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Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

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CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This report describes some organisational aspects of the Italian education system and the professional circumstances of teachers. We hope readers will find the reality is more diverse and dynamic than the stereotypes put forward in political and media debate. However, it is hard to avoid the feeling that the recent (especially didactic) changes affecting Italian schools in recent years have lacked direction and coherence.

In one sense, this should not come as a surprise. As the scenario analysis in Chapter I shows, nobody today – in Italy or elsewhere – can predict with certainty where schools will be in ten or fifteen years. Without a clear goal, experimentations are unlikely to be ordered and consequential. Education systems in all developed countries find it increasingly difficult to effectively meet society's training needs. The removal of cultural and commercial barriers, the evolution of technical and scientific knowledge, the advent of new information and communication technologies, progress in the science of learning and migration all render the traditional school model obsolete, based as it is on stable classes and homogenous programmes, learning specialisation, frontal teaching and extensive bureaucracy. Social and technological changes reduce the monopoly of the school, which is increasingly complemented by other educational providers – private and public bodies, networks and “virtual teachers” – that can supply personalised instruction without the need for a formal scholastic system.

This prospect involves risks that require serious consideration: are we, for example, prepared to forego education in social relations, which is one of the fundamental functions of school? Can we permit greater segregation of students along economic, religious or ethnic lines as forecast by the *American Teacher Leaders Network*?

Moreover, in the future the current framework, whereby educational investment is focused on the early years of an individual's life, will become less compatible with the knowledge economy: educational systems will have to provide continuous training and schools will have to teach how to “learn to learn”, which individuals can use for their whole life.

If, contrary to popular belief, the evolution of Italian schools is similar to that of our near neighbours, then the discussion of the schooling problem and search for solutions have begun late in Italy. Indeed – as stated in the Introduction – it was not until the publication of the Oecd-PISA study on the abilities of fifteen-year-olds that public opinion in Italy began to recognise the education system as undermining the country's economic and social fabric. The system is relevant to the economy because inadequate investment in knowledge means Italy will be unable to adapt its productive system to provide innovative and creative goods and services, which is an inevitable consequence of globalisation. From a social perspective schools appear less and less capable of fulfilling their fundamental role – as written in the Constitution – of supporting social mobility and renewing the managing classes.

Italy is behind in terms of recognising and deliberating on the weaknesses of the education system. As discussed in Chapter I, research on schooling is nascent: relatively little is known about school organisation and the attributes of schoolteachers and principals (the motivation behind our *Report*). In particular, Italy has yet to base educational policy on concrete and successful experiences: although the term “experimentation” is included in all relevant legislation, learning-related innovations are rarely followed up with a review of empirical evidence.

In the absence of a solid analytical apparatus and a culture of assessment, educational policies in Italy have often been characterised by ideology. Scholastic autonomy, “competition tests” for teachers, vocational schools and the use of a single class teacher are all measures that have been taken or proposed over the last few years to boost the school system, without offering empirical evidence as to their relevant pros and cons: as a result the measures have been the focus of opposing viewpoints on schooling and the role of the teacher, rather than the fruit of reflection as to potential remedies required by the system. This explains the frequent rethinks, half-baked reforms, inconsistencies and, above all, the lack of a long-term vision for schools.

We believe that it is possible to bring coherence and perspective to the debate on schooling. We also believe that the pre-eminent goal of this debate must be to improve students' learning and their capacity to fit into society and act as responsible citizens.

The quality of students' learning is a complex product, based on a combination of at least four factors: the characteristics of the learners, as individuals and as a group; the curriculum; overall school organisation; and teaching quality. This *Report* focuses on the latter two factors and deals with the first two only indirectly. Consequently, our final proposals apply only to the organisation of the education system and the professionalism of teachers (cf. BOX PROPOSALS, p.12), and these proposals cannot be taken out of the national and contemporary context. While the development of ideal school types or the mechanical application of practices from other countries may be intellectually stimulating, it is of dubious efficacy. A more valuable and relevant approach is to identify the feasibility of various proposed reforms on the basis of the actual situation in our schools.

In keeping with our belief that education policies must be firmly based on analysis of the Italian system, we will summarise the findings of our research before describing each proposal.

Italian schools are today being modified and redefined by two processes: demographic evolution and autonomy.

Demographic evolution affects both students and teachers alike. Student numbers have dropped significantly since the late Seventies (from 10 million to 7.5 million in state schools alone), despite an increase in levels of scholarship: only recently has immigration slightly reversed the trend while presenting new didactic and cultural challenges which Italian schools are only now preparing to deal with. Conversely, the number of teachers increased from 700,000 state schoolteachers in 1978 to 850,000 today, not including over 200,000 teachers in municipal and provincial institutes, private schools and short-term substitute teachers.

The widening gap between overall teacher supply and demand is a major unresolved problem in our school system and has been the focus of many different (and often conflicting) attempts at reform over the last decade. The high teacher to student ratio, unique to Italy compared with other developed countries, does not appear to have led to above-average learning quality. On the other hand, it should be recalled that in recent decades Italian schools have undertaken additional responsibilities, such as providing support for disabled students. In any case, Italy, in contrast to other countries, has adopted a policy

of having a high number of teachers relative to recent demographic trends in exchange for low salaries and parity of pay.

In our research we looked beyond the excess in overall teacher numbers and an interesting point to emerge was the stark contrast based on geography and subjects taught. For example, while it is generally known that there are more aspiring teachers than positions available each year in most of the 8,000 provincial waiting-lists (in three quarters of cases there are at least five teachers for every post), it is less well known that 1,500 waiting lists contain either very few or no candidates. The situation is similar in other European countries where a dearth of teachers for subjects that are most financially rewarding in the self-employed and private sectors has become the norm. It is increasingly difficult to find people prepared to teach mathematic, scientific or technical subjects in northern Italy and will be impossible within a few years if current trends continue.

Another important element is the increasing age of teachers, which is also linked to policy. Today more than 50% of permanent teachers are over fifty years old, with a large number aged between 53 and 57. The rapid increase in average teacher age has been accentuated by the fact that the average teacher is 41 by the time they gain a permanent position, as revealed by research carried out by the Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli with the Regional Education Offices (*Uffici Scolastici Regionali*) in Emilia Romagna, Piedmont and Puglia. Many teachers – over 300,000 in the next decade – are approaching retirement age. Public finance limitations mean that not all outgoing teachers will be replaced and the school system will undergo a massive overhaul of personnel. Managing this process will be one of the greatest challenges in coming years.

There is a danger that guaranteeing the future prospects of the more than 240,000 teachers with short-term appointments that have been on waiting lists for many years will mean excluding more capable and motivated younger people from the profession and create a generational gap that would undermine any organisation, particularly at a time when the use of new technologies risks creating a rift between students and older teachers.

This challenge cannot be met without changing teacher recruitment mechanisms. In Italy these mechanisms have long been based on waiting list ranking, which is in turn based largely on years of service, with limited remunerative and career prospects.

The waiting list system is flawed in a number of ways. On the one hand it does not reveal the two factors that ought to be rewarded in teacher selection: teaching ability and commitment to school activities. Rather, the system rewards years of service and the acquisition of qualifications which, rather than offering true professional development, become little more than means to increase one's rank on the waiting list. On the other hand, the waiting list system, together with other individual ministerial procedures (e.g. post assignment to newly recruited teachers) combine to create a continuous movement of teachers between schools that interrupts didactic continuity to the detriment of students. Finally, the system does not ensure that teachers find work in their preferred schools, nor can a school choose the teachers most suitable to its own educational goals. This significantly reduces school autonomy and encourages teachers to follow "informal" career paths to gain work in schools that are more prestigious or nearer to home and not those schools where they can best apply their professional skills and contribute the "added value" as described in Chapter V. It is true that the (albeit arbitrary) logic behind the waiting list system offers teachers a certain element of insurance, which explains its continuation; although denigrated by all, few are convinced of the benefits of abandoning it. An appropriate metaphor is that of a river, to whose waters aspiring teachers commit themselves: the current carries them slowly to their destination, more or less maintaining the order of departure. The higher one's rank on a waiting list, the greater 'right' one has to a permanent job: as a result, unlike other sectors, it encourages teachers with short-term appointments to remain on the list until they arrive at a full-time position. As discussed in Chapter III, each year spent on a waiting list increases the social security benefits that a teacher enjoys once they obtain a permanent position.

Almost all the newly employed teachers interviewed (who represent the immediate future for Italian schools) agree that the waiting lists are an inadequate and punitive recruitment system. These teachers know that they are made permanent at an advanced age – they spend over 10 years on short-term contracts – without any real selection method or assessment of teaching capability. They complain that this generalised recruiting system crushes potential and enthusiasm and penalises the entire group. Newly employed teachers are clearly in favour of greater entry selection and procedures that effectively assess candidates and at the same time grant selected candidates

swift access to schools. While these teachers are strongly motivated and willing to accept greater didactic and organisational responsibilities associated with more diverse schooling, they are vocal in their criticism of bureaucratic procedures, particularly the basing of pay increments on age.

These critical aspects, which emerge from both quantitative analysis and teacher perceptions of their situation, need to be dealt with before further they affect the impressive level of motivation that, almost miraculously, still exists among Italian teachers.

The second process affecting Italian schools over the last ten years is autonomy. The increased decision-making responsibilities of individual schools in relation to teaching, internal organisation, human and financial resource management and local community relations has been a major innovation in European education systems in recent decades.

In all countries, the advent of widespread education, diversification of territorial and individual needs and reduced public resources have made school systems excessively complex and costly relative to the educational service offered. The prevailing view is that overall system efficiency can be improved through decentralisation to different levels of government. A less centralised system and more autonomy for individual schools (decentralisation and autonomy are not synonymous, although they commonly overlap in Italy) can therefore improve overall efficiency in education, although experience indicates that public spending can increase in the early phases of decentralisation. However, it is difficult to imagine that a centralised system run along purely administrative lines, such as that in Italy up to ten years ago, can provide the continuous, personalised and high-quality training required to meet future education needs.

According to economic theory, one way to increase school efficiency is to introduce, via autonomy, market mechanisms and inter-school competition. Competition is a powerful incentive that forces schools to do a number of things: fully exploit the financial, human, physical and intangible resources available and actively seek additional resources; attract more skilled and motivated teachers and differentiate pay according to merit; maintain rigorous teaching standards to ensure their reputation is not tarnished; and assess quality against results. These are all desirable effects from many viewpoints and this approach has been taken

by a number of countries, above all those in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, with contentious results.

We are unconvinced that public schools can become a market. The assumptions that families have complete liberty to choose and are fully informed about individual schools do not reflect the reality. With the exception of major urban centres, families are unlikely to have a large enough number of schools available within a "reasonable" distance: small towns and some city areas are faced with the problem of daily travel to and from distant schools. In addition, information on the quality of schools is not currently available to Italian families and is unlikely to be available in sufficient detail in the near future. Competition between schools may also have questionable consequences as overseas experience has shown: competition can lead to a situation whereby a small number of schools contain a disproportionate number of the best teachers and students and have access to greater resources (with a similar concentration of poor teachers and students in other schools). This is unacceptable for a system that aims to improve the overall quality of public education.

There is more autonomy in teaching, research and experimentation in Italy than the rest of Europe; in terms of management of financial resources, Italian schools have as much discretion as schools in other countries. In reality autonomy should be consolidated with regard to managing human resources, and particularly teachers, by reforming the recruitment process and this would appear consistent with the role of school autonomy under the 2001 reform of Title V of the Constitution.

By the end of 2009, or 2010 at the latest, there will be a re-division of powers between the State, Regions and autonomous educational bodies, which has been the subject of lengthy (and sometimes bitter) debate between the State and Regions. One of the most important issues, in our view, is to avoid overlapping that could lead – and has already led – to ongoing conflict. The State ought to be responsible for setting the system objectives and verifying that Regions meet these objectives. Regions in turn should be responsible for setting targets on organisational efficiency. It is particularly important that overly stringent State benchmarks on performance do not limit Regions' independence excessively. The most controversial issue remains whether or not teachers should be State (as is currently the case) or Regional employees. In Chapter II we referred to the latest outcome of this ongoing discussion.

Moving away from general governance of the education system, we will look at some equally important issues of internal governance. The passage from a centralised to a decentralised management model entails greater responsibilities and decision-making powers for school principals. However, common sense and teacher-based research point to a concern about the fairness of such a system: there is a fear, particularly in the South, that greater powers for principals – particularly if schools acquire greater powers in relation to recruitment – could lead to arbitrary appointments, nepotism and clientelism. One possible solution to counter this risk is to consolidate the checks and balances governing management, which are all the more necessary in the event of increased delegation. This role should be carried out by the school board, which needs to change its current structure – dating back to the 1970s – to a board of management model that can draw up education programmes, deal competently with budget issues and participate in principals' decisions relating to staff, buildings and general school operation.

This leads to yet another problem that has not been resolved satisfactorily in the most advanced overseas systems.

Who should sit in the school board? Obviously it should include those with a stake in the school: the principal, teachers, auxiliary staff, families and – at more advanced levels – the students. Who else? Purely representative participation on the part of local authorities could increase bureaucracy and introduce a political element into school environments. Further research will be needed to find an appropriate answer to this complex question. For the moment we suggest that board membership ought to reflect the interests in proper school running, e.g. representatives from higher-level schools in the same catchment area.

Another critical issue on internal school governance relates to successfully involving teaching staff in activity organisation.

Apart from opposition from teachers in general, this has been limited by financial and managerial constraints that prevent principals from designating middle management staff with responsibilities for organisation and didactic coordination. Principals assert the importance of having reliable teachers they can involve in day-to-day activities and planning, but complain that they lack incentives and can only ask for willing teachers to volunteer.

If "Italian-style" school autonomy has shown itself to be lacking in terms of human resource (and above all teacher) management, another major limitation

is backward assessment and analysis of school results. It is only in the last few years – in the face of difficulty, limited resources and significant opposition – that a serious need for accountability has been acknowledged. Such accountability is necessary governance tool to balance greater independence of schools and implement measures to correct and redress system imbalances.

Without accountability, any discussion of recognising merit in education is doomed to remain rhetorical.

Nowadays the word “merit” is rightly a much in relation to education. There is no question that merit needs to be rewarded; the question is *how*. Debate in Italy often ignores the fact that learning scores are largely determined by students’ economic, social and cultural situations, as discussed in Chapters IV and V. Consequently, assessments of school performance must separate these factors when measuring the real contribution of a school. Any final analysis ought to consider a school’s capacity to create “added value” relative to students’ conditions, thus renewing education as the principal contributor to social mobility. In this sense, schools that develop the social abilities students, even though they operate in socially or culturally disadvantaged environments, should be recognised and rewarded. Indeed, it is possible (and we have included examples from international research) that greater “added value” is provided by vocational schools in problem areas than by the most prestigious second level schools, despite the difference in learning scores in absolute terms. It is only fair that teachers know they will be rewarded for good work even in “difficult” vocational schools.

Chapter V analyses the four different approaches that should be involved in assessment: (1) school self-assessment; (2) visits by Ministry inspectors; (3) standardised testing to measure learning; and (4) an assessment by third parties, such as universities and employers.

Comprehensive assessment of this type provides families with information on which school to choose and helps develop a system of incentives that reward schools offering greater added value (cf. pg. 000).

It is important to note that we refer to schools and not individual teachers. In theory, the methods used to measure the added value of an individual school (within the limits that research has identified), can be used to estimate the added value of classes and remunerate teachers accordingly.

However, experimental merit-based remuneration plans for individual teachers have proven unsatisfactory in a number of US school districts and States. We believe a different solution is required because of the importance of the entire teaching staff and class interaction (peer-effects) in determining test scores, which often makes it impossible to isolate the contribution of individual teachers: for example, class results for a given test must be attributed to all staff teaching that class.

There are both practical and theoretical reasons to reward groups rather than individuals. Significantly, the newly hired teachers interviewed for this Report indicated a preference for team over individual assessment. Rewarding all the staff of a school equally for positive results, while neither optimal nor risk-free, is a valid option where the *team effect* is central.

Proposals

To bring teachers' aspirations and desire to succeed in line with the needs of the system; to reduce excess movement of teachers and mitigate problems related to didactic interruption; to define and put in place measures to complete the processes of decentralisation and autonomy. All the above need to be achieved with an eye to the primary goal of all educational systems, i.e. to ensure each student gets the best quality of learning possible. The following proposals do not guarantee all of these goals will be met, but are intended to move the system in the right direction.

The underlying premise is that it is time to place faith – and responsibility – in teachers and schools: faith in the ability of teachers to build their own career, choosing schools that most suit their expertise; and faith in the ability of schools to choose the most suitable teachers.

Our first proposal is to abolish the teacher waiting lists. 1,500 of these lists are already exhausted while thousands of others are too full to offer any reasonable chance of employment. Selection of teaching staff should be based on the principle that both teachers and schools – have a role to play in the recruitment process. Since it is clear that individual schools cannot hire randomly, recruitment should be based on a register of professional teachers that would replace the current waiting lists. Inclusion in the register would confer the right to employment as a teacher, although it would not guarantee a job. This would

bring together the new and older candidates and schools selecting candidates from the register would be guaranteed of the teacher's professionalism. Requirements for qualification and registration would be established by the State on the basis of (1) an updated definition of a teacher's occupational status and basic teaching requirements; (2) a study programme that develops professional skills and a final exam. Both points need to be revised given the decades-long absence of teaching assignment competitions and the current closure (and probable definitive failure) of the SSIS (specialised institutes for second-level teaching). This approach combines three closely linked aspects of the education system (initial training, qualification and recruitment) which have become separated in recent years. Maintaining State responsibility for defining basic requirements and the final exam guarantees that a qualified teacher fits into the overall education system and avoids geographical imbalances in qualification.

Individual schools would issue notice of the positions available for the following school year and select from registered professional applicants. Notices of available jobs would specify whether the vacancy includes only teaching duties or additional management or didactic coordination responsibilities (i.e. project managers). Under the principle of autonomy, each school could select the methods for candidate examination and teacher selection; recruitment mechanisms designed for other labour market sectors could be used such as direct interview, discussion of previous experience and references and a practical test (e.g. a trial lesson).

While this represents a possible way to bring demand and supply closer, the research presented in this *Report* indicates that current remuneration parity for teachers needs to change and should be differentiated along horizontal and vertical lines.

Horizontal differentiation refers to the need to remunerate teachers according to local living costs, alternative non-teaching opportunities on the local labour market and the subjects for which teachers are in demand. Within a given geographic area, horizontal differentiation must reflect objective disadvantages – deprived urban areas, catchment areas heavily affected by migration, isolated and peripheral areas affected by depopulation – where financial rewards could attract the best and most motivated teachers rather than the least expert, as can happen. Given that the Title V Constitutional reform made the Regions responsible for planning and managing the school network and in expectation

that Regions will also gain responsibility for teaching staff and Regional Education Offices (currently under the Ministry), regional wage agreements – with or without a national minimum wage – should ensure horizontal pay differentiation. Salary differentiation should also promote more efficient autonomous, dividing responsibilities among teachers on the basis of ability, experience, time availability, commitment and so forth. Project managers involved in organisation/management and didactic coordination would receive additional payment on top of the basic salary, thus creating *vertical differentiation* between teachers with different duties. We are not convinced however, that these positions (with the possible exception of principals and deputy principals) would become permanent job and salary levels which teachers would maintain when changing schools. There is a risk that overly simple access to a higher position might lead to a costly increase in career and remuneration levels, as shown by experience in the UK.

It is important to note that the transfer of teachers to Regions can only take place within a clear national framework for the profession as a whole and the State must define requirements for teacher qualification and registration, as well as basic performance standards. More generally, the State must define the occupational status of teachers, the minimum standards necessary to teach and the nature of the entry-level examination. The State should also be responsible for preparing and managing an assessment system that can guarantee comparability of results on a national level. This would facilitate overall system monitoring and verifying consistency with set goals as well as assessment of individual school performance. Individual schools would be encouraged to continuously improve and receive additional resources on the basis of merit according to scores and “added value” to learning quality. In addition, “weaker” schools would receive assistance in drawing up a specific improvement plan (which could run over a number of years) to be regularly monitored. This type of *collective result reward* for staff in one school is then shared out among the greatest contributors according to each school’s criteria. As discussed in Chapter V, the principal, as both educational leader and manager, would decide on the reward for each teacher. This type of decision is largely discretionary and requires a strong sense of managerial responsibility (decision-makers should in turn be subject to controls and assessments by the school board and higher levels of government).

The problem of how to develop, assess and compensate teachers is a complex one and needs to be dealt with simultaneously on a number of fronts. The above salary incentives are one possible tool. Since the teaching profession maintains a strong element of motivation, further non-monetary incentives could include coordination, supervision and responsibility of school projects, or cheaper access to local cultural offer. The impact in terms of recovering social status and prestige for the teaching profession could be important.

In conclusion, we believe Italian schools are ready to assume greater autonomy in selecting and managing teachers, assessment and recognition of school results and salary differentiation.

At this stage, improving student learning in Italy also means regaining balance across the country. There is irrefutable evidence that learning quality is particularly low in southern Regions, which largely explains Italy's disappointing position in international rankings. It is only right that the already excellent level in the north-east (at the top of international tables alongside Finland and Korea) continue to improve as the quality of an education system is also measured by its highest achievements. It must, however, be clear (especially with fiscal federalism redefining the balance of financial resources for education) that the national battle to improve learning is today carried out *above all* in lower performing areas in order to avoid the definitive relegation of southern schools and reduce the divide separating them from other Regions. This is the only sustainable route to increase the overall quality of the Italian education system.

The changes anticipated must be developed on the basis of concrete research and empirical methodologies rather than ideology. Educational innovations are always the fruit of *political* choices, but those political choices must be assessed with hindsight.

It is important that the teachers have faith in the changes, for it is they who will manage our schools and bring up the young people in a 21st century society with the motivation, enthusiasm and commitment that our research has revealed. Apart from the all-too-human reluctance to challenge the *status quo*, without the complete participation of teachers it will be impossible to introduce improvements and save the teaching profession, and Italian schooling as a whole, from stagnation and decline.