Reflections during the Pandemic

Compiled and Edited By Dasarath Chetty

ISA **RC10** Participation, Organizational Democracy and Self-Management

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Donatella Poliandri

The global pandemic of COVID 19, in addition to putting the world in crisis as we have experienced up to now, affecting every aspect of social life, can offer new dimensions in thinking about how governance takes place and what responses were given in a moment of emergency.

As a scholar and a citizen, I think one of the hottest issues in this emergency concerns the policies that the Italian government has put in place for child and teen care and my approach to these policies try to take nothing for granted. I think it is necessary to shift attention from solving the problem to how the problem arises - by questioning the ways in which the proposed change represents problems - because looking at what is proposed, as a policy intervention, will reveal how the issue is being thought about.

As Carol Bacchi says in her Analysing Policy: What's the problem represented to be? (2009), understanding how government takes places, and what implications for those so governed, allows creating a public space for debate: "The term 'policy' is generally associated with a program, a course of action. Public policy is the term used to describe government programs. There is an underlying assumption that policy is a good thing that it fixes things up. Policy makers are the ones who do the fixing. The notion of fixing carries with it an understanding that something needs to be fixed that there is a problem. This presumed problems can be, but does not need to be, explicitly elaborated. That is, most government policies do not officially declare that there is a problem that the policy will address and remedy. Hence, there are implied problems. It makes the case that it is important to make the problems implicit in public policies explicit and to scrutinise them closely" (Bacchi, 2009:IX-X), asking questions about policies economic sources and how they operate.

The approach to policy analysis introduced by Bacchi challenges the commonplace view that policy is the government's best attempt to deal with problems. In this conventional understanding of public policy that are exogenous the policy process. Hence, the focus of analysis is limited to competing ways of 'solving' policy problems. The terms in which specific policy problems are understood are left unexamined. But if you look at a specific policy, you can see that it understands the problem to be of a particular sort. Policies therefore give a shape to problems. Hence, rather than reacting to problems, governments are active in the production of policy problems.

So, if we look at the child and teen Italian policies at the time of Covid 19 we can see that they takes shape within specific historical and national dimensions, reflecting deep-seated cultural assumptions: this implied problem (Dean, 1999) is to be intended as the question of the space of rules.

Following the lockdown across Italy and the consequent closure of schools of all levels, which took place on 4 March 2020, the policies implemented by the Italian government that can affect - directly and indirectly

- child and teen care are mainly four, and implying different problem representations.

Abruptly and ex officio two and a half million workers were placed in Smart working by their public or private employers: a great open-air social experiment. We do not yet have empirical data capable of demonstrating how and what this approach little used in Italy before now has managed to achieve the aim of changing the organizational systems of work in this moment of emergency.. However, we can assume that the flexibility introduced by smart working was the only immediate way to solve the problem of the impossibility of sending children

to school. Now, at the time of Covid19, smart working does not represent a balance between work and private life or a welfare corporate initiative, but it seems more similar to working from home using technologies. Not as smart as it seems! Child and teen care is here represented as a labour market problem and it is judged a 'problem' when both parents - including the primary care giver (most often the woman) - are engaged in paid employment.

Subsequently, the Italian government introduced the babysitting vouchers and extended the possibility for one of the two parents to take advantage of parental leave from work. Usually the vouchers are given to the families leaving them the possibility to choose how to spend them: babysitter for family care or institutional care. We can consider parental leave from work as a grant - a kind of voucher - for a parent who stays at home to continue the role of primary care provider (normally a woman) for a usually low amount. In this policy option, caring for children and adolescents is a "problem" of family choice. Parents can choose how to manage their responsibilities. These solutions are clearly oriented for families who have two incomes but leave out those who have only one income or no income at all.

In the meantime, seven million students of all levels have learned – plus or minus-to manage so-called distance learning, which represents the only form of school in Italy today and certainly for the next few months. This is another policy option by means of which to take care of children and teens. Distance learning has helped to uncover a series of critical issues already present in the Italian education and training system. I will mention only a few. The first is the multidimensionality of the digital divide, which underlines that it is not enough to equip schools with an adequate IT infrastructure or train teachers to use new technologies to ensure effective and efficient teaching for all. In addition, distance-learning policy ignores embodied and social relationships, and sets up divisive practices, which tend to exclude specific social groups. This raises questions about its desirability. The second critical issue is that families - and the wide society - consider schooling not so much as an educational institution, but as an organization for the care of their children, in particular in the segment from kindergarten to lower secondary school. Again, child and teen care seems to be a labour market problem (and the problem of schools exclusively a problem of the lack of technological infrastructure).

Policies are often complex, combining a series of proposals. Thus, there may be more than one representation of the problem within them. These different types of representations in each policy can conflict and even contradict each other. How do we identify the dominant representation? An easy way is to see how the funds are earmarked for one policy rather than another; this can certainly help identify the dominant representation of the problem.

The Italian government has allocated € 1.2 billion for the policy of baby-sitting vouchers and for the extension of parental leave from work. The Italian government has defined the same action program through the two identified measures, allocating an overall sum without dividing the funds.
For distance-learning - and more generally for the Italian schools - the Government has allocated € 80 million divided as follows: € 70 million managed by schools to equip all students who need it with the necessary technological tools (tablet , personal computer, internet connection); € 10 million to equip schools with the necessary IT infrastructure and hire 1000 IT assistants; € 5 million for teacher training.

Nothing has been allocated to support Smart working policies.

These strategic options show that the dominant representation of the problem of child and adolescent care during the Covid 19 emergency is a matter of family choice (especially in relation to the primary care giver in the family - more often a woman). However, as regards the cultural dimension of the context in which the policies in Italy determine the problem, I am not sure that this vision is linked only to the exceptional moment. The care of children and adolescents in Italy has never been a matter of public responsibility.

According to Bacchi, it could be appropriated thinking of the Italian child and teen policy in anthropological terms, as a cultural product.

This brief reflection during pandemic is a warning to me: the more policies have an undeniable cultural dimension, the more necessary is cross culture and cross-national comparison. This type of analysis might encourage us to think about links between areas, highlighting important crosscutting themes. At the time of Covid19, problematizing the problem seems to me to be the only way of public responsibility, placing the emphasis on making citizens responsible for ever wider aspects of their lives, in order to choose their own future.