

SCHOOL GOVERNANCE: INSIGHTS FROM THE ITALIAN CASE

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Abstract

How to cite this paper: Liberatore, A. (2021). School governance: Insights from the Italian case. *Corporate Ownership & Control*, 19(1), 199–207.
<https://doi.org/10.22495/cocv19i1art15>

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ISSN Online: 1810-3057

ISSN Print: 1727-9232

Received: 10.09.2021

Accepted: 23.11.2021

JEL Classification: G30, I20, I28

DOI: 10.22495/cocv19i1art15

In view of the recent “*La Buona Scuola*” reform, growing attention is emerging about the enhanced role of the principal and its effects on school organizations in Italy. However, further research is needed to understand the Italian governance outcomes. Thereupon we would make a worthy contribution to the existing research with a deep assessment of Italian school governance. To achieve this purpose, the original contribution here is linking school governance to the learning outcomes of high school students and aspects of their daily life activities using a macroeconomic perspective. Our methodology is twofold: first, we review the various reforms of school governance in order to assess the strengths and weaknesses of each reform. Second, we involve a quantitative research methodology to analyze how school governance reflects social culture, students’ well-being, and educational outcomes. Our results confirm the significant role of the State in triggering education reform. Finally, we provide policy suggestions to the Italian Ministry of Education.

Keywords: School Organization, Education Management, Education Law

Authors’ individual contribution: The Author is responsible for all the contributions to the paper according to CRediT (Contributor Roles Taxonomy) standards.

Declaration of conflicting interests: The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, school autonomy was increasingly supported by normative intervention with the aim to reshape education systems within a global context of decentralization (Barzanò, 2011). According to neoliberal economics, the managerial practice of shaping school and making it an organization is based on the logic of the market within the educational field (Ball, 1998).

Effective governance is the combined result of strategic leadership, appropriate board structures, and community’s participation (Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990). This research work draws insights on governance in the contest of public Italian schools (Galiani & Schargrodsy, 2002). The Italian school system is organized according to the principles of subsidiarity with a high degree of autonomy¹. Starting from the legal frame provided at the national level (DPR 275/1999), public schools

have increasingly gained relevant administrative and management functions. However, in the last six years, the Italian government implemented the duties and responsibilities of schools (Baldacci, Brocca, Frabboni, & Salatin, 2016). In particular, the so-called “*La Buona Scuola*” reform (Law 107/2015) increased the powers of school heads, establishing a teacher evaluation system. It lays foundations for a new school organization.

Despite strong support for successful governance at schools, relatively small progress has been made in improving the concept, either in research or practice. Our research question is: What is the impact of “*La Buona Scuola*” reform on students and the community?

Following the literature in management and education (among others see Samkange, 2013; Hofman, Hofman, and Guldemond, 2002), the main purpose of this work is to analyze Italian school governance with particular attention to secondary

¹ <http://www.indire.it/progetto/eurydice/>

education². In such a specific context, a study of school governance is, therefore, necessary to understand its impact on the community and to know its development nowadays (Salvioni, Giandini, Franzoni, & Gennari, 2012). It is also appropriate to review some governance strategies so as to promote a new school culture based on students' and parents' participation. On the one hand, we present a brief overview of past educational reforms to find a way to understand reforms of recent years. (Grimaldi, Landri, & Serpieri, 2016). On the other hand, we involve a quantitative research methodology to evaluate effective school governance. We carry out an empirical survey on public schools since many Italian schools are state-run. Based upon empirical data, and this is the novel contribution of the paper, we examine the effect of school governance on students' performance and their daily life activities.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we outline Italian reforms with particular attention to school governance and "*La Buona Scuola*" law. In Section 3, we present our data and methodology. In Sections 4 and 5, we show and discuss the results of the analysis here conducted. Finally, in Section 6, we report the main conclusions, providing some policy suggestions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Among the many types of decisions to be considered in the school system, certainly, those that have the greatest influence on teaching and learning are concerned with the curricula of studies and also with how resources are distributed and managed (Sahlberg, 2007). Consequentially, in the scenario of decentralization (Eurydice, 2008), school principals have assumed greater responsibilities on curricular and instructional decisions as well as for managing human, financial and material resources (Lee & Reeves, 2012; Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012). More specifically, in OECD scenarios for schooling, the areas of interest for which autonomy is awarded to public schools mutate from country to country (for a review see OECD, 2012a, 2018). Among others, Hartong and Förschler (2019) compare German and U.S. public school systems based upon flows and practices of school monitoring. Although school finance management is a highly investigated area of research (Arar & Abu-Romi 2016), this perspective is not exhaustive for analyzing school governance (Khurniawan, Sailah, Muljono, Indriyanto, & Maarif, 2020). The increased autonomy at school needs to be measured in terms of its impact on students' learning, well-being, and community. The integration of schools in the community indeed generates synergies and knowledge that are potentially useful for all local members (Kilpatrick, Barrett, & Jones,

2005). A significant contribution related to students' learning is the cross-national research conducted by Luschei and Jeong (2020) across 68 countries. They find that student achievement varies after controlling for principal leadership style until there is a negative effect on their performance in the case of high promotion by school leaders of instructional improvement and professional development. However, the main influence on student achievement is supported by teacher decision-making.

The focus of this paper is analyzing the effects of Italian school governance on the educational needs of the community and social culture for developing an effective and quality system of management (Salvioni et al., 2012; Mayer, Donaldson, LeChasseur, Welton, & Cobb, 2013). The hypotheses here tested are the following: as a result of the reform "*Buona Scuola*" that expanded the autonomy of public schools, did it have an impact on student performance? Furthermore, considering that governance also involves parents, are there any effects on the community in terms of well-being? The data involved are described in the next section, while a brief overview of legislative changes is provided below.

2.1. Italian educational reforms and school governance

In the last hundred years, the Italian educational landscape has been studded with various school reforms. Every reform contributes to building the current Italian school system in small steps. It is important to underline that each reform has been developed into a socio-historical context to which it was intrinsically linked. For example, the Orlando Law of 1904 brought compulsory schooling to 12 years, forcing the municipalities to establish the primary school (elementary school) at least until the fourth grade. The goal was to combat illiteracy. A few years later, the Daneo-Credaro Law of 1911 led to the nationalization of elementary schools, tracing the foundations on which the state school in Italy still stands today. During Mussolini's rule, the Gentile Reformation of 1923 promoted a class, authoritarian and hierarchical school organization. In accordance with Hegel's philosophical thinking on which the Reformation was based, the student can yearn for higher degrees of knowledge through philosophy and humanistic culture. Among the schools of the second cycle, the classical high school stood out which was accessed after having attended the lower grammar school. The professional start-up schools, introduced in 1928, underlined, even more, the class nature of the existing school system. Despite the class nature of the Reformation, Minister Giovanni Gentile raised the obligation to 14 years of age and introduced state exams at the end of each education cycle. In general, this reform has marked more than others the organization of the Italian school system.

Regarding the organization of the school system, significant changes took place in the 1960s: from the introduction of secondary schools (lower secondary education) which served as a bridge between the elementary and secondary schools of the second grade, to the birth of pre-primary schools education for children under 6 years of age. Following the 1968 revolution, access to university

² In Italy, the national school system is divided into three levels: primary, low and upper secondary education. Compulsory education requires 10 years spent in school from primary up to the second year of upper secondary education. In fact, there are many different types of upper secondary schools: lycea, technical and professional institutes. The increasing numbers of institutes of qualification at the regional level are added to these. Therefore, at the end of low school the Italian students have been choosing a determined field of study (when they are only 14 years old). This fact will certainly influence them in choosing tertiary education and/or regarding the type of future employment. Otherwise, such decision is not so marked in other countries, where students face partially common paths during upper secondary education.

faculties was liberalized in 1969, previously reserved only for high school graduates from grammar school. On the revolutionary wave, active participation starts from both students and families, as well as from the rest of the school staff. The publication of the “delegated decrees” (1974) confirms this: these decrees introduce the representatives of students, parents, and ATA school staff³.

In the last years of the century, Minister Luigi Berlinguer introduced the two-cycle education system through the “Document for discussion on the reform of education cycles”. The primary school contributed to the development of children’s personalities, their civil values, democracy, and social coexistence. The secondary school consolidated their skills and socio-educational learning. In addition, the upper secondary school made students better prepared for university and work. In particular, Law 425/1997 promoted a new structure for *esame di stato* (final degree exam) leading the score from sixtieths to hundredths and organizing three written tests and an interview. Exam commission was composed of the same numbers of internal and external teachers. The President was included among the latter. This structure has remained almost unaltered up to the present day. More specifically, changes are not delivered until 2018, while recently under Bussetti’s government the number of written tests has been reduced to two. The way was open to novel governance of schools where families should be included in the preparation and follow-up of the socio-educational plan. Nevertheless, only the “*La Buona Scuola*” law really increased the powers and duties of principals and school boards.

2.2. *La Buona Scuola*: Towards a good school

The well-known “Reform of the national education and training system” (Law 107/2015), currently in force, has been encouraging good governance and the awarding of merit (Baldacci et al., 2016). This is the first model of Italian school governance. It is no coincidence that Prime Minister Matteo Renzi invited all Italian citizens to submit their suggestions about the preliminary program.

Considering previous educational reforms of the twenty-first century, *Buona Scuola* strengthens school-work connections already promoted by the Moratti reform in 2003 towards a mandatory training period for all secondary students of grades 3, 4, and 5. Even if there are several school curricula, the runway project is maintained to facilitate eventually school transitions. In spite of the previous reorganization of curricula carried out by Minister Mariastella Gelmini in 2008, Law 107 gives a new light to the technical and professional schools, increasing the amount of time spent in the laboratories as innovative “knowledge workshops”. Much importance is assigned to new computer technologies and cultural events, so as to provide an annual bonus to all permanent professors. Regarding teaching staff, indeed, a special fund is set up at the ministerial level. The tasks and powers of school principals have grown: for this reason, they gain the role of “educational leaders”.

In addition to curricular teachers, principals make use of a large group of teachers that composed the “strengthening staff”. In 2015, a large part of this group was hired through the big round.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The central point of view in the work is to consider the effect of Italian school governance on students’ performance and their well-being. To reach this goal, our methodology is twofold. First of all, we draw a picture of Italian school governance in upper secondary schools based on Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015 data. More specifically, we consider the PISA questionnaire compiled by parents and schools. Secondly, we conduct a series of empirical analyses to relate Italian education data with students’ outcomes. In addition, we examine how school governance could impact social involvement and cultural participation over the course of their lives. The data collection procedure is explained in the following sub-sections.

3.1. School governance data

In Italy, the governance of schools is mainly founded on the public system. In our study, we attempt to measure school governance based upon PISA (OECD, 2017) and Istat⁴ data. The data extracted are listed below.

PISA 2015: Parent questionnaire:

- The school has an active and pleasant school climate.
- There is a safe school environment.
- Most of my child’s school teachers seem competent and dedicated.
- I am satisfied with the disciplinary atmosphere in my child’s school.
- My child’s progress is carefully monitored by the school.
- My child’s school provides regular and useful information on my child’s progress.
- My child’s school does a good job of educating students.
- My child’s school provides an inviting atmosphere for parents to get involved.
- My child’s school provides effective communication between the school and families.
- My child’s school involves parents in the school’s decision-making process.
- School staff, would you feel comfortable talking to if you had a question about your child?

PISA 2015: School questionnaire:

- School ownership;
- Compared to similar schools, we have a well-equipped laboratory.
- We have extra laboratory staff that helps support <school science> teaching.
- Our school spends extra money on up-to-date <school science> equipment.

Istat 2013–2017: Education finance:

- Expenditure of the educational institutions by education level, program orientation, type of institution, and expenditure category.
- Annual expenditure on educational institutions per pupil/student based on FTE.

³ ATA staff states for Administrative, Technical and Auxiliary staff of primary and secondary education institutes and schools in Italy.

⁴ <http://www.istat.it>

Istat 2013–2017: Education personnel:

Classroom teachers and academic staff by education level, program orientation, sex, type of institution, and employment status.

Istat 2013–2017: Education outcomes and participation:

- Graduates by education level, program orientation, completion, sex, and age.
- Pupils enrolled in upper secondary education by program orientation, sex, type of institution, and intensity of participation.

3.2. Young Italians data

Secondary students’ data are collected by PISA surveys that contain 15-year-olds’ performance in reading, mathematics, and science. According to research evidence (Smith, 2005; Veas, Gilar, Miñano, & Castejón, 2016), we consider the percentage of underachieving students from upper secondary school at grade 2.

Furthermore, we select data on young Italians (Istat) regarding daily life in order to study their subjective well-being and socio-cultural activeness. Although these data are not available for students, we assume them to be representative of upper secondary students. Indeed, the age groups 14-17 and 18-19 are mostly composed of students in secondary education. This assumption is based on the duration of compulsory schooling up to 16 years of age and, moreover, on the low drop-out rate. A brief outline is shown below:

PISA 2015: Underachieving 15-year-old students

- Mathematics;
- Reading;
- Science.

Istat 2013–2017: Young Italians, 14–19 year-olds:

- Satisfaction with life as a whole;
- Social activities;
- Cultural activities, events;
- Cultural activities, newspapers, and books.

Based on the principal component analysis, we present hereafter total and synthesized Istat. Finally, we simulate the missing years for PISA that is run every three years.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

This section is twofold. In the first part, we show PISA 2015 results regarding school governance. In the second part, we outline synthesized results and brief historical trends on Istat and PISA data from 2013 to 2017.

School governance results are related to the opinions expressed by parents and school staff in the year 2015. Figure 1 reports that parent opinions are conflicting about school climate and environment: some parents perceive the importance of their children being safe, while others do not believe that the level of safety is essential. In addition, Figure 2 shows that many parents are satisfied with the disciplinary atmosphere of the school and they express a positive and more than positive opinion regarding the preparation of teachers. Despite the fact that the communication from the school is often clear and effective, a large part of parents does not feel involved in the school decision-making process. This is better clarified in Figure 3, where many parents declare that they feel comfortable asking questions to school staff (the values are concentrated on 3, 5, and 6 points). Unlike Xu’s (2021) findings, we find that there is great communication and cooperation among school staff and this is also perceived by parents, although there is always room for improvement.

Despite some schools investing extra money to update school science equipment, school questionnaire highlights how structural resources are lacking, in particular regarding laboratories. Moreover, even the technical staff should be increased (Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 1. PISA 2015: Parent questionnaire: Opinion about school climate and environment

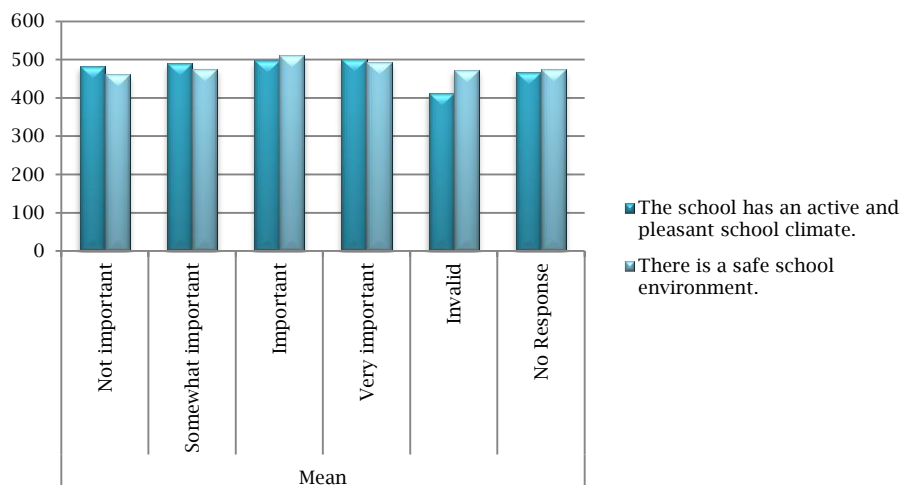


Figure 2. PISA 2015: Parent questionnaire: Opinion about school governance

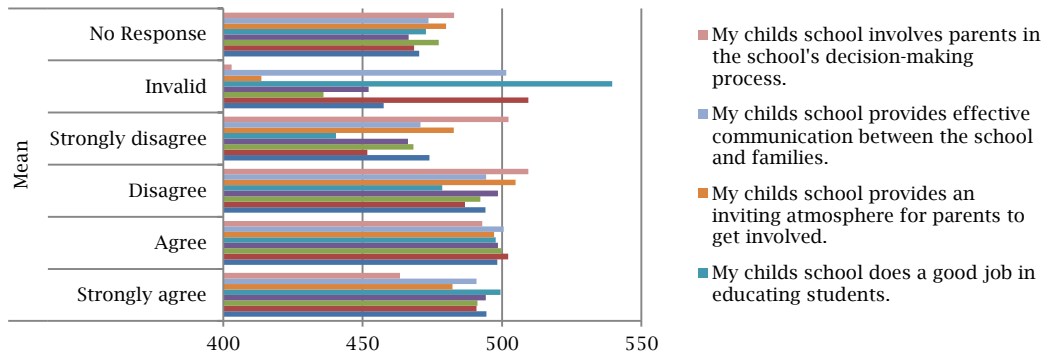


Figure 3. PISA 2015: Parent questionnaire: Opinion about school staff

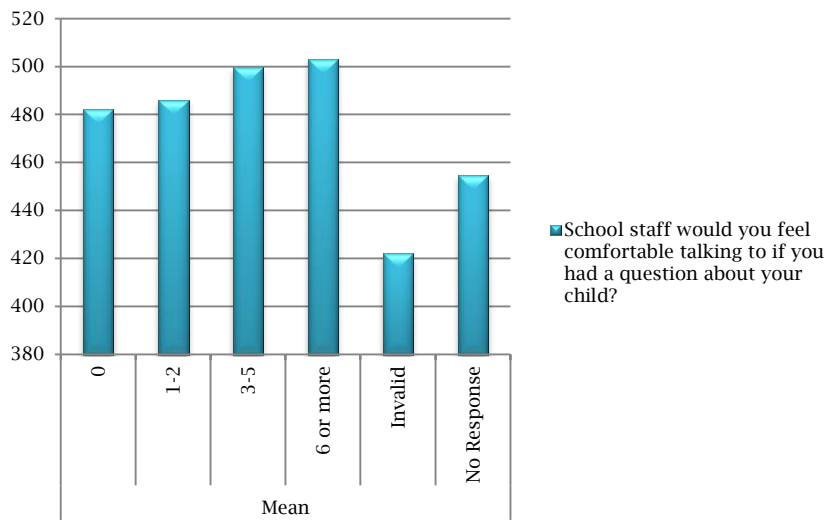


Table 1. PISA 2015: School questionnaire: Type of school

School questionnaire: Mathematics results	Mean			
	Private independent	Private government-dependent	Public	No response
School ownership	522,35	420,95	493,42	479,54
School questionnaire: Mathematics results	Standard error			
	Private independent	Private government-dependent	Public	No response
School ownership	15,37	16,75	3,69	7,68

Table 2. PISA 2015: School questionnaire: Science staff and equipment

School questionnaire: Mathematics results	Mean		
	Yes	No	No response
Compared to similar schools, we have a well-equipped laboratory.	500,85	463,04	511,75
We have extra laboratory staff that helps support <school science> teaching.	494,98	483,20	504,82
Our school spends extra money on up-to-date <school science> equipment.	504,73	472,79	507,17
School questionnaire: Mathematics results	Standard error		
	Yes	No	No response
Compared to similar schools, we have a well-equipped laboratory.	4,39	9,50	15,45
We have extra laboratory staff that helps support <school science> teaching.	4,68	8,16	15,38
Our school spends extra money on up-to-date <school science> equipment.	5,08	7,58	17,36

Figure 4. PISA 2015: School questionnaire: Science staff and equipment

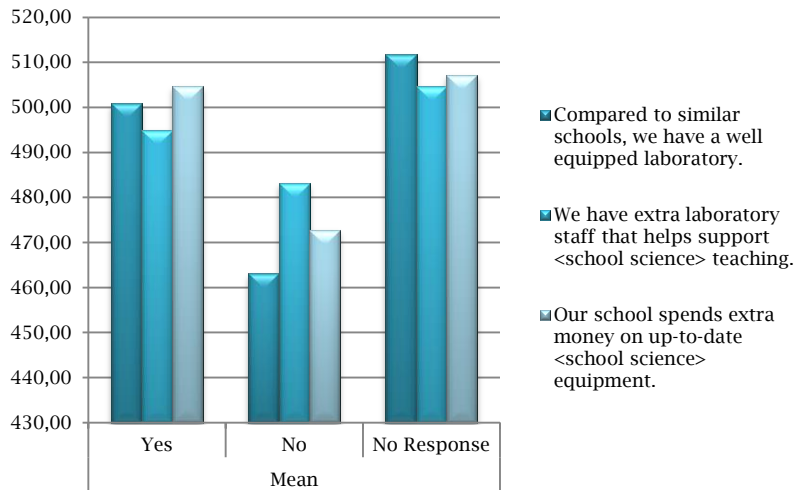
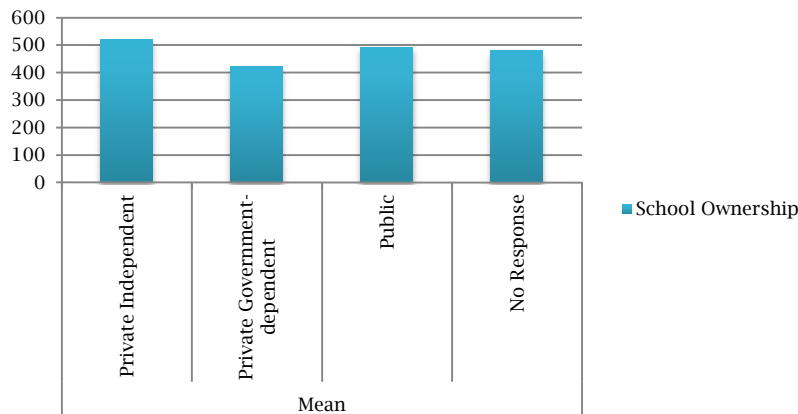


Figure 5. PISA 2015: School questionnaire: School ownership



4.1. Istat and PISA trends

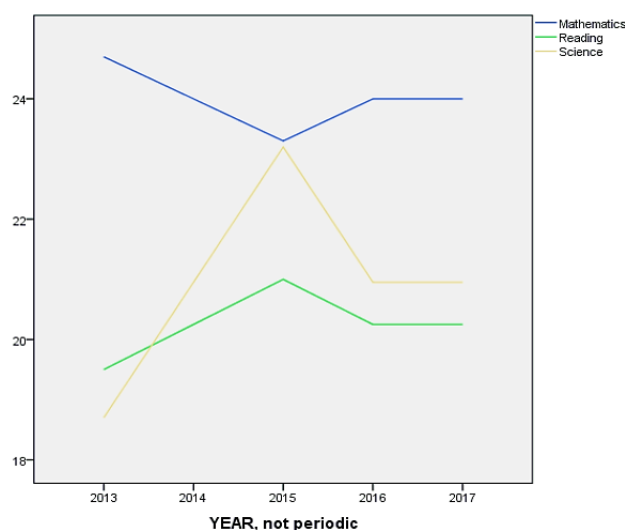
Starting from the total database, a factorial analysis is carried out following principal components (PCA), so as to retain the most important variables. PCA technique allows us to recombine a synthesized dataset. For example, we have two expenditure variables from education finance and only one for the number of teachers and staff in the classrooms. First of all, we outline a descriptive analysis of the new dataset. The most normalized variables are subjective well-being and social participation. Teachers and staff, cultural participation variables received mixed answers, since their kurtosis is negative and very high. Instead, expenditure is more homogeneous because the value of kurtosis is high and positive.

At this point, we carry out the correlation of all synthesized variables. The relationships are significant and highly significant for many pairs of variables. Regarding students' performance, there is a perfect mismatch between reading and mathematics, suggesting the presence of various types of learning among 15 years-old students.

A further precise mismatch concerns the number of teachers and staff in schools of all grades and the frequency of reading among young Italian people. This result would translate into a general students' laziness following the daily overstimulation of the teacher. Otherwise, teachers and staff should be better used during school hours. In addition, a perfect discrepancy between subjective well-being and public expenditure emerged: total expenditure in the public sector should be improved and reorganized.

Subjective well-being has a strong correlation with classroom, while negative with expenditure 1, which is almost completely discordant. It does not depend on the investment of the school. Cultural participation is also strongly discordant with expenditure and subjective well-being. Subjective well-being is influenced by the classroom (environment). Those who record low PISA performance in reading and math tend not to graduate. The graduates are strongly disagreed with cultural participation, those who graduate learn from school and perhaps are linked with the environment. Idem the classroom has perfect discordant with cultural participation: The kids engage more in the class but less culturally.

Figure 6. Simulation of PISA for missing years



Source: Author's elaboration.

5. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

School governance findings provide a nationwide cubist painting that needs further investigation. These findings are generally consistent with Landri's (2021) research where school governance is variable depending on how school singularities participate in the digital governance of education.

In addition, the perspective used here is not centered on the school but relates it to the whole community. First of all, a real school governance culture does not yet seem to have formed among the community and this is clearly stated by parents. However, a large number of parents show interest in school decisions and would like to be involved: this is a good premise for laying the foundations towards advanced learning communities (Kilpatrick et al., 2005). For this reason, according to Salvioni et al. (2012), the Italian school system needs governance where all relevant actors play key roles in the community, contributing to cultural development, social and economic welfare.

Secondly, the difference between parental opinions on the perception of safety and on the school climate could be explained by the gap existing among the Italian regions, in particular between the North and the South. Furthermore, the school environment depends not only on its organization but mainly on the peer-to-peer relationships within classes. Public school governance should more favor social integration and economic development at the regional level.

Whereas the excellent PISA results of Finnish students reflect a high level of decentralization (Darling-Hammond, Hylar, & Gardner, 2017), the results presented here show that the Italian school system is strongly attached to centralized decision-making power. This is especially true for financial spending possibilities, as well as for the recruitment of school staff. According to Burns and Köster (2016), we also confirm the significant role of the State in triggering education reform. Regarding future developments, this research is still continuing to include other data at the regional and provincial levels.

6. CONCLUSION

In the course of this work, we attempt to measure the school governance of the Italian educational system. The final aim is to study the effect of school governance on young Italians' well-being and daily life activities. These effects are partially positive: "Effective school governance is a driver of educational change" (Breslin, 2017, p. 7).

How can we make innovative changes in education? This is a big question that is not easy to answer. First, it is necessary to improve teacher-student relationships leading pupils into the process of learning and promoting their desire to learn. An important element of good teaching is an experimental investigation, so as to engage them in a broad range of instructional activities. Second, it would be advisable to elect school boards official promoters of socio-cultural events, assigning to secondary school a predominant role in the organization of social and cultural events. This policy could stimulate the participation of pupils and their parents.

The limits of this research are the following. The national data do not take into account regional divergences that characterize the Italian system. Similarly, PISA data fails to capture these differences. The application of *Buona Scuola's* model is still in the shade. It is also a truth that is a recent reform and therefore the data available are few. This research is the beginning of a project on Italian school governance that is advancing. We are organizing to collect field data in order to include also private schools. In addition, we would like to improve this work including future PISA results (OECD member countries decided to postpone the PISA 2021 assessment to 2022) and also INVALSI outcomes that are available regionally. The research could be enlarged with a qualitative methodology that included documentary analyses and fieldwork, in particular using direct observations of school contexts and semi-structured interviews.

Even though the ministry has been allocated a large amount of funds, a culture of school governance is still lacking. Progress is slowly being made, but there is still a long way to go.

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