there is a time of children's learning, a personal time that each takes to appropriate a concept and then there is a time linked to the evolutionary development of the children. In order to be able to design in the perspective of "trajectory" rather than "curricula", the teacher must take into account the interactions of all these mentioned dimensions. Maria Montessori had already proposed a revision of the teaching-learning process starting from experience: observation, the definition of general and particular objectives of competence, identification of procedures and tools suitable and consistent with their achievement, then new observations that evaluate, question, lead to redesign, in a recursive process that must never be stopped. Montessori was also among the first ones to try to investigate the specificities of childhood and adolescence, defining phases of development, defined by the "plans", specific needs and interests and to consider the subject in its entirety and complexity, in its physical, psychic, cognitive, emotional, closely interconnected constituents. She then claimed the rights of the child and young adult, first and foremost respect for his or her freedom of development. In addition to the design of spaces, furnishings, and materials, this idea of trajectory able to consider among the different declinations of "time" mentioned is also found in the definition of Curriculum which is precisely organized on conceptual cores and generative foundations. In other words, it is a matter of creating an integrated curriculum, organized around the axes of knowledge and articulated according to the main junctions, in which learning allows the construction of highly transferable cognitive patterns. In this perspective, teachers are finally released from the compulsory standard program that sometimes constitutes their primary resistance to all proposals for changing their way of thinking and acting in school education.

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