

FGA EDUCATION PROGRAMME

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Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli

2010 Report on the School in Italy

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Executive Summary

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Our *Report on the School in Italy 2009* asserted the central role of teachers. On the one hand, the report confirmed the necessity of teachers' full involvement in any process to rejuvenate the Italian schooling system; on the other, it indicated a series of shortcomings in the way teachers in Italy are trained, hired, organised and motivated, which negatively impact student learning and the equity of the school system. The absence of career and pay-scale advancement has led to structural imbalances in the number of teachers available, which is excessive in some disciplines and regions while lacking in others. Furthermore, rather than being motivated to work in disadvantaged schools, the best teachers aspire either to transfer closer to their home address or to work in more prestigious institutions which already enjoy a higher concentration of students with greater socio-economic privileges. The proposals put forward by Fondazione Agnelli included replacing today's teacher hiring rankings (*graduatorie ad esaurimento*) and "flat rate" pay systems with greater pay flexibility – based on location and subject – as well as the possibility for the autonomous schools to select their own staff. The latest Report extends our research into other areas, while maintaining the initial thesis of the centrality of the teachers and the proposals put forward, which are indeed reinforced. This year we looked at a number of the more obvious flaws in the Italian school system – a system that is in many respects both strongly unitary (in terms of bureaucracy) and highly fragmented into diverse in other aspects, with deep divisions between and within regions with regard to training, equal opportunities for access and achievement, teacher efficacy, didactic innovation and the efficient use of human and financial resources. The differences within the system ultimately lead to shortcomings in Italian schooling on an international level, measurable primarily (although not exclusively) in terms of learning quality.

Digital divide.

Chapter I examines the digital divides in our school system. In Italy (and throughout most of the world) these divides are caused by a wide gap between the diffusion of new information and communication technologies (ICT) in day-to-day life and their use in schools. ICTs are a promising resource for the development of tailored didactic courses given the enormous amount of information available online and ICTs' inherent potential for simulation and interactivity. These give the teacher a more active role and offer each individual the opportunity to increase their learning level at any stage, even after leaving school. The possibilities, however, have so far largely been ignored in Italian classrooms. In part this is because many teachers have a poor knowledge of ICTs and the Internet as they come into contact with these only in adulthood (in the words of Marc Prensky, they are "digital immigrants"). Furthermore, educational organisations tend to regard these resources as supplementary and often ancillary rather than as promising didactic tools. There is therefore a divide, perhaps unlike any before, between students' activity within the classroom and outside,

where they use the whole range of digital, Internet and Web 2.0 resources for communication, entertainment and information acquisition: this creates a breach between the student and education and reduces motivation to learn.

Our research comparing ICT use in schools in Italy and in other developed countries concluded the following:

- (i) The availability of ITC equipment and the connectivity of Italian schools is not drastically behind compared to other developed countries;
- (ii) Italian students have a high level of computer use at home (equivalent to European peers) and a low level of use in school (lower than European peers);
- (iii) Frequent use of ICTs at home produces differing effects depending on family background: effects are positive for young people with a more privileged background, while they can be negative for less privileged students. This is a symptom of the so-called *second digital divide* dependent on social and cultural rather than generational factors;
- (iv) Young people more familiar with computers achieve better results, independently of social background: in Italy, students with three years of computing experience score 35 points higher on OECD-PISA tests compared to those with just one year, and students with five years' experience score 87 points higher;
- (v) There is a large amount of convincing empirical evidence that the use of ICTs in schools increases student interest and motivation;
- (vi) However, there is insufficient evidence that ICT use in schools improves learning. In addition to the low number of case studies providing definitive evidence and the need for more widespread experimentation, a further explanation – which we find convincing – may be that ICT use in schools is not yet combined with a coherent change of didactic methods to best exploit the cognitive potential of ICTs.

Despite the absence of conclusive evidence to support their integration into didactic systems, we are convinced that a school system which ignores ICTs is neglecting an important training opportunity and risks, in the long term, failing both to meet students' learning needs and fulfil its own duty in overcoming digital, generational and social divides.

The question is not so much *how many* computers are in each classroom, but the *way* in which computers are used, ie establishing new didactic practices that give students tools to learn and operate within the different digital and virtual spheres that they will encounter in the future. Chapter I describes a vision of the school we would like our children to attend in the Internet age: a school where teachers maintain a central role in didactic and technological development.

While with regard to digital divides, it seems we are living through a period of fundamental change (the future alone can tell us if this impression is accurate), the divides examined in Chapter II (social inequalities in schooling) give an impression of *déjà vu*. It is disquieting in 2010 to find how unsuccessful the Italian schooling system is in abating existing social inequalities. Indeed, new forms of exclusion have developed, with students with a non-Italian background, including second generations, facing educational difficulties and new risks of unequal opportunity of educational access and success.

The leading inequality in Italian schools *is early school-leaving*. 20% of young people aged between 20 and 24 have not completed high school, a figure which places Italy outside the European norm. Chapter II draws a profile of students at risk of dropping out based on previously unexamined data: the student is generally male, often from a non-Italian background and an underprivileged social and cultural environment. For once, there are no differences between the North and the South of Italy. Early school-leavers usually have a history of poor school performance in earlier cycles, meaning that the drop-out phenomenon should not be dealt with when it finally emerges, but rather when there are early warning signs. Additional and immediate educational support for at-risk students would avoid the present situation where they are usually directed to receive low level professional training, which itself generates further marginalisation. Early school leaving not only severely impedes the future of these young people, it also exacts a heavy cost on the country: counterfactually speaking, if every young person finished school and gained a high-school diploma, there would be 1,300,000 more people in employment.

The second inequality in Italian schooling *is the selection of a course of studies at secondary level*. This largely depends on social and cultural background and determines the academic and professional fate of children when they are only fourteen years of age. In other words, there is a rigid hierarchy in Italy: the children of well-to-do or more educated parents attend more prestigious schools (a secondary school known as a *liceo* that generally prepares students for university); conversely, those from less privileged backgrounds receive a vocational education, where the educational career often ends, or attend a technical school, which is an intermediary choice, including in terms of study transition. The current segmented system goes against any notion of merit (talent and motivation do not count, what counts is family) and the best way to combat this is to avoid selecting a course of studies too early, allowing children more time to express their own inclinations and abilities.

The third inequality in Italian schooling is the fact that *the course of studies and family background also affect educational performance*. A student attending a *liceo*, all else being even, scores 61 OECD-PISA points (out of a 500 point average) higher than a student at a vocational school. These data confirm the idea of an inflexible social system, where students are assigned a given course of studies or school (indeed the average social/cultural background in a school has, all else being equal, a significant impact) according to social background rather

than merit. In addition there is a lack of corrective mechanisms, such as scholarship programmes, study assistance, full time participation and effective guidance.

The fourth inequality in Italian schooling is *the geographic learning divide*. Being a student in the North of Italy confers an immediate advantage of 68 points measured by OECD-PISA 2006 over a student in the South of the country, independent of individual characteristics and the school attended: this is an enormous gap, larger than those caused by any other factor and, worst of all, is connected exclusively with the fact that a student resides in the South. It is not the case, however, that Italy has two contrasting regional blocks – the North effective and fair while the South is ineffective and unfair. The situation is rather more complicated. Some regions of the North, such as Trentino Alto Adige, succeed in achieving excellent learning levels across the board, but at a very high per-student cost. Others, such as Veneto and Emilia Romagna, are score effective, cost efficient, but less equitable in terms of ensuring similar educational success in all school types. The situation is similar in the South. Puglia and Campania offer similar learning levels in all school types and (particularly the former) keep costs low, however equity is achieved at the bottom rung – with a wholly unsatisfactory quality of learning. In Sicily, Sardinia and Basilicata, low effectiveness and efficiency combine with significant disparities between schools.

The principal research conclusion of this chapter, however, relates to the empirical evidence of a close link between effectiveness and equity at a regional level: the regions (particularly in the North-East and above all Veneto) that have high PISA scores are also the regions where very few children score below minimum international levels in the same tests.

This leads to an important recommendation on education policy for both the central government and the Regions, which will soon have significant responsibility for education: the fight against early school leaving and the improvement of learning levels, in particular, of students currently below the minimum threshold does not contrast with the achievement of excellence. At this current historical phase for schooling in Italy, the two can and must be sought in tandem. This, for us, is a national priority and one which will presumably, and perhaps preferably, involve educational federalism.

Output objectives for educational federalism.

The geographical divides in learning levels represent the great failure of the central government in terms of education. With general equality between regions in terms of educational process *input* – timetables, cycles, curricula, service coverage, student/learner relationships, teacher qualifications, training courses, support for people with disabilities – the *output*, the results, are drastically different and, in the South, unacceptable for a civilised country. The creation of relatively differentiated regional educational systems – introduced by the passing of legislative responsibility for education from the State to the Regions implementing the 2001 reform of the Title V of the Constitution – is thus at once a promising

and risky step: educational federalism may reduce divisions, but it could very well exacerbate the divisions, especially if the handover to the Regions involves the State simply walking away, without a clear blueprint.

Chapter III illustrates the conclusions of research into what we can term “year zero for educational federalism”: consisting on the one hand a meticulous examination of schooling cost, which may be defined as “historical cost”; and on the other hand the potential consequences of passage to costs based on standard needs – or efficiency criteria – as contained in the law on fiscal federalism of 2009.

In 2007 public expenditure on education amounted to approximately 60 billion Euro, of which 43 was covered by the State (almost entirely for salaries), 10 by territorial authorities (of which 6 by Municipalities), and 5.5 for imputed State property rental (which we estimate at over 100 billion). Overall, Italy spends 6,600 Euro per student a year, more than the OECD average, with marked regional differences: amounts range from 9,900 Euro in Trentino Alto Adige to 5,800 in Puglia. Regional spending differences can be attributed to three basic factors: school and class size, which reflect territorial demographics and morphology; the levels of full time primary school students and lower secondary school students following the longer timetable (known as *tempo prolungato*); the presence of students with disabilities and support teachers. This is an important point: regional divisions do not depend on arbitrary causes or, worse still, waste and inefficiency, but rather on *decisions* that Italy has made on educational policy. These decisions are, obviously, open for new discussion, but we believe they are well-founded, if we want to ensure everyone living in Italy the availability of an education system that is readily accessible, compatible with the organisation of family life and women’s working lives and that meets the needs of the weakest children.

The introduction of federalism into education entails a rethink of some key issues. Much will depend on the definition of base performance levels (BPL, *Livelli essenziali delle prestazioni*) provided by the Regions and applied throughout the national territory, and that the State undertakes to finance on a standard cost basis. To measure the impact on schools, we have calculated the regional staff figures in 2012 if all regions achieve the levels of the most efficient region, given the demographic trends. The result is surprising:

- cost rationalisation, provided for under the programme plan presented by Minister Gelmini in 2008, is already bringing the historical cost closer to the standard cost. In 2012, the difference between the two scenarios will be less than 20,000 teachers (a reduction of 96,000 compared to 2008 in the case of federalism and 78,000 in the provisions of Minister Gelmini);
- On the standard cost basis, cost savings for personnel would be 3.2 billion Euro per year, 600 million more than under Minister Gelmini’s plan.

Our study demonstrates that educational federalism based solely on objectives of saving and cost rationalisation would not be of much use, since many of those objectives have already been achieved without and before federalism.

On the other hand, we believe that educational federalism can be a very useful tool to close the territorial divides and ensure that everyone living in Italy receives what the Italian system has so far failed to provide: adequate learning levels and more equitable opportunities for educational access and achievement. The primary right of all students, regardless of social status, is to reach a level of skill that allows him/her to actively participate in the economic and civil life in 21st century Italy. The fact that in some southern regions 30% of children are not given the conditions to reach a minimum standard of education and skills (based on international standards) is a scandal in the present school system.

We therefore propose that educational federalism involve the definition by the State and Regions of a series of programmes designed to achieve specific training goals:

- the first training goal for educational federalism is to *remove obstacles to learning*. For example, we would like to see Regions below the minimum threshold commit to achieving 420 points on OECD-PISA equivalent tests within 5 years for 95% of sixteen-year-olds; Regions presently above the minimum threshold would draw up improvement plans with the State;
- the second training goal for educational federalism is to *half the rate of students that drop out after the mandatory period*.

Failure to achieve these goals by Regions would lead to sanctions, such as subsidiary administration by the State in the long run.

Under fiscal federalism, these goals would be adequately and wholly financed by the State, with the use of equalizing measures and – temporarily – any additional resources required to allow the lowest performing Regions to catch up. To this extent *all savings* which have already been achieved in the rationalisation of education expenditure should be reinvested in the school system and used to achieve set targets. The State must be responsible for overseeing and measuring the effects for the Regions through a national evaluation system. The Regions, in turn, will be responsible for selecting and implementing the most appropriate strategies.

Our research indicates that the Italian school system, in order to face coming changes and overcome its divides and shortcomings, will have to focus all its efforts and financial resources on results and the effectiveness of its actions (primarily the quality of learning and reduced drop-out rate) as well as the equity of the education provided. The evidence demonstrates that this is now possible and our research shows us that educational federalism is a suitable tool.

That we define educational outputs as a vector for change is the proposal of this second *Report on the School in Italy* by Fondazione Agnelli. By its nature the proposal once more points to

the central role of teacher, requiring greater preparation and involvement than currently exists. Furthermore, it appears that this must occur in a more problematic context than previously: professional unease among teachers is increasing each year, as witnessed by the responses of 15,000 newly-hired staff that took part in our recent survey.

The measures and policies benefiting teachers proposed in the last *Report* therefore seem all the more urgent and necessary and should be transposed into the new institutional framework of education federalism. Without the intelligence and commitment of motivated teacher, the path of Italian schools to greater effectiveness and fairness – goals to be followed in tandem – is doomed to fail.

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