

FGA EDUCATION PROGRAMME

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Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli

2009 Report on the School in Italy

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Twenty-five years ago a report – presciently entitled *A Nation at Risk* – set alarm bells ringing in the United States. The report asserted that failures in the education system put the country's future at risk. The warning did not go unheeded and there followed a concerted investigation into American education, which quickly spread to other developed countries and led to changes in institutions and organisation.

Today it is our turn to ask the same question: *does the Italian education system constitute a risk for our country?*

The response is that there is some cause for concern. A not infrequent argument runs that the reduced competitiveness and poor innovation of the Italian economy – and perhaps the very model of Italian industrial specialisation – in the last twenty years stem from a failure to develop sufficient human resources, especially in terms of the technical/scientific knowledge and expertise that are central to a knowledge economy. This *Report* will not discuss the causes of weakness in the Italian productive system, but there is no denying that international studies have repeatedly identified worrying deficiencies in the quality of Italian students' learning. As a result, the efficiency of our schooling system and universities – and those responsible for policy over the last decades – are in the dock. The Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli has decided to look at both aspects, beginning with this *Report* on schools.

In our view, the school system poses two principle risks to the Italian society. The first is the increasing divide between North and South. It is well known that the OECD-PISA international assessments offer a disquieting picture of competencies – defined as the capacity to apply knowledge learnt at school to the resolution of day-to-day problems – for Italian fifteen-year-olds, particularly those living in southern regions. This can be attributed in part to the object and methodologies of research, which is not in tune with the Italian teaching tradition; indeed, this report asserts that studies such as OECD-PISA are just one (albeit important) basis for creating an effective system to assess schooling processes and results. Moreover, OECD-PISA looks at one specific moment in students' school experience; a more complete overview would require a repetition of the research, typically, at the beginning and end of each scholastic cycle. A similar logic is followed, for example, by TIMSS, another international study assessing mathematical and scientific learning at the fourth primary year and the end of junior-high school or midway through secondary school. Recent 2007 data confirm that primary education in Italy continues to produce positive results overall on an international level and with lower territorial variations than other school systems. On the other hand, there are unfortunately setbacks in early secondary education.

Aside from minor reservations on methodology and the need to refine assessment tools, the evidence cannot be denied: while results in northern regions (especially in the northeast) are higher or at least within the average of other OECD countries, the situation in the rest of the country is worrying: mathematical and scientific learning and the ability to read and interpret texts are all below average, in some cases considerably so. Students in the South in particular seem to emerge from a completely separate education system. It has been noted that students and parents in the South often believe that the quality of teaching in their schools is satisfactory: the North and South would then appear divided not only in terms of the actual situation but also in terms of the perceptions and behaviour of schools and families. Denial of the evidence can only increase the alarm.

In the face of such territorial variations among schools in Italy (the most severe in Europe) that cast doubts on the fulfilment of the constitutional right to education for all, it is fair to ask what risks might be associated with yet wider variations. This divide could deepen – while not a certainty, it would be irresponsible to ignore the possibility – with the application of the principles contained in the revised Title V of the Constitution, which provides for a significant transfer of education-related powers from a State to a Regional level.

As this *Report* will examine, the division of responsibility for the school system between the different government levels – State, Region, local authorities and autonomous schools – is somewhat confused both legally and politically. It is difficult to identify a solution that accommodates, on the one hand, the trend towards legislative and administrative decentralisation to a Regional level and, on the other, defining the basic levels of common performance on a national level by the central State and the independent decision-making powers of individual schools as enshrined in the Constitution. The current debate between the Government, Parliament and Regions includes “old-centralist” viewpoints that would maintain excessive State control over the education system and “neo-centralist” elements that could lead Regions to threaten the autonomy of individual schools. Fundamental decisions regarding the institutional organisation for education will be made over the coming months and a chapter of the *Report* deals with those themes.

The already delicate situation is further complicated by uncertainty over the future impact of fiscal federalism in Italy, which while promising opportunity may have unforeseen consequences. A decentralised education system, combined with the growing need to raise financial resources at a local level, will hopefully improve the quality and efficiency of schools in Regions that behave appropriately, but could also aggravate already serious problems. No matter how we move forward, reducing the territorial gulf in learning must be at the top of the agenda for decision makers. The *equity* of our

education system is as much at risk as its overall *quality*: reducing the gulf will benefit both.

The second risk that educational inequality poses to society relates to social mobility. In all developed countries, including those more orientated to the market and individual choice, schools must – and in many cases do – fulfil the fundamental role of favouring success on the basis of merit and renewing the managerial class regardless of social background.

Defining merit is, however, a complex exercise. Equity involves above all an education system that rewards *natural individual* talent, which is crucial for society's progress, and *effort*, which is based on individual choice. Schools must not reward, but rather counterbalance, advantages deriving from privileged economic and cultural background. Only by following these principles can schools reduce social inequalities in terms of access, educate young people on socialization and active citizenship, renew the elite and be regarded as "fair".

In practice if not in theory, Italian schooling seems to have moved away from a role that promotes merit and, consequently, social mobility. The education system tends to reproduce, generation after generation, a frozen social structure: the children of wealthy and educated parents go to secondary schools while the children of less well-off parents and, today, the children of immigrants end up in vocational schools, even when they have the capacity to aspire to different standards of education. International studies show a close correlation between a family's social, economic and cultural background and test results: this relationship exists in all types of educational institutions, but is most pronounced in secondary schools. The differences in scores between those from better-off backgrounds and those from less well-off backgrounds is similar to the difference between developed and less developed regions; it is a significant, albeit little known, phenomenon.

The importance of social and cultural background also highlights an element that is often overlooked in the assessment of test scores and thus the educational system as a whole. Since students' families select a school on the basis of social similarity and since background influences learning, we should not limit ourselves to assessing school performance solely on the basis of students' scores; doing so risks offering a snapshot of social background rather than assessing individual merit. What we do need to identify and measure is how much a single school contributes to improving the quality of students with respect to their starting point and thus cultivating the merit of young people regardless of background. In other words, a school in a deprived area can do excellent work with difficult "raw materials", even if final learning assessment scores do not compare with a school in a privileged environment. We will discuss in detail the ways to

modify assessment techniques to take account of schools' effective contribution in Chapter V.

In recent months, education has been at the fore in Italian political debate. This has been an altogether unexpected development: in the spring of 2008 the future of the education system was a marginal issue in the electoral campaign and was treated poorly and insufficiently in the main parties' programmes. Perhaps after prolonged study among researchers and thanks to broad media exposure of international studies on learning, the alarm on the quality and equity of our education system has finally registered with the public and politicians. The proposals put forward by the new Government have fed debate and – as witnessed – caused exuberant reaction among students, teachers and families. There is no doubt that a debate on schools and strong emotions on the issue are positive indications, however the debate has taken a number of unpredicted turns and often focuses on less than crucial points. Even when dealing with the most important issues – e.g. cycle reform and teachers – it has proven difficult to get contingent questions into proper perspective; and while this may be understandable for families, the same cannot be said for decision makers.

Discussion and debate on schools must be more farsighted. Remodelling the school system means remodelling Italian society or, at the very least, ensuring that the country can respond adequately to the challenges it faces, such as globalisation, immigration, the development of the Internet and the fragmentation of social groups.

The future discussion on schooling will have to follow a number of clearly defined guiding principles.

The first is that debate cannot be parochial: although we sometimes like to believe that Italy is an untypical country, as a whole it is not an isolated case. All developed countries in recent years have initiated intense discussion on the quality of learning and the inclusive capacity and future role of schools. In 2004, for example, US Secretary for Education Rod Paige stated that: "too many graduates are not sufficiently prepared to achieve success in higher education or work. These students were robbed of their life's potential". Similar concerns are common in France, Germany, the UK and Spain. All countries, even those with the best results, are asking the same questions. How do we create an education system for a knowledge economy? How can we change learning logics when students are "digital natives", i.e. brought up with the Internet, while teachers are "digital immigrants", having experienced the Internet as adults? Is it better to maintain the school as the leading (physical or virtual) place for training, or transform it into one of many tools that each person – adults and young people alike – can use to train and develop over time? How can we reconcile the essentially individual goal of

improving learning quality to increase social and employment opportunities with the collective goal of developing a sense of civic duty and capacity for social relationships. Although no country has yet found satisfactory answers to these questions, it is important that we follow closely what happens elsewhere to avoid isolation from 'main stream' debate on education or repetition of mistakes made elsewhere. This *Report* will therefore make frequent reference to instructive overseas experience. Avoiding provincialism also means resisting the temptation to assume that what has worked elsewhere in the past will instantaneously work in Italy and not unthinkingly import models and solutions developed in different contexts: there are good blueprints available, but they should always be reinterpreted.

The second guiding principle is to abandon the idea that there was ever a "golden age" of schooling to which Italy can return. Although we all tend to regard our childhood and youthful years with affection, education systems develop over time. While some aspects of schools prior to 1968 may have seemed more convincing than today, a return to that model is impossible. By the age of twenty, more than 50% of the population born in Italy before 1950 had at most graduated from primary school. In the Seventies school structures were falling apart (many remain so today), teaching was excessively authoritarian, social segregation in schools used to be more widespread than today and there was practically no access for different cultures: all limits that render any education system incapable of adapting to society's needs. Education cannot have one eye on the past with the second on the future.

The third principle is the crucial role of teachers. Learning is not achieved using books, computers or electronic screens: learning is achieved with and from other students and above all from teachers, who have to know how to interact and collaborate with students and other teachers in order to produce and transmit knowledge. At its best education is a group activity involving people that communicate with and, preferably, appreciate each other: more than financial incentives – which are nevertheless necessary – education is the fruit of a mutual respect and shared goals. Reorganisation of the school system must start with the teachers: their social prestige – much tarnished in Italy – is of interest not only to those directly involved, it is a central precondition for an effective and legitimate education system and as such concerns us all.

On the one hand, we need to think about what makes a good teacher – not only in terms of knowledge, but also attitude – and how the best prepared, adapted and motivated young people might be selected to take up the career. One of the most serious defects in the Italian school system today is the inability to put in place rigorous policies for the training and recruitment of new young teachers. On the other hand, we need to look at how best to motivate and encourage those already working in schools to perform well. Today the rules on the assignment of teaching staff to schools are neither effective nor

transparent: it is worth reflecting on the value of maintaining mechanisms for selection and career progression that are purely administrative and penalise the best teachers, whether permanent or otherwise. The fact that a large portion of this *Report* is dedicated to these issues reflects the firm conviction that institutional, organisational and didactic development is important for our education system, as is revision of the learning and curriculum content; without good teachers, though, the former are neutralised and the latter futile.

Finally, the fourth principle is the adoption of a long-term perspective. Education cannot exist with a constant drip of emergencies that need resolving; reforms must be consistent with a vision of the role of schools and the education system as a whole over the next twenty years. It should be recalled that it will take at least a generation before we can assess the effectiveness of measures to improve education. This makes the series of reforms and counter-reforms over recent years particularly detrimental as their effectiveness has not been assessed.

In recent months the discussion on education reform has once again been opened up. Parliament is currently discussing a law proposed by the Government and voices from some quarters suggest the opposition are in some agreement. Aside from agreement or otherwise on individual points, it is a positive sign that the proposed law emphasises modifying recruitment mechanisms for teachers and (re)defining their professional status. Similarly, the current Government has announced a reform for secondary schools. Available information indicates that this should be in line with most European models and seemingly deals with the delicate topic of vocational education in a similar vein as the previous government. Although these legislative efforts fall short of ideal (when, for example, will there be a debate on middle-schools, which are perhaps even worse off?), they nonetheless deal with broad issues and the solutions offered could impact Italian schools in the medium-long term. Most certainly past experience – with too many reforms not put forward or quickly killed off – advises caution on the possibility of completion. If, however, that does happen, we must hope that these reforms are afforded enough time to be properly tested.

The *2009 Report* on education is divided into six chapters. The first chapter identifies some long-term trends in educational change in all developed countries. The second deals with the issue of school organisation and assesses the pros and cons of school autonomy in Italy following its introduction ten years ago. Chapter three – the longest chapter – looks at the characteristics, professional career paths and motivation of teachers and seeks to enrich the debate with new empirical evidence obtained through original research carried out for this *Report*. Chapter four analyses secondary school students and their opinion on the educational environment. Chapter five discusses in

detail the constituent elements and aims that make up a good evaluation system for schools. In the sixth chapter we return to the issues dealt with in this Introduction in the light of the research presented in the *Report*. The chapter contains a number of proposals put forward by Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli in relation to teacher recruitment and remuneration.

In response to the initial question – whether Italian education constitutes a risk for the nation – we say that there is still the chance and (we hope), the will, to reverse the decline. However, there is not much time left: any intervention must be both farsighted and prompt, which is not an easy task. Success will require a currently lacking foundation of analysis and in-depth knowledge on schooling. Twenty-five years ago, *A Nation at Risk* started a new phase of research into education in the United States. It is hoped that this *Report* is a step in the same direction for our own country.

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