

# The multi-dimensional politics of education policy in the knowledge economy: The case of Italy (1996–2008)

Niccolo Durazzi<sup>1</sup>  | Emmanuele Pavolini<sup>2</sup> | Fabio Battaglia<sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

<sup>2</sup>Department of Political Sciences, Communication and International Relations, University of Macerata, Macerata, Italy

<sup>3</sup>Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

## Correspondence

Niccolo Durazzi, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK.  
Email: [niccolo.durazzi@ed.ac.uk](mailto:niccolo.durazzi@ed.ac.uk)

## Abstract

Despite rhetorical agreement amongst all major political-economic actors around the importance of education policy in the knowledge economy, the reform of education systems remains a complex political endeavour. The article explores the politics of education policy by focussing on its multi-dimensionality. It argues that education systems simultaneously perform three functions: they distribute educational opportunities; they provide skills to the labour market; and they are a source of public sector employment. It is argued that policy change in one dimension is likely to trigger spill-over effects onto the others, giving rise to complex political dynamics at the intersection of the parliamentary and corporatist arenas. It is in this context that centre-left and centre-right parties (try to) pursue distributional goals whilst being pressured by different interest groups. The theoretical argument is explored empirically through a detailed reconstruction of over a decade of intense reform activity in the Italian upper-secondary education system.

## KEYWORDS

education, early years and schooling, education, vocational, politics of social and public policies

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This article aims to offer theoretical insights on the political tensions that characterise education policy in the knowledge economy. We examine primarily two political arenas, namely the parliamentary and corporatist arenas (Carstensen and Emmenegger, introduction to the special issue) and the interaction between them. In particular, we show how actors in the corporatist arena might weaken the reformist efforts stemming from the parliamentary arena and gradually pull the latter closer to their preferences.

We focus on three dimensions of education systems: (i) distributing educational opportunities, (ii) providing skills, and (iii) providing public sector employment. Whilst the political dynamics underpinning each dimension have been traditionally analysed separately in the literature, we argue that these three dimensions interact and give rise to political spill-overs making the reform of education policy a complex endeavour, despite rhetorical agreement amongst all major political-economic actors around the importance of education on both equity and efficiency grounds in the context of the knowledge economy.

To probe the argument empirically, we focus on the politics of upper-secondary education policy in Italy from the mid-1990s through the mid-2000s, when after three decades of policy inaction intense reform efforts began. The beginning of a reformist era in education policy in the mid-1990s is per se not surprising. This is exactly when advanced capitalist countries started ‘chasing’ knowledge-based growth (Hall, 2020) and, as education is unanimously considered a necessary condition for this to happen, governments are expected to attune education systems to the challenges of the knowledge economy. Yet, a closer look at these reforms poses some puzzles: why did a decade of reform activity lead to an upper-secondary education system that looks remarkably similar to how it looked prior to the reformist period? Why did the alignment between interest groups and political parties hardly follow established patterns? In particular, why were business associations amongst the fiercest critics of some measures promoted by the centre-right, whilst unions opposed a reform proposed by the centre-left that addressed their long-standing request of increasing equality of educational opportunity? Building on recent advancements in the literature, we suggest that solving these puzzles requires (i) placing the multi-dimensionality of education policy front and centre of the analysis (cf. Carstensen & Ibsen, 2021) and (ii) theorising how centre-left and centre-right parties are pressured by different interest groups whilst they (try to) pursue distributional goals to the advantage of their constituencies (cf. Giudici et al., 2022).

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the existing literature on the politics of education policy; Section 3 builds on the existing literature to advance a theoretical argument centred on the interaction between multiple dimensions of education policy; Section 4 presents the research design and the process of data collection; Section 5 provides the empirical evidence by reconstructing and explaining a decade of reform in Italian upper-secondary education; finally, Section 6 discusses the findings and concludes.

## 2 | THREE DIMENSIONS OF EDUCATION POLICY – AND THEIR POLITICS

Existing literature highlights three crucial—and highly politicised—functions of upper secondary education systems: they distribute educational opportunities; they provide skills to the labour market; and they constitute an important source of public sector employment.<sup>1</sup> The literature associates these functions with distinct underlying political dynamics.

‘Education as distribution of opportunities’ has crucial importance in the transition to the knowledge economy in the broader re-alignment of welfare states towards social investment states. In this context, social policy is seen as a preparatory—rather than reparatory—tool and education is tasked with a crucial role in preparing individuals to thrive in complex societies (Morel et al., 2011). Yet, how to distribute educational opportunities is heavily shaped by the partisan coloration of governments. The presence and rigidity of tracking (i.e., streaming pupils into different educational paths – typically juxtaposing general/academically-oriented education with professional/vocational training) has been singled out in the literature as a crucial element shaping the extent to which educational opportunities are distributed in more or less egalitarian ways (cf. Pfeffer, 2008): early and rigid tracking dampens the expansion of educational opportunities as it tends to reproduce existing inequalities; weak tracking (as for instance in

comprehensive systems) tends to equalise educational opportunities. The presence of left cabinets has been identified as a crucial variable to explain the emergence of egalitarian education systems characterised by weak tracking and comprehensive schooling (Osterman, 2017; Wiborg, 2010). Thus, this literature suggests that stark partisan differences are expected to emerge in the distributional dimension of education.

'Education as skill formation' is of no less importance in the transition to the knowledge economy. As technological advancements reshape labour markets, it is crucial that education and training systems meet (changing) skill requirements if they are to effectively insure individuals against labour market risks. Crucial to this dimension is not so much the distribution of students within the education system but rather the skills content of educational programmes. Political dynamics also differ. Partisan politics takes the back seat and producer groups politics comes to the fore, with a crucial role assigned to employers and their associations (Culpepper, 2003; Thelen, 2004). In countries where skill formation takes place through extensive company-based training (e.g., apprenticeships), employers have often imposed their policy preferences onto governments by threatening to otherwise disinvest from training (Bonoli & Emmenegger, 2021; Busemeyer, 2012; Durazzi & Geyer, 2022a). But even in instances of 'low co-dependence' between states and business (as in countries without apprenticeships), governments have actively sought consent—if not direction—from business (Benassi et al., 2022; Durazzi, 2021). Indeed, incorporating business preferences has a political appeal that stretches across party lines: for centre-right parties it can be framed as serving the needs of business in a competitive economy, whilst the centre-left can frame the alignment between educational provision and labour market needs as a way to foster smooth school-to-work transitions for young people (Durazzi, 2019).

A third important dimension is that of 'education as public sector employment'. Whilst policy-makers do not tend to explicitly frame education policy as a source of employment, important actors—teacher unions above all—mobilise on this issue. This strand of literature is concerned primarily with the ways in which reforms impact teachers' working conditions in terms of pay, career opportunities, evaluation or control (Dobbins & Christ, 2019; Moe & Wiborg, 2016; Schneider, 2021). This literature shows that since the 1980s policy-makers both from the left and the right subscribed to the paradigm of 'performance-based' reforms in education, which 'threatened to translate into less control over jobs and policy for the unions and far greater scrutiny of what teachers do and how well they do it' (Moe & Wiborg, 2016, p. 289). In this context, teacher unions emerged as 'the leading opponents of reform' (Moe & Wiborg, 2016, p. 8).

This brief review of the literature allowed us to discern three political dynamics – partisan politics, producer group deals and (teacher) unions' bargaining underpinning respectively the educational opportunities, skill formation and public employment dimensions of education systems. In the next section, we illustrate how the three dimensions are tightly linked and how—therefore—political dynamics in the parliamentary and corporatist arenas intersect.

### 3 | MULTI-DIMENSIONALITY AND CORPORATIST CONSTRAINTS TO PARTISAN POLITICS IN THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

The central theoretical contention that this article seeks to develop is that the three dimensions of education policy outlined above are tightly inter-linked in the transition to the knowledge economy. This contrasts with existing literature that tends to assess them separately or to only focus on the interaction between two of three dimensions (but see Carstensen & Ibsen, 2021 and Giudici et al., 2022 for notable exceptions). These inter-linkages make education a multi-dimensional policy area in which the three political dynamics mentioned above are not isolated but rather interact. Theorising the multi-dimensional politics of education policy requires therefore two steps: first, advancing an argument as to how and why the three dimensions interact; and second, developing theoretical expectations around how actors' navigate this multi-dimensional policy space.

The multi-dimensionality of education policy can be usefully captured by making reference to the two main levers that governments have at their disposal to run and reform their education systems: (de-)stratification and (de-)standardisation (cf. Allmendinger, 1989; Giudici et al., 2022). Seminal work by Allmendinger (1989, p. 233) defines stratification as 'the proportion of a cohort that attains the maximum number of school years provided by the educational system, coupled with the degree of differentiation within given educational levels (tracking)' and

standardisation as ‘the degree to which the quality of education meets the same standards nationwide’ measured by variables ‘such as teachers’ training, school budgets, curricula, and the uniformity of school-leaving examinations’.

Operating the (de-)stratification and (de-)standardisation levers is likely to have far-reaching implications across the three dimensions of education policy. Let us consider them in turn. Operating the de-stratification lever increases the educational opportunities for larger shares of the population, by keeping pupils in the education system for longer and/or by keeping them in the same type of school (cf. Pfeffer, 2008). Either features benefit pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds disproportionately more than their better off peers. Yet, it has also been noted how such a movement is likely to weaken the vocational emphasis of the system, which is often dependent on early and rigid tracking (Bol & Van de Werfhorst, 2013). This trade-off has political consequences: policy-makers will have to respond to the electorate about decisions that affect peoples’ educational opportunities but also to powerful interest groups, such as business (as well as federal unions, as discussed below), about decisions that alter the relationship between educational provision and their skill needs. Whilst it might be legitimately expected that the transition to the knowledge economy has weakened the pervasiveness of this trade-off as knowledge intensive sectors are often portrayed as relying on cognitive and academically-oriented skills, recent research shows that this trade-off is in fact here to stay. Employers still emphasise greatly the vocational orientation of education (Bonoli & Emmenegger, 2022) – although the type of vocational skills that need to be imparted by contemporary education and training systems is very different. In short: employers support an updating of vocational training systems rather than their dismissal in favour of general education.

Acting on the stratification lever, however, also alters the composition of the teacher body by creating more employment opportunities for teachers in some segments of the education system, whilst decreasing them in others (for instance, their distribution between vocational and general education tracks might be re-shaped). Depending on the organisation and composition of teacher unions, it is plausible to expect these organisations to support or oppose (de-)stratifying reforms depending on whether they stand to gain or lose in terms of employment opportunities for their members (Giudici et al., 2022, p. 6). Furthermore, stratification also poses challenges to the union movement that go beyond teacher unions. It could be expected that sectoral unions (e.g., in the manufacturing sector) are likely to be sympathetic towards stratified systems if these are conducive to a stable supply of skilled workers into ‘their own’ sectors. Indeed cross-class coalitions between sectoral unions and employer associations in the skill formation dimension are well documented in the literature (cf. Busemeyer, 2012). Union confederations, on the other hand, are often moved by broader solidaristic principles (Durazzi, 2017) and might therefore welcome the increased social mobility that comes with less stratification. How this intra-union tension is resolved likely depends on the organisational features of unions that vary across countries with respect to, for example, the relative strength of confederations over its affiliates and vice-versa (Durazzi & Geyer, 2022b).

Let us now turn to the standardisation lever. By using the standardisation lever, policy-makers modify the extent to which educational standards are the same nationwide. (De-)standardisation can be achieved in various ways, such as through budget allocation mechanisms and use (e.g., centralised vs. competitive; more or less leeway at school level in managing budgets); teachers working conditions (e.g., differentials in training or performance-related pay); curricula (e.g., more or less leeway for schools to deviate from national curricula); devolution to lower levels of administration (e.g., allowing sub-state levels to deviate from national standards); or private education (e.g., supporting or restraining private provision of education) (Allmendinger, 1989; Giudici et al., 2022). These measures can be used to alter educational opportunities. Giudici et al. (2022, p. 6) show for instance how de-standardising measures have been deployed by centre-right governments to maintain ‘informal elite pathways’ for their constituencies in the context of de-stratifying reforms. But (de-)standardisation has far-reaching implications for the skill formation and public employment dimensions, too. Regarding skill formation, employers might welcome or oppose de-standardisation depending on the specific de-standardising measure. Allowing more ‘freedom’ on curricula at school level might be met with suspicion by employers if they perceive de-standardisation as making the skill certification process less ‘authoritative’ (cf. Busemeyer, 2009), weakening the signalling value of educational credentials and therefore increasing the hiring costs incurred by employers. If de-standardisation takes, say, the form of performance-related budgets, employers might instead welcome such measures that would signal from their

perspective the quality of the skills acquired by students in different schools. Additionally, de-standardisation might allow schools to operate more flexibly and offer opportunities to establish closer links between schools and firms.

Operating the (de-)standardisation lever has even more profound consequences on the employment dimension. Several de-standardising measures have obvious implications for teachers' working conditions as they create segmentation within the workforce and, therefore, undermine solidarity amongst workers (Moe & Wiborg, 2016). Performance-related pay is the biggest threat from the perspective of teacher unions as well as granting more autonomy to individual schools, if that comes with greater managerial power assigned to principals, therefore increasing the degree of control over teachers' work. Indeed, teacher unions have fiercely opposed this type of de-standardising reforms (Moe & Wiborg, 2016).

Having established the inherent multi-dimensionality of education policy, we now need to theorise the strategies that actors are expected to develop to navigate this complex policy space. We argue that in the transition to the knowledge economy, there are aspects of the politics of education policy that unite centre-left and centre-right parties and others that divide them. As such, the political strategies developed by centre-left and centre-right parties will have commonalities as well as differences. The first commonality lies in the shared interest in aligning with business groups. This is not surprising for centre-right parties, given their historical linkages with business groups. As for left-parties, tighter links with business groups have been part of the broader re-orientation of the centre-left in the late 1990s (Farnsworth & Holden, 2006), which has resulted—amongst other things—in a re-conceptualisation of social policies as preparing individuals for success in increasingly complex labour markets (cf. Morel et al., 2011). Ensuring that the education system produces skills in demands from the labour market has therefore strengthened the bond between centre-left and business groups in the transition to the knowledge economy. Second, both the centre-left and centre-right subscribed to the performance-based paradigm in education (Moe & Wiborg, 2016). As such they are both expected to support a de-standardising agenda.<sup>2</sup>

What do we expect then to mark a differentiation in partisan political offer? First, distributional aims are expected to be different. The centre-left in the transition to the knowledge economy has (at least partly) shied away from pursuing equality of outcomes (via social consumption) and privileged equality of opportunities (via social investment) (Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015). Therefore, we expect the centre-left to promote de-stratifying educational reforms to increase educational opportunities of pupils from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Contrarily, we expect the centre-right to be less concerned with this issue and be rather more or less openly concerned with maintaining the advantageous position in the education system of their constituencies from better-off backgrounds (Nelson & Stephens, 2011). Second, the relationship with teacher unions is expected to be an important source of variation in the political strategies of centre-left and centre-right. Teachers—as a prime example of socio-cultural professionals—are an important part of centre-left electorates in the transition to the knowledge economy (Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015); moreover, centre-left parties have on balance stronger organisational ties with (teacher) unions than their centre-right counterparts (Dobbins & Christ, 2019). Thus, we expect centre-left parties to be more attentive to teacher unions' demands, whereas centre-right parties can 'afford' to disregard them.

Building on these considerations, we are able to hypothesise two stylised reform strategies. The centre-left strategy will be a combination of de-stratification and de-standardisation. It will do so, however, cross-pressured by employers and teacher unions. Hence, de-stratification will have to be pursued without weakening the skill formation dimension and de-standardisation without fundamentally altering teachers' working conditions. The centre-right strategy will instead consist of stratification and de-standardisation. The centre-right will be relatively less constrained in pursuing its strategy, the only limitation being that of not weakening the skill formation dimension.

## 4 | RESEARCH DESIGN

The article focuses on upper-secondary education policy in Italy between 1996 and 2008. We think of Italian upper-secondary education policy as most-likely case for the theoretical argument advanced in Section 3. We therefore

employ a most-likely design with exploratory aims: in this set-up, if a theoretical argument that has not yet subject to comprehensive scrutiny is corroborated by empirical evidence in a most-likely setting, it ‘will have survived a “plausibility probe” and may be worthy of further scrutiny’ (King et al., 1994, p. 209). We build precisely on this line of reasoning: to the best of our knowledge, most existing studies of education policy focus on one of the three dimensions identified in Section 2.<sup>3</sup> As such, we think of our study as a step towards an explicit theorisation of the politics of education policy as a three-dimensional interaction between the educational opportunities, skill formation and public employment dimensions.

Three factors contribute to qualifying our case as most likely. First, during the period in question Italy was characterised by far-reaching reforms in education policy, increasing the likelihood that multiple dimensions have been affected. Second, our theoretical approach focuses on three actors: (i) political parties (ii) trade unions, and (iii) employers. In the period under examination, all these actors played relevant roles in the domestic political arena. Third, given that our argument focuses on domestic political dynamics, we select a time period in which these prevail over external constraints of various nature (Jessoula & Pavolini, 2022). In terms of data collection, we relied on several sources that are detailed in the online Appendix.

## 5 | EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE: SECONDARY EDUCATION POLICY IN ITALY (1996–2008)

This section unpacks the politics of education policy by describing how secondary education was organised until the mid-1990s before providing for each of the three reforms examined (i) a summary of the main policy measures and (ii) an analysis of actors’ preferences and their impact on the policy process.

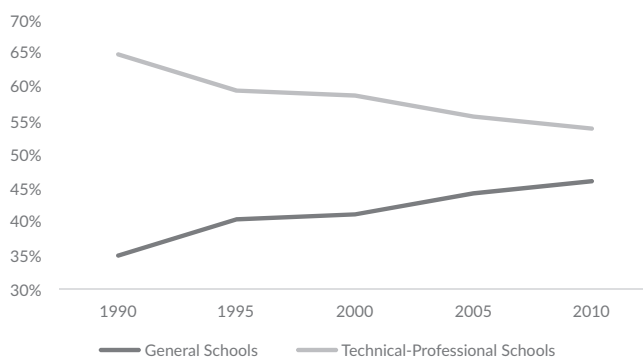
### 5.1 | Secondary education before the mid-1990s reforms

Secondary education had been remarkably stable in Italy for over 30 years. The system was organised around 3 years of common lower-secondary school (between the age of 11 and 14, which also marked the end of compulsory schooling) after which students would opt into one of three upper-secondary tracks: (i) general schools (*licei*), which typically lead to university; (ii) technical schools that are the backbone of the vocational training system and had traditionally supplied workers to the manufacturing sector; and (iii) professional schools, which are also part of the vocational training system but focused on less demanding professional profiles.

Next to tri-partite tracking, two other features characterised the school system. First, standardisation was high, as testified, amongst others, by budgets allocated to schools centrally and curricula set nationally. Second, the teacher labour market was characterised by high job security and pay increases awarded through seniority rather than performance-related mechanisms (Capano, 2011; Gasperoni, 2006). In this context of formal continuity, however, substantive changes took place, too. Families and students had progressively moved away from the technical and professional tracks in favour of general education. As Figure 1 shows, in the early 1990s around 65% of upper secondary students were enrolled in the vocational sub-set of the education system and 35% in the general one, whereas by the end of the 2000s the gap had significantly narrowed. It is against the background of steep and steady decline in the share of students attending the vocational tracks that the debate in the parliamentary and corporatist arenas took place.

### 5.2 | Centre-left (1996–2000): Upskilling through ‘equal opportunities’

The first reform attempt came in 1996 with a centre-left government and with Luigi Berlinguer as Minister of Education. The various legislative initiatives in this period go by the name of Berlinguer Reform, which aimed to raise the



**FIGURE 1** Relative share of students in upper secondary school by track in Italy. Source: own elaboration based on Istat (2010, 2015)

overall educational attainment of the population; provide competences in line with the needs of a knowledge-based society; make schools more autonomous and subject to evaluation; and reward high-performing teachers (Berlinguer, 1997). In 1999, compulsory schooling was increased to the age of 15 (Capano, 2002). Elements of organisational autonomy were also introduced. Within framework conditions set by the state, schools were assigned greater autonomy in how these objectives should be achieved, including management of personnel, supplementary decentralised bargaining, raising additional resources through partnerships with business or philanthropic donations (Campione & Contu, 2019).

In 2000, another major piece of legislation reached parliamentary approval: the re-organisation of secondary schools. Lower-secondary school was abolished and merged with primary school, whose duration consequently increased from 5 to 7 years. Students would then move onto 5 years of secondary education and choose between humanities, science, technology, art, and music. Such streams would take place in different schools but would all nevertheless be called *licei*. In the first 2 years, programmes were similar across areas and students were expected to be able to move easily from one to another until the end of year two, when they would be asked to make a final, informed decision. The last 3 years of secondary schools were supposed to be highly specialist, including practical orientation of study programmes and close ties with local employers. The reform had a major de-stratifying goal: it postponed tracking by 2 years, and created a comprehensive secondary school.

Also in 2000, the reform attempted to introduce a mechanism of performance-related pay for teachers, which was considered as a corollary to increased school's organisational autonomy, to allow those with over 10 years of experience to receive an increase in salary upon successful external evaluation. This part of the reform was never formally passed.

### 5.2.1 | Actors' positions and political dynamics

The main proponent of the reform was the Democratic Party (DP). The reform project is clearly in line with a social investment approach (cf. Morel et al., 2011), testifying to the realignment and modernisation of the DP presenting itself as a left-wing party looking beyond its traditional constituencies and keen on forging new alliances, for example, with business (Salvati, 2003). De-stratification was clear in the denomination of all types of schools as *licei*, which was meant to ensure that all post-secondary options were perceived as equal (Dedoni, 1999), weakening tracking between general education and vocational training was meant to overcome what was identified as 'the real flaw' of the Italian education system (Soave, 1999, p. 4), and increasing compulsory schooling to 16 further de-stratified the system, by including larger shares of the population in the education and training system. Next to de-stratification,

as expected, the centre-left promoted de-standardisation and school autonomy as well as performance-related pay of teachers. The centre-right contested the de-stratification of the system, arguing that a dual path in upper-secondary education, clearly distinguishing between general education and vocational training, would better meet young people's diverse aspirations and talents. Members of parliament from the opposition also pointed at the risk that 'the labour market won't provide any jobs [to *licei* graduates] as they will have neither the skills nor the specific training required by the job opportunities available' (Tonioli, 2000, n/a).

But the most consequential opposition came from the corporatist arena, where business groups and unions mobilised against the reform. Neither employers nor unions objected to the government's aim of increasing equality of educational opportunities. However, both took issue with the spill-over effects of this measure on the skill formation and employment dimensions. Employers were concerned that de-tracking would weaken the vocational emphasis of upper-secondary education, which was guaranteed by the existing technical and professional tracks (Ballarino & Panichella, 2021). Therefore, the government had to engage in lengthy discussions around the future of technical and professional education (Benadusi & Niceforo, 2010). Employers' stance softened over time as they came to appreciate the de-standardisation measures of the reform that were seen as an important element of the modernisation of the education system, whilst their worries around the loss in vocational emphasis were softened by the perspective of stronger specialisation and ties with local employers to be fostered in the last 3 years of the 'new' secondary education system, as well as by the introduction of teacher evaluation procedures and the attempt to make schools more autonomous as—they argued—'schools and different education systems must feel in competition between each other' (l'Espresso, 2000, n/a). But their initial scepticism contributed to weakening the momentum for reform and delayed the approval of its de-stratifying element to the very end of the government's tenure (Benadusi & Niceforo, 2010).

Trade unions were more vocal against the reform for reasons related to the employment dimension. In particular, the re-organisation of secondary education meant that the overall number of school years decreased from 13 to 12 and the unions were alarmed by the associated job losses (Colturani, 2000; see also La Repubblica, 2000a). Furthermore, de-stratification meant a change in the relative weight of employment in the various tracks and levels of education, creating uncertainty amongst teachers in relation to their placing in the new system (for instance, lower-secondary education would disappear and lower-secondary teachers would find themselves mostly employed in the new primary school) (Corriere della Sera, 1999a, 1999b). Finally, de-standardisation was seen with suspicion as a way to weaken, on one hand, teachers' autonomy (by giving more powers to single schools and their governing body) and, on the other, teachers' homogeneous working conditions (by introducing a performance-related salary). The unions' front was guided by one confederal union (CISL), several small but highly militant grassroots teacher unions and found some support in another confederal union (UIL) (Corriere della Sera, 1999a, 1999b; La Repubblica, 2000a). CGIL, the largest confederal union and historically aligned to the centre-left, initially expressed partial appreciation for the reform. However, when the political conflict over the introduction of performance-related pay escalated and all the other unions openly started talking about a general strike against the reform, the CGIL joined forces with them, not least due to the risk of losing members in favour of the other more militant unions (Capano & Terenzi, 2014) in a logic of inter-union competition for teachers' support and their membership. As hypothesised in Section 3, going openly against the unions would have been an electorally too risky strategy, given voting preferences of Italian teachers at the turn of the century being overwhelmingly in favour of the centre-left (see Table 1).

As a consequence, the renewed unity across the union front prompted the decision of the minister to drop the proposal for performance-related pay (La Repubblica, 2000b). Whilst all the other components of the reform were passed, this only took place towards the end of the government's term, due to the multiple sources of opposition that the reform encountered along the way. As such, the reform was never formally enacted, given that in 2001 the centre-right coalition won the general elections and swiftly put forward a radically different reform.



**TABLE 1** Teachers' party voting in Italy at the turn of the century (2002–2004)

	% of teachers voting:	% of party's electorate made by teachers
Centre-Left parties	72.6%	8.2%
Centre-Right parties	27.4%	3.5%
Total	100.0%	6.0%

Source: authors' own elaboration of pooled ESS microdata (waves 1 and 2).

### 5.3 | Centre-right (2001–2005): Re-stratifying education policy

Education policy took centre stage again when the new centre-right government came to power in 2001. Letizia Moratti was appointed Minister of Education. Education policy had been salient during the electoral campaign: the centre-right promised that their first act in government would be a 'strikethrough' of the Berlinguer Reform. The Moratti Reform aimed to (re-)stratify and (further) de-standardise the education system. In terms of stratification, it reinstated the lower-secondary school at the end of which students had to choose between a general and vocational track. The age of tracking was therefore brought back to how it was prior to the Berlinguer Reform but with a crucial difference in the choice that was given to students at the end of lower-secondary school. The reform reduced the traditional tri-partite tracking to two options: the general path of *licei* would be retained, whilst the former technical and professional schools would merge into a single vocational track. Reformers envisioned strong links between firms and schools in the vocational track, including extensive company-based training. Moreover, this vocational track would no longer be part of the national education system but it would be run by regional administrations. Thus, the reform aimed not only at (re-)stratifying the system but also at de-standardising it, creating de facto different vocational training systems at the regional level (Tuttoscuola, 2002, 2004, 2006). Further re-stratifying the system, the reform lowered compulsory schooling, bringing it back to the age to 14 (Gasperoni, 2006).

One element of continuity with the Berlinguer Reform was to be found in the push for greater organisational autonomy, which was not challenged but rather reinforced through the introduction of nation-wide student performance tests, providing a (still embryonic) tool for school rankings (Borgna et al., 2022).

#### 5.3.1 | Actors' positions and political dynamics

The centre-right coalition defended the re-stratifying measures by alluding to an education system which could 'attract young people and make them enter the labour market' (Barelli, 2002, n/a). The centre-left opposition, instead, in heavily criticising the reform underlined how it would restrict educational opportunities and hamper social mobility by making it easier for parents to influence their children's decisions thereby perpetuating a 'socially static society' (Rossi, 2003, n/a). The opposition also criticised the reform from a skill formation dimension, as the rigid division between theory- and practice-oriented educational paths was thought to hinder the country's competitiveness, which 'requires integrated technical-scientific knowledge' (Grignaffini, 2003, n/a; see also and Capitelli, 2003, Sasso, 2003).

But it was again from the corporatist arena that the most consequential criticism came from. In this case, what turned business and unions against the reform was the regionalisation of vocational training due again to its knock-on effects on the second and third dimensions of education policy. Employers criticised the merging of technical and professional schools into a single vocational training track. Technical schools had traditionally provided skilled labour to the manufacturing sector and employers feared that their role would now be weakened (Corriere della Sera, 2006a). Moreover, business associations were concerned that moving vocational training out of the national

education system and onto the regions would have been perceived by students and their families as a 'downgrading' of vocational training (Corriere della Sera, 2006a), further feeding the process of academic drift illustrated in Section 5.1. In the words of a spokesperson from *Confindustria*, merging technical and professional schools meant 'giving up on our family jewels—technical schools—and favouring the migration of students towards less professionalising sectors' (Sole 24 ORE, 2003).

Trade unions in general were worried by the shift of a large part of the teacher body from state to regional employees, which created uncertainty about teachers' future working conditions and potentially increased status-based segmentation amongst teachers (Tuttoscuola, 2002, 2006). Additionally, teacher unions were worried about the strengthening of evaluation procedures (Gasperoni, 2006) whilst confederal unions, in line with the parliamentary opposition, were worried by the class-based discriminations that the reform would introduce through early tracking and through the 'downgrading' of vocational training (AGI, 2003).

The opposition stemming from the corporatist arena—and in particular from the business side—had consequences on the reform. Technical schools were not eventually assigned to the regions along with professional schools, as the Minister hoped, but were instead retained in the national education systems and 'upgraded' to the rank of technological *licei* (Tuttoscuola, 2006). Having 'saved' technical education from regionalisation and having made it clear that this should retain its vocational emphasis even as it was upgraded to the *licei* status, employers considerably softened their opposition (Corriere della Sera, 2006b). The unions welcomed the 'upgrading' of technical schools to the rank of *licei*, but remained overall highly critical of the reform, given none of their other demands were addressed. The reform, therefore, was approved with the only major modification to the 'original' plan coming as a consequence of employers' demands, whilst unions were by and large ignored, despite their vocal opposition. However, as in the previous case, general elections approached, and as the centre-left re-gained power, the new government sought to reverse the Moratti reform.

## 5.4 | Centre-left (2006–2008): Reform by restoration

In 2006, the centre-left came to power again. Giuseppe Fioroni was appointed Minister of Education. Fioroni's approach to education policy was considerably different: he shied away from systemic reforms and rather sought to introduce incremental changes. He employed the metaphor of the 'screwdriver'—a tool for minor repair—to capture his incremental approach to change, making clear that the 'the only real revolution [of education policy] brought about by his new measures was to say no to *riformite*'<sup>4</sup> (Tuttoscuola, 2007, n/a). This meant envisioning a secondary education system that looked quite similar to the one of the early 1990s. Nonetheless, some of the less conflictual elements of the Berlinguer and Moratti reforms were retained. The outcome was an upper-secondary education system that returned to its tripartite nature of general, technical and professional schools, with both technical and professional schools reinstated in the national education system but with a de-stratifying effort (although limited compared to Berlinguer's attempt of establishing a comprehensive model) to be found in raising compulsory school age to 16 again. 'Moratti's' regional system of vocational training was maintained but conceived as a form of 'remedial training', sitting alongside—rather than replacing—technical and professional schools and essentially catering for drop-outs from the national school system.

### 5.4.1 | Actors' positions and political dynamics

The Fioroni Reform was relatively immune from strong critiques as the result of a strategy that tried both to find some synthesis between the Berlinguer and Moratti reforms and to address the main demands of trade unions and employer associations in relation to the (perceived) shortcomings of the Moratti Reform. The attempt to avoid a major reform and to simultaneously present the bill in a non-confrontational and non-ideological manner, as it had been previously the case, helped to reduce conflict in the parliamentary arena.

The re-centralisation of education policy worked as a magnet for unions and business to come together, this time, to support the reform. Employers welcomed the reversal from technological *licei* to technical schools. Indeed, their main concern was the weakening of 'technical education', essential for the Italian manufacturing base, and the polarisation of the Italian education system between *licei* and professional schools (Confindustria, 2008). Reinstating technical schools as a distinct track and as part of the national education system safeguarded—in their view—a strong role for technical education in the overall education policy mix. At the same time, teacher and confederal unions rejoiced for the renewed centralisation of the education system (Corriere della Sera, 2007), curbing the process of segmentation amongst teachers and class-based stratification amongst students that the Moratti Reform had led to. The (re-)inclusion of technical schools as a separate segment of the national education system was explicitly welcomed by the unions for its public employment impacts given that, as highlighted by UIL, technical schools employ a sizeable '21% of staff [working] in secondary education' (TM News, 2007, n/a). Compared to the two previous cases, Fioroni's reform attracted less criticism and it was implemented as initially conceived. The corporatist arena was in fact was by and large in favour of the reform, whilst the government quietly reached some distributional goals as well—albeit more modest compared to the Berlinguer reform—by prolonging compulsory schooling and re-instating professional training into the national education system, thereby avoiding the lowering of educational quality in this segment of the education system that was widely anticipated through the 'regionalisation' envisioned by the Moratti reform.

## 6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Overall, findings support the theoretical approach presented in Section 3. First, the multi-dimensionality of education policy appeared throughout the three reforms. As governments acted on the (de-)stratification and (de-)standardisation levers, important actors mobilised across the three dimensions of education policy: political parties battled on how the reforms re-shaped educational opportunities, with (confederal) unions occasionally making their voices heard on this dimension; employer associations mobilised to ensure that the system provided valuable skills to the labour market—and they were ready to mobilise on this dimension regardless of the political coloration of governments; and (primarily teacher) unions opposed any form of segmentation in the teaching labour market—again, regardless of the political leaning of the government proposing to do so. Second, actors' preferences and their inter-relationships also played out—by and large—as hypothesised. The centre-left pursued de-stratifying and (moderately) de-standardising reforms. When the proposed measures found the opposition of employers and (teacher) unions, the centre-left stood ready to find a compromise with both actors. The centre-right promoted stratifying and de-standardising reforms and, as expected, was willing to compromise only to meet employers'—but not unions'—demands.

We also note that some political dynamics that emerged from the empirical analysis were not accounted for theoretically. For example, we hypothesised that intra-union preferences might have differed between teacher unions, other sectoral unions and the confederation. Yet, empirical evidence from Italy showed that teacher unions were dominant within the union camp. Other sectoral unions were conspicuously absent from the public debate, whilst confederations aligned with teacher unions' demands on the public employment dimension and expressed (largely non-consequential) support/opposition for those reforms that strengthened/weakened equality of opportunity. Whilst intra-union cleavages did not seem to have played a key role, inter-union competition seemed to matter to an extent that we had not fully anticipated. There emerged from the analysis that in a sector where multiple unions co-exist, as in the Italian education sector, if one trade union consents to a contested policy innovation (e.g., for systemic, long-term reasons), it risks losing members to competing unions that might present themselves as better safeguarding their members' immediate interests. These dynamics are likely to be determined by how unions are organised both within and between them – which is something that varies cross-nationally. A similar reasoning can be applied to business associations. In short: exploring more closely how different institutional/organisational contexts shape the strategic choices of corporatist actors in the multi-dimensional space of education policy seems a fruitful research endeavour to be pursued in the future. Moreover, our theoretical framework only accounted for

centre-left and centre-right parties. Focussing on the early phase of the transition to the knowledge economy (late 1990s-early 2000s), this seemed a legitimate choice. The partisan political landscape, however, has since become more complicated, and future research should also examine the role of radical- right and left parties – both with respect to their preferences for educational opportunities as well as their relationships with the relevant actors from the corporatist arena.

Going back to one of the main themes of the special issue, namely the political mediation of the equity-efficiency tension in education policy, our article has two insights to offer. First, the efficiency-equity trade-off can be avoided through policy design. The Berlinguer Reform is a case in point: the combination of later and weaker tracking on the one hand and greater specialisation and tighter links with the labour market on the other offered the opportunity to both foster a more equitable distribution of educational opportunities and meeting labour market's skill requirements. In other words, the reform promised to simultaneously achieve two objectives that are often thought of as mutually exclusive. Yet, a second insight is that the equity-efficiency trade-off is not necessarily resolved within the relationship between the distribution of educational opportunities and skill formation dimensions of education systems. Because of the inherent multi-dimensionality of education policy, knock-on effects on the employment dimension might prove fatal even for a reform that had seemingly resolved the equity-efficiency tension. Approaching the study of education and training systems as a three-dimensional policy space and accounting for the asymmetric corporatist pressures that parties are subject to in the pursuit of distributional aims seems therefore a promising way to capture the complex political dynamics that characterise education and training systems.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

## ORCID

Niccolo Durazzi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7581-5595>

Fabio Battaglia  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3871-192X>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A fourth crucial function, socialisation, is not considered here because it is not as politicised by key actors as the three dimensions that this article focuses on.
- <sup>2</sup> The centre-right has however tended to stress efficiency gains in the education system as a result of a movement towards performance-based and broader de-standardisation, whilst the centre-left has tended to focus on the alleged increase in the quality of education resulting from de-standardising measures.
- <sup>3</sup> Notable exceptions include Carstensen and Ibsen (2021) who focus however on the more specific case of collective skill formation systems and Giudici et al. (2022) who develop their argument with respect to post-World War II education systems, hence in a significantly different socio-political context.
- <sup>4</sup> *Riformite* is a term used to indicate a 'disease' caused by excessive use of systemic reforms.

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