



Teacher education is a deeply pedagogical process rooted in values, ethics, and the social purpose of schooling. Globally, it sits at the core of educational quality and fairness, as research in comparative and international education demonstrates: the training of teachers directly influences students' learning chances, social inclusion, and the democratic aims of schools. Teachers are not simply transmitters of curricula, but active professionals whose convictions, reflective skills, and ability to manage the complexities of classroom life give shape and substance to the educational experience itself.

The pedagogical dimension of teacher education frames teaching as a relational, context-aware, and ethically grounded profession rather than just a set of procedural skills. From a research perspective, this demands robust research methodologies that can critically examine the complex realities of schools and inform evidence-based policies. Equally important is the connection between theory and practice, which helps to bridge the persistent gap between universities and schools.

The contributions gathered in this volume reflect the richness and diversity of experiences showcased during the ATEE Spring Conference 2024, held at the University of Bergamo from May 29 to June 1, 2024. The volume presents 70 selected papers out of more than 300 presented by researchers representing over 40 countries.

This broad spectrum of studies highlights promising directions that can inspire renewed inquiry and concrete proposals aimed at improving contemporary educational systems.

**FRANCESCO MAGNI** is an Associate Professor of General and Social Pedagogy (PAED-01/A) at the Department of Human and Social Sciences, University of Bergamo, Italy. He is a member of the board and Deputy Director of CQIIA (Center for the Quality of Teaching, Didactic Innovation, and Learning). He is also a member of the ATEE - Association for Teacher Education in Europe.

**NICOLE BIANQUIN** is an Associate Professor of Didactics and Special Education (PAED-02/A) at the Department of Human and Social Sciences, University of the Aosta Valley, Aosta, Italy. She is a member of the ATEE - Association for Teacher Education in Europe.

ATEE Spring Conference 2024

## ATEE Spring Conference 2024

### Teacher education research in Europe: trends, challenges, practices and perspectives

May 29<sup>th</sup> – June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024  
S. Agostino, Bergamo



Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni





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**S. Agostino, 2 - Bergamo, Italy**

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# **Teacher Education as a Game Changer: Non-Traditional Factors of Inequality and the Role of Teachers in Achieving Equity**

Valerio Ferrero, *University of Turin*, [valerio.ferrero@unito.it](mailto:valerio.ferrero@unito.it)

## **Abstract**

This paper contributes to the discourse on social justice and equity in education by introducing the category of “non-traditional factors of inequality” to analyse how school systems generate disparities among students. A qualitative study conducted in the Italian context explores teachers’ roles in ensuring an equitable and quality education, highlighting the potential of teacher education. The findings may benefit school systems facing similar challenges.

**Keywords:** equity; non-traditional factors of inequality; teacher education; middle leadership; Italy.

## 1. Introduction

The need to ensure an equitable and quality education for all is internationally recognised (OECD, 2023; UN, 2015): promoting accountable, inclusive and democratic school systems is both an ethical imperative and a political challenge. Nevertheless, inequalities still strongly affect students' paths (OECD, 2024): education does not compensate for disparities at the starting gate, but rather creates new ones, failing significantly in efficiency and effectiveness.

The issue is central to political and academic debates and calls for an interdisciplinary approach (Bradshaw, 2021); it also represents an epistemological endeavour (Newman, 2020), aimed at developing interpretive frameworks to better understand the dynamics that hinder students' educational trajectories and obstruct the pursuit of a more equitable society.

An important aspect concerns teacher education (Kaur, 2012). It can develop visions and ideals of future teachers regarding the meaning of their profession and spread a culture of equity, supporting their engagement as agents of change in the classroom and as middle leaders (Lipscombe et al., 2023).

This paper investigates the relationship between teacher education and equity by introducing the category of non-traditional factors of inequality, aimed at capturing how schools and education systems actively produce disparities. The Italian case, characterised by entrenched socio-economic, cultural and territorial asymmetries, as well as structural injustices embedded in school culture and organisation, offers a critical lens to explore how institutional and governance dynamics shape equity. While the framework is transferable across systems, the findings are especially pertinent to contexts marked by decentralisation, social reproduction and uneven school autonomy.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Social Justice and Equity in Education

Education is crucial to achieve greater social justice (Bell, 2007; Gewirtz, 2006). It is an ideal that has never been fully realised (Bauman & Tester, 2001) and requires continuous efforts to include everyone in democratic processes and support self-determination despite the interdependence that binds people (Buettner-Schmidt & Lobo, 2012). Access to knowledge and critical skills is vital for becoming actors in History and fighting against injustice (Hackman, 2005). Thus, equity should serve as a guiding principle for educational practice in order to understand the school as a great equaliser (Bernardi & Ballarino, 2016) and to improve individuals' life paths (Ainscow, 2020).

In developing a theoretical-practical definition of equity that is consistent with the ideal of social justice, the concepts of equality of opportunities, capabilities and social inclusion seem appropriate to guide educational theory and practice towards valuing people, to question school contexts, to better align them with students' educational needs and to overcome counterproductive models based on standards and homogeneity (Ferrero, 2023). It is necessary to guarantee an excellent education for all, aimed at acquiring the skills to exercise citizenship in terms of active participation in political, social, cultural and economic life at the local and global level: diversity must not turn into inequality, but pluralism must be lived as a daily experience and as an opportunity to enhance people's strengths (Espinoza, 2007; Unterhalter, 2009).

### 2.2 Educational Inequalities: The Category of "Non-Traditional Factors of Inequality"

The persistence of inequality within education systems remains a significant obstacle to achieving equity. Children frequently replicate their parents' educational and occupational paths, reflecting entrenched patterns of social reproduction (Farid, 2024). Family socio-economic and cultural capital continues to play a critical role in shaping disparities in access to learning opportunities and academic achievement. However, focusing solely on students' backgrounds risks ignoring the systemic contribution of schools themselves to these inequalities. Educational institutions may inadvertently or structurally reinforce and produce injustice. Rather than mitigating disadvantage, schools often exacerbate it over time, further eroding the foundational promise of equitable and quality education

for all (Mayabi, 2015; Thompson, 2019). From this perspective, the anthropology of education has long underscored how school culture, organisational structures and bureaucratic routines can act as powerful exclusionary forces (Engels et al., 2008).

The category of non-traditional factors of inequality, first introduced by Ferrer-Esteban (2011) and further expanded by subsequent studies (Ferrero, 2024; Mincu, 2025), provides a compelling lens to understand how disparities are actively generated within school systems. Rather than attributing inequality solely to students' backgrounds, this framework shifts attention to the internal dynamics of schools. It highlights three interrelated levels at which inequality takes shape, i.e., everyday pedagogical practices (micro-level), organisational and leadership structures (meso-level) and national education policies (macro-level). As shown in Figure 1, decisions regarding curriculum, resource distribution, institutional routines and leadership, often perceived as neutral or procedural, can exacerbate disparities and entrench stratification within them, sustaining cycles of advantage and disadvantage that typically go unexamined.

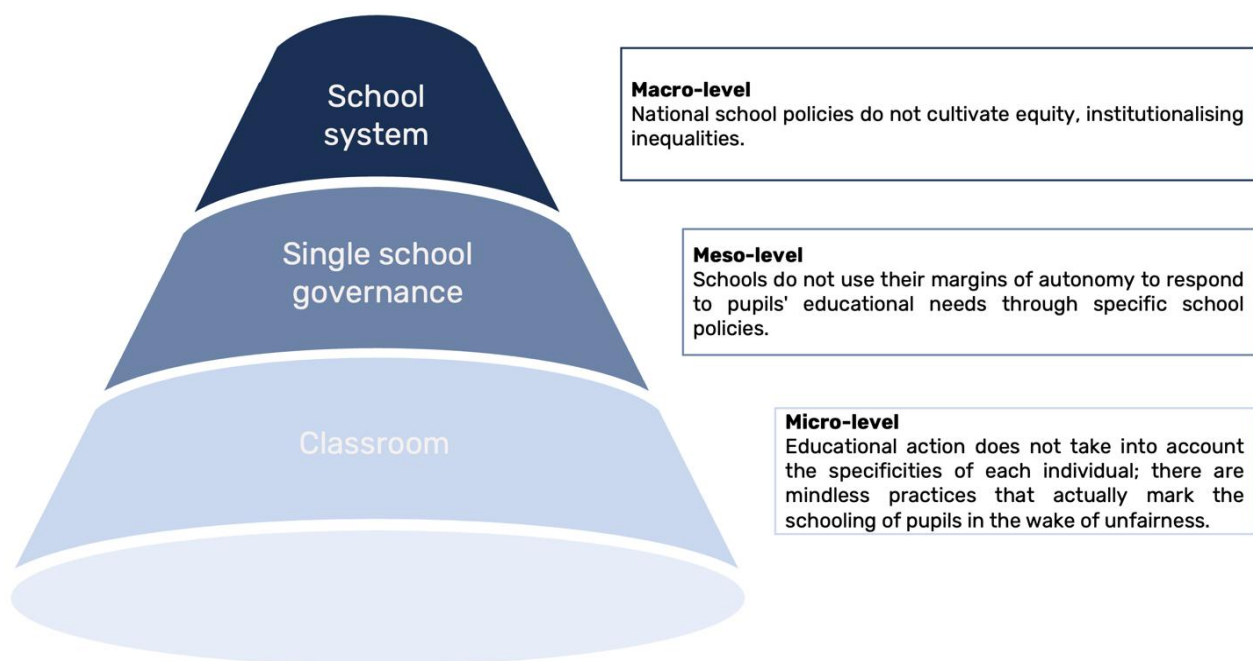


Figure 1: Non-Traditional Factors of Inequality

### 2.3 The Role of Teachers and Teacher Education for Equity

Teacher education plays a crucial role in raising awareness of the dynamics of inequality in school systems and in promoting pedagogical practices that counteract it (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Verma, 2021). Offering specific training enables teachers to recognise and address non-traditional factors of inequality by developing self-reflexivity (Dervin, 2023). Furthermore, it is crucial to support the construction of a habitus that is open to diversity, enabling teachers to engage in equity-driven practices by valuing pluralism over uniformity (Craft, 2011). Ultimately, teacher education is an essential condition for building a school system that recognises, challenges and transforms structural forms of injustice.

Teacher education should directly influence school governance (Saleh & Khine, 2009): teachers can help shape policies that promote equity by addressing students' real needs. As middle leaders (De Nobile, 2018; Grootenboer et al., 2019), they can transform school culture and tackle organisational inequalities (Lynch, 2021). It requires a professional attitude to critically analyse institutional dynamics and act as a bridge between administration and the school community, framing their role in a politically impactful way (Stone & Stone, 2024).

### 2.4 The Italian School System: An Overview

The legal framework of the Italian school system aligns with principles of equity and social justice (Cartabia & Lupo, 2022), reaffirmed by policies promoting inclusive education and equal opportunities. Nevertheless, deep-rooted inequalities persist (OECD, 2024). These disparities stem from students' backgrounds and internal school mechanisms: they often stem from non-traditional factors that vary across contexts and require targeted responses (Guarini et al., 2018). Moreover, the persistent influence of social reproduction dynamics (Pensiero et al., 2019) continues to reinforce pre-existing advantages and disadvantages, making the enactment of equity-focused policies both necessary and increasingly urgent.

School autonomy, introduced in the late 1990s and early 2000s, aimed to enhance responsiveness to local needs (Bracci, 2009). However, its implementation yielded mixed results. Many schools remain dependent on centralised procedures and struggle to use autonomy meaningfully (Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2014). Italy reflects the Southern European governance model (Ferrera, 1996; Landri, 2021), characterised by a combination of strong autonomy in teaching and weak autonomy in strategic and organisational matters. This asymmetry has significant implications for equity, as it limits schools' ability to intervene effectively in response to structural disparities.

In this landscape, school leadership emerges as a potentially influential lever within governance dynamics, yet often underdeveloped. School leaders play a pivotal role in addressing these challenges: their vision and leadership are essential to align national policies with local needs and use autonomy in order to create equitable opportunities for all students (Mincu, 2022). Therefore, the relationship between autonomy, leadership and equity is neither automatic nor linear, but rather mediated by a series of institutional, cultural and political factors that shape how autonomy is understood and enacted at school level.

Inequality is not merely inherited from the social fabric but is also shaped within schools through concrete decisions and routinised practices (Ferrero, 2023). For instance, they include the criteria used for student grouping, the reliance on parental financial contributions to support school activities, or the uncritical reproduction of established norms and procedures. Such practices, even when not deliberately exclusionary, can contribute to the reproduction of educational disadvantage and reveal the complex ways in which school organisation intersects with broader processes of social stratification.

### **3. Research Design**

#### **3.1 Research Questions**

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. what contribution do teachers make to equity and to the fight against non-traditional factors of inequality, also with regard to their role in governance?
2. what impact does teacher education have?

#### **3.2 Method**

A qualitative approach (Luttrell, 2010) was used and semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, school leaders and family representatives from K-8 schools<sup>1</sup>. The aim was to gather information on visions of equity and institutional commitment to its realisation, non-traditional factors of inequality and teacher education. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the informed consent of the participants.

#### **3.3 Participants**

The sample includes ten participants (Figure 2), i.e., five teachers, three school leaders and two family representatives, all from K-8 schools in the Turin metropolitan area (northern Italy). Each participant came from a different school, covering varied socio-economic contexts within the Turin metropolitan area. The selection aimed to ensure variation in institutional settings and governance practices. Although the sample size limits statistical representativeness, triangulating data across roles and

<sup>1</sup> In Italy, K-8 schools serve children from age 6 to 14, covering primary and lower secondary education.

school types strengthens the reliability of the findings. Participants were recruited via an open call through institutional channels to ensure a range of perspectives.

<b>Teachers</b>	T1: 3-year experienced male untenured teacher (primary school) T2: 5-year experienced female untenured teacher (primary school) T3: 8-year experienced male tenured teacher (middle school) T4: 10-year experienced female tenured teacher (kindergarten) T5: 15-year experienced female tenured teacher (primary school)
<b>School Leaders</b>	SL1: 2-year experienced male leader SL2: 5-year experienced female leader SL3: 7-year experienced male leader
<b>Parents</b>	P1: representative since 2 years P2: representative since 3 years

Figure 2: Coding of interviewees

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The data collected were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2021). After becoming thoroughly acquainted with the participants' dialogic interactions, we coded them by extracting the relevant excerpts in relation to the research questions. Then, themes were constructed and defined to summarise the different codes into a central and organising concept that takes on various nuances. Participant feedback was also sought on preliminary interpretations to ensure that their perspectives were accurately represented.

### 3.5 Limitations

The limited number of participants and schools involved restricts the generalisability of the results, which should be interpreted as exploratory findings. Future research with larger and more varied samples is needed to validate the patterns observed.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Equity as a Criterion for Classroom Action

Teachers typically view equity as a commitment within the classroom, focusing on adopting inclusive pedagogical approaches to support all students' learning. However, the principle of equity is often overshadowed by the emphasis on special educational needs. This perspective is shared by leaders and parents.

«In our school there is a great focus on equity and inclusion. Teachers use diverse methods and strive to personalise and individualise learning paths» (SL2).

«As a teacher, I design my lessons *with my students in mind*. I don't think one-size-fits-all is useful» (T1).

«Teachers are almost all careful to make their lessons inclusive. Only a few remain from the old guard» (P2).

«Equity means that everyone must learn. This is precisely why I try to adopt as many methods as possible, to better address my students' needs» (T4).

This emphasis on special educational needs suggests that broader dimensions of inequality, such as socio-economic background, school culture or systemic governance issues, are often overlooked or absorbed into narrow inclusion discourses. As a result, while teachers may perceive their practices as equitable, their interpretations tend to focus on individual support rather than questioning

structural inequities. This limited framing risks masking deeper institutional dynamics that produce or reinforce disadvantage.

#### **4.2 Equity at the Governance Level**

The interviewees reveal a bureaucratic view of involvement in school governance. The institutional dimension is often not linked to a commitment to equity, while teachers focus on the classroom action.

«While some teachers actively engage as middle leaders, few fully grasp the significance of these roles. Most remain focused on classroom work, unaware of the broader impact and importance of their institutional responsibilities» (SL1).

«I am involved in interculturalism at the institutional level. It is a heavy workload: I understand its purpose, but I would like to be less alone» (T5).

«I don't see a real institutional commitment to equity. There is no shared vision» (P1).

«I engage in the classroom... At the institutional level it's just bureaucracy: it's what we do on a daily basis that counts!» (T2).

«Teachers often think of their own class. They don't feel part of the whole school» (SL3).

#### **4.3 Teacher Education, Equity and Middle Leadership**

Teacher education does not appear to specifically address the issue of equity, with particular reference to aspects related to governance. Conversely, a focus on middle leadership and teachers' institutional commitment would be necessary.

«We don't talk much about governance during initial teacher education and apprenticeship... We go into the school and find out about all bureaucratic processes, in which we are involved» (T5).

«Including more training on middle leadership is essential, especially in the context of school autonomy. Few are willing to take on leadership roles, leaving leaders to shoulder all responsibilities, so that they end up performing purely administrative tasks» (SL3).

«There is a lack of training and mentoring in institutional aspects» (T1).

«I wasn't trained to act as a deputy leader. I found myself there. I had to learn a lot. Including these aspects in teacher education would strengthen schools institutionally, otherwise we continue to act as we always have and make school life worse for the students» (T2).

#### **4.4 Non-Traditional Factors of Inequality and School Governance**

The school organisation creates inequalities between students. The institutional involvement of teachers could be useful to address this dynamic, but it proves insufficient.

«There are classes with the same teachers for all years and others where every year there is a change... Leaders and teachers should have a broad outlook» (P2).

«Some issues should be improved: the request for a financial contribution, the division of pupils into classes... Instead, we tend to follow established routines without much critical reflection» (T1).

These comments illustrate how institutional routines (such as classroom composition, resource allocation and time management) are rarely interrogated through an equity lens. Participants acknowledge problematic practices, yet, there is limited evidence of systemic efforts to reform them in pursuit of more just outcomes for all students.

«We have many complaints about the management of school time. I have tried to start a discussion with the teachers' council, but no one wants to change. Thus, we have "excellence" classes and classes where there is no planning» (SL2).

## 5. Discussion

Our exploratory study indicates that teachers tend to frame equity mainly as a classroom concern, often through inclusive strategies focused on individual needs. However, their understanding appears fragmented and mostly limited to special education. Broader systemic inequalities, related to governance, resource allocation or institutional norms, are rarely acknowledged. Thus, teachers perceive themselves as acting equitably rather than actively pursuing equity in its full systemic dimension. This tendency reveals a critical gap between pedagogical intentions and awareness of the institutional structures that sustain injustice.

Furthermore, teachers' limited engagement in school-wide decision-making processes is evident: they tend to focus exclusively on classroom teaching, without taking responsibility for institutional management. This withdrawal threatens to undermine internal school cohesion and hinder the implementation of an integrated and shared educational policy.

Teacher education is another critical issue: the professional profile of teachers includes classroom teaching as well as a political role in school governance. Current training often does not provide sufficient tools to address the institutional challenges; therefore, specific in-service teacher education is needed in order to tackle these aspects. Participatory research paths and collaborative learning could help teachers to better understand and more effectively perform their institutional role.

Finally, there are significant difficulties in implementing middle leadership in schools. Middle leaders struggle to understand this role from an educational perspective. Investing in the specific training of this figure and strengthening it is essential to improve school management, promote innovation and ensure greater school resilience.

## 6. Conclusion

Ensuring an equitable and quality education for all is an international urgency that clashes with persistent traditional and emerging inequalities: in addition to social reproduction, education systems and schools give rise to non-traditional factors of inequality arising from national educational policies, organisational choices and pedagogical practices. Our exploratory study shows that the Italian school system is affected by these dynamics and, as a result, fails to promote equity.

Teacher education could play a crucial role in spreading a culture of equity and supporting teachers' commitment not only in teaching but also at institutional level. Indeed, the importance of middle leadership is increasingly proving to be a key factor in building strong school systems and accountable schools that develop equity-oriented policies to address inequalities.

Initial teacher education should include dedicated modules on school governance, institutional functioning and middle leadership. Practical training and mentoring in these areas would prepare teachers for a more active role in shaping equitable school cultures. Furthermore, education policymakers should promote professional development initiatives focused on collaborative decision-making, equity audits and shared leadership practices that empower teachers as institutional agents of change.

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