

1. The scenario

In the city of Milan it is possible to identify three scales of governance with regard to the information policies:

- The Ministry of Education
- The Municipality of Milan
- Schools

The Ministry of Education has meant to bring a significant contribution to the information accessibility through the project *Scuola in Chiaro* (Clear Schools), inaugurated in 2011, that has the ambitious scope of providing a wide set of standardized information of each school (from nursery to high school) over the national territory. Despite the potentialities, *Scuola in Chiaro* is an under implemented instrument because the uploading of information is voluntary from the part of schools. In addition, the platform is not really user friendly and the comparison between information is quite hard. Moreover, this instrument is not well advertised, so many families ignore it exists.

Municipality of Milan provides a set of information through its website especially about the geographical location of schools (<https://geoportale.comune.milano.it/geoschool/webapp/>). The municipal website gives the chance of looking for the catchment area school, by typing one's own address. In addition, Municipality sends a letter home to all families for communicating them the opening of the enrolments procedures and which is their catchment area school. The Municipality of Milan provides information mostly about the enrolments process itself rather than the quality of the offer or other features. Overseeing the maintenance of the buildings, the website of the Municipality of Milan provides also information on the schools that are going or are expecting to be under renovation or construction works. We can tell that lately there have been some attempts from the municipality to promote the choice of the catchment area school in order to reduce the so called "white flight": here we refer especially to a work of "re-branding" or "re-labelling" rather than an actual policy. On the page of the Municipality website that advertises the schools' open days, it is possible to check which is the local school, using an instrument called "Scopri la tua scuola vicina di casa" (Discover your neighbour school).

Apart from what showed above, most of the information is then in charge of singles schools. Being *Scuola in Chiaro* website contents in charge of the single schools, also this mean of information depends on the schools. Strategies are largely set autonomously and independently by principals. Each school has its own website and organizes the open days: specific appointments with parents of potential future pupils in order to show them the school from the building to the pedagogical offer (during the Pandemic most of the open days have been held online).

In the last years the Municipality of Milan has made several efforts to spread the use of these sources among parents, by advertising them in their own website or using targeted projects to valorise them (as the already mentioned "la scuola vicina di casa" or geoschool). One of the major flaws of this set of information source is that they are not so used and recognized from parents. The slogan "la scuola vicina di casa (Neighbour school) has been created to enhance the attractivity of the local school, for instance, but while this is greatly

acknowledged by the municipal administration, it is hard to say which are the impacts and what has been the reception of this message from households. This is an issue linked also to the lack in terms of evaluation that municipal policies suffer.

As it will be discussed below, the major source of information remains the words of mouth, through which the reputation of schools is conveyed. In addition, the analysis of flows and performance confirmed that in Milan, middle class tends to make strategic choices compared to lower educated or low-income parent seemingly having a less strategic relationship with the educational system.

2. Information contents:

Here we enter in detail the contents accessible to families:

- **Open days** provide information about the teaching and pedagogical offer, the extra-curricular activities, the project that the school is promoting (such as language enhancement, sport, music, carpentry, digital skills...). Also this event is a chance for parents to see the school environment, the facilities, the quality of the space (during pandemic video were produced). During open days, teachers, or at least some of them, are introduced as well as the principal. Also information about class formation, number of students, where classes are located, collegial bodies, equipment for children with special needs are given.
- **GeoSchool website:** this website, accessible through the municipality website, permits families to see which public schools are located closed to their address
- **School websites** are usually organized in the following sections: contact information, plexus, teaching, projects, educational offer (POFT) and news. Of course school websites are not solely dedicated to provide information for the school choices, but they are actually targeting mostly the current family 'students to provide information and updates about what is occurring at schools and to signal events or notices (about closure, changes or institutional arrangements)
- **Scuola in chiaro website** collects different types of information: numbers of classes and students, location and conditions of buildings, educational offer (POFT) including achieved results and future expectations, additional services and extracurricular activities. In addition, parents can find information on the socio-economic composition of the school (percentage of foreigners or students coming from disadvantage areas) and INVALSI data. These last are data collected by the INVALSI (National Institute of Evaluation of the Educative and Training System) that measure the performance of the school. In the primary schools these texts are taken during the second grade. This means that on Scuola in Chiaro website parents can find for each school the performance of each second-grade class in math and Italian, compared to the city, regional and national average. Scuola in Chiaro Provides also information on teachers: average age of the personnel, turn-over rate, diffusion of certain abilities or skills (such as the knowledge of foreign languages).
- **Brochures:** some schools also use brochures as a mean of communication. They are mostly used to advertise dates and modalities of the open days, but they also convey a first image of the school through the brochure designs or the pictures shown on it.

We observe different levels of difficulties for parents to get in touch with information. The information that are available are largely not easy to reach out. Parents have to look for this information, because it is hard that they are offered to them. Moreover, many information that during interviews parents addressed as relevant are not in the hands of parents. In particular information about the criteria used to compose the class are not broadcasted to parents. From the focus-groups emerged that the content of information that parents look for varies largely from central to peripheral schools and from the typology of parents. Principals in central schools declare that the first point addressed in the parents' question is about the probability that their children can really attend the school, followed by the interest in knowing if they can choose the teachers or the other pupils to be in class with, what is the number of tenured teachers and what is the school program for following the gifted (*plus-dotato*) children. Additionally, parents are interested in news about the state of the art of the buildings in case of renovations. To the contrary, principals of schools placed in more peripheral areas said that parents ask about the ethnic and social composition of pupils and the percentage of tenured teachers and precarious ones.

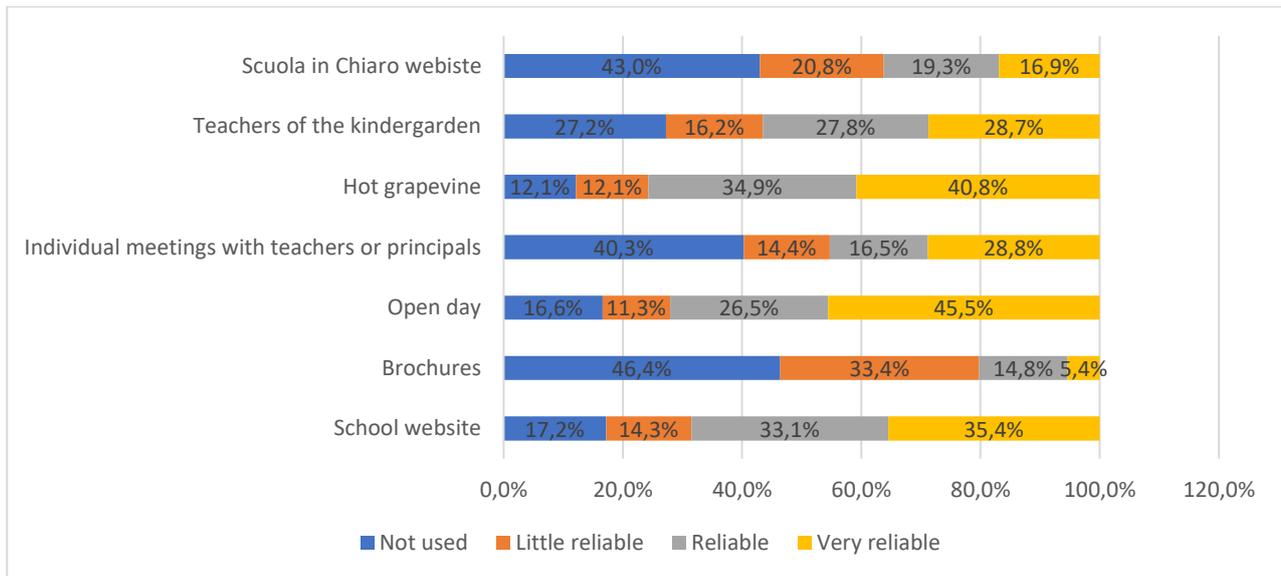
3. Information channels

A survey conducted in 2021 in the city of Milan showed that the main sources of information for families, regardless their socio-economic condition and their level of education, are informal. More in detail they look for information among friends and other parents who have already children enrolled in the primary school they are considering or who are in their same condition (making the choice). The degree of reliability perceived by parents really depends on how much they trust and they consider alike the persons who provide the information. Then the "hot grapevine" is still the main mechanism in looking for information about schools: only the 12% of respondents has not used it, while the 40% consider it as very reliable. The only other source of information that shows similar trends of appreciation is the "open day", that is considered very reliable by the 45% and is not used by the 16% of the respondents. School websites are also quite used and considered very reliable by the 35% of the sample. Awkwardly the official tool though by the institution to convey information about school' offer, Scuola in Chiaro, is used only by half of the sample and it is considered very reliable only by the 16%. This could be due to several factors:

- 1) The scarce advertisement about it
- 2) The website is not really user friendly: it is not easy to understand what users would find by opening some pages
- 3) Schools are autonomous in uploading information and materials on the "Scuola In Chiaro" website. This leads to a great variety about the quality and quantity of information parents can find for each school

It deserves to be added that because of the Pandemic, open days have been suspended and substituted by online meetings. From interviews emerged that this turn allowed to reach families that usually did not participate to the open days, but at the same time it disappointed the other families who missed the only occasion to enter in the school and to know about "where" children would spend the next 5 years. Within this framework, a renewed importance has been accorded to the meeting with principals and teachers.

Tab 1 - Source of information about schools and their use among parents



Source: Polimi elaboration from the survey conducted in 2021 "Which school?"

The schools broadcast information through their sites or through the previously mentioned tool of *Scuola in Chiaro* and by additional instruments such as the website GeoSchool. Nevertheless, just few parents are aware of these instruments. They are not broadcasted by public administration or by schools themselves, so they are largely unknown by those parents that are not yet inserted in the school realm (because they are teachers themselves or because in contact with school professionals). Therefore, the only occasions that parents feel to have to collect technical information are the open days and the private colloquia with principals.

As our survey and focus groups have highlighted, more than these official means of information, it is the word of mouth that represents the main source of information about schools for parents. Despite the fact the information conveyed are true, false or vague, the "hot grapevine" (as it is called by the literature) is still the source considered more reliable. As pointed out by principals during the interviews, parents perceive to already have the information they need because of the informal talks with other parents. The relevance accorded to these informal talks seems to be the same regardless the level of education and the socio-economic status of households.

4. Information about quality

Quality appears as a sort of conceptual horizon that often remain unpacked. It is not explicit what parents mean when they call into account "a good school". Few of them refer to the test score -that generally speaking is not a criterium looked for by any kind of parents -and criteria largely vary from the typology of parents. In the peripheral areas of Milan, quality seems to be much more related to the number of tenured teachers of each school, to the contrary, in central zones it is related to alternative methods (i.e. the Montessorian one) and the physical characteristics of the schools. Indeed, quality is put in relation to the presence of good learning environments meaning appropriate rooms, instruments for lab and furniture. Parents seems to use various information as a proxy of a good quality: high rate of tenured teachers, low rate

of foreigners (and this is also considered a proxy of the socio-economic composition), good infrastructure, proof of maintenance of the building, presence of laboratories or room dedicated to specific activities (music, carpentry, art...).

Interesting outcomes emerge also in relation to the search of quality and socio-economic profiles of families. Contrary to what have been stressed by the literature, immigrants and working-class parents are much more interested in quality rather than middle-class ones. Indeed, the latter declare to pay attention to the cosmopolitan environment, the alternative programs and other collateral features instead of to the program.

4.1 Test scores

Since 2001 information about the performance of school are accessible to everybody through the website Scuola in Chiaro. The information about the performance is composed by the average of the grades obtained in math and literature tests of each classroom in second grades compared to those obtained in schools showing similar features in terms of socio-economic composition and rate of foreigners. Parents then can read which is the performance of the single classes (that are anonymized) in comparison with the city, regional and national level. Despite this is the only information about the level of achievement reached by the students in each school, in several research that have been made on school choice, has never been mentioned among the criteria from parents interviewed. This can be due to already mentioned issue of accessibility of these data. Although they are public, they are not easy to find at all and not easy to understand. In addition, not every school upload them. The section where parents can find information about the test score is called “Rendicontazione sociale” (Social reporting). Under this section parents can find the following sub-section:

- **Context and resources**, where the general context of the school is described. School can upload the percentage of foreigners, the socio-economic conditions, the presence of students with special needs and the social capital of the school (i.e. the link with other territorial realities: third sector, association...)
- **Results achieved**: this section describes the level of achievement that can be achieved in the different subjects by the students and the school, detailing also the evaluation criteria
- **Future developments**: here projects or expectations for the future can be found (the most recent ones concern usually the extension of the teaching of digital skills, the strengthening of foreign language teaching or the acquisition of new materials)
- **Other reporting documents**, where test score can be downloaded in a pdf file.

From this description, it is evident that here most of the information looked for by parents can be found. Nevertheless, the way in which this information are displayed, especially those concerned test score, make the use of this webpage more suitable to teachers or principals, than families.

4.2 School reputation

The reputation of school plays a great role in affecting parents' choice. Reputation seems to be composed by several elements, that span from objective evidence to rumours and feelings. Reputation is mostly conveyed

through the words of mouth. This makes the intervention of policies quite limited and soft. In the city of Milan, there are some schools that have been labelled as “bad schools” and have not been able to get rid of this labelling for years, despite changes occurred within their intake and their offer. Other schools have instead managed to change the way they are perceived by families. Most of the reputation, according to interviews to families and teachers, seem to depend on the neighbourhood the school are located: the presence of public housing, for instance, a higher rate of foreign population compared to closer neighbourhood often are associated to a bad reputation.

Moreover, the importance given to the reputation varies largely on the base of parents’ profile. The same school can be considered good or bad on the basis of what parents are sensitive to. Higher educated parents tend to judge traditional forms of learning as indicator of bad quality, while immigrants or working class parents consider expression of good school the attention paid to extra-curricula factors. Schools suffering from a negative reputation tries to become more attractive through diversifying the pedagogical offer by focusing on some subjects such as music or foreigner language or introducing alternative methods (such as Montessori, Senza Zaino, Pizzigoni).

The Municipality of Milan has accompanied some of the most segregated and stigmatized schools in this mission. One example is the IC Colasanzio, a school located in a public housing neighbourhood characterized by a high rate of immigrants, mostly Arabic speakers, which has been for several years on the newspapers as the “ghetto school”. The principal, together with the Municipality of Milan, have introduced the Pizzigoni method, that sees a spread use of outdoor educational activities (such as taking care of a vegetable garden, sometimes also of animals) and promote the learning though the personal experience. On occasion of the inauguration of the new method adopted by the school, the Councilor for Education has chaired the event, which was also largely advertised by the media.

Conclusions

The information asymmetry about school in Milan is not caused by the lack of information, but rather by a limited use of the available means, associated with a lack of trust in the official source of information. Official sources of information provide in fact qualitative and quantitative data on the environments, personnel, curricula and extra-curricula activities, projects, future expectations, evaluation criteria and performance. Actors at several scale have also taken a major role in promoting a more informed choice and counteract stereotypization of peripheral schools. The major flaw of the information policies seems to derive from an issue of communication and scarce accessibility of the means itself. Unfortunately, they tend to contribute to the asymmetry rather than soften it, by reinforcing the strategic relationship that the most educated and resourceful families already have with the school system. Browsing in the Scuola in Chiaro website and understanding the information about test score or school composition implies some digital and cognitive skills that are not equally spread in the population. Open-days, that are the more used and appreciated formal source of information, are often considered an advertisement moment, whose information should be balance with those collected through the words of mouth. As confirmed by principals, parents arrive to the

school asking for very practical information but with a choice already made based on the informal talks with other parents or friends.

Nevertheless, there is some evidence that when the initiative of a school is supported by the Municipality some changes are foreseeable. Despite that, the territorial features seem to play a great role in affecting parental choice, so that reputation is mostly build by the context in which the school is located, and this is hardly to address solely by strong information policies.