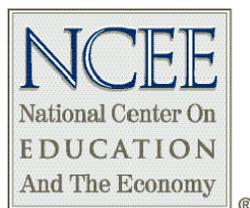


An Overview of Italy's Education System

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From 1996 through 2001, Italy enacted a series of new laws focused on the family and the role of government uncharacteristic for a country that has long avoided explicit family policy. For years, Italian social policy was directed toward certain categories of families and family members, in particular, children, pregnant women, poor families, and families with a handicapped child. The new laws provide increased income support for less well-off families with children, new parental leave, and a comprehensive reorganization of social services and social assistance.

Italy's history of a strong Catholic tradition coupled with a weak national government, on the one hand, and strong regional governments coupled with an industrialized and affluent north on the other resulted in a limited and fragmented welfare state. As Italy follows the trends in lower birthrates and higher female labor force participation rates characteristic of its European neighbors, it too is motivated to develop stronger social policies, especially around the family.

Traditional family roles and structures continue to dominate Italy, as well as the regional differences between the more urban, economically developed north and rural, agricultural south that have long existed. Women continue to have primary responsibility for children, and adult children continue to bear primary responsibility for caring for their aging parents. The elderly are living longer and adult children tend to remain at home with their parents until marriage which like other industrialized countries, is increasingly delayed. Although the labor force participation rate of Italian women at 46.8 percent is well-below the EU and OECD averages of just over 60 percent, the rate is higher in Italy than it has been in the past and calling for reorganization of family time and roles.

Of growing concern and an impetus for policy change, is Italy's very low fertility rate - at 1.24 it is the lowest in the EU, coupled with delayed childbearing. Concern too, that the economic situation affects family formation, spurned an increase in both tax deductions and allowances for families, as well the provision of economic benefits to young families with children for meeting housing needs.

A recent secondary analysis of data from the 1994 European Community Household Panel Survey revealed that, compared to 75% of young Danes who had left their families of origin between the ages of 21 and 25, only 7% of their Italian contemporaries had taken this step. Some 28% of all women between 21 and 25 were already mothers in Sweden and the United Kingdom, as opposed to only 12% in Italy. In the United Kingdom, half of all young people had joined the job market by age 19; while in Italy, entry to the job market tended to happen five years later with half of all young Italians still without a job after age 24. Family poverty remains high in Italy (12.3% in 2000). The gap between the incidence of poverty in the North and in the South grew steadily. In 2000, the percentage of poor families by geographic division was the following: 22% in the North, 15.3% in the Centre and 62.7% in the South, where more than one family in five (23.6%) lives in conditions of relative poverty (as opposed to 5.7% in the

North and 9.7% in the Centre). Public assistance given to families is scarce, as is help given via services. Together with the UK, Italy is the country with the highest rate of child and youth poverty.

Italy is a parliamentary republic, a partly decentralized system. Education policy making is shared between the national government which has responsibility for funding, school curricula, and quality control and the Regions responsible for education delivery, in particular for vocational education and training (see www.istruzione.it). During 2002, public debate was focused on the proposed major reform of the education system. The legislation, which was passed by Parliament early in 2003, affects the structure of schooling, increases the autonomy of the individual schools, and decentralizes political and administrative decision making to the regional level (see www.istruzione.it/mpi/progettoscuola). The law extends the right to education and vocational training up to the age of 18 years. There are now two education levels: primary school (5 years) and lower secondary school (3 years); the second level provides two options: the "Liceo", or general education (5 years), with direct access to university, and the system of vocational education and training (4 years) that awards a vocational qualification and allows, with a supplementary one-year course, for enrolment in university. Parallel to this legislation, a National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education System was established. In 2002 it conducted a national survey aimed at developing instruments for the regular assessment of the effectiveness of educational provision and the quality of its outputs. (See www.invalsi.it).

THE ITALIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

The System

Up to Age 3: Day nursery (Nidi d'infanzia)

Ages 3 to 6: Nursery school (Scuola materna)

Ages 6 to 10: Elementary school (Scuola elementare)

Ages 11 to 14: Middle school (Scuola media)

Ages 15 to 19: High school/Secondary school (Scuola secondaria di II grado):

High School/Secondary School Courses of Study:

Classical (Classica)

Scientific (Scientifica)

Technical (Tecnica)

Vocational (Professionale)

Higher education (4 to 6 years' duration): University (Università)

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Almost 95 percent of Italian children aged 3 to 6 are enrolled in preschool programs, which is among the highest rates of enrollment in the European Union. Italy's ECEC programs are divided by age and follow a pattern fairly similar to that in France and Belgium. Compulsory primary school begins at age 6.

Scuola Materna (Preschool). Like the French Ecole Maternelle, the Scuole Materna is the Italian preschool program serving children aged 3-6, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, financed largely by the national government, free for the core school day and voluntary. About 96 percent of the cohort is enrolled. The program began as in several other countries, more than a century ago, as a private philanthropic activity carried out under religious auspices. There was little further development before 1968, when national legislation was enacted, assigning responsibility for the establishment of preschools to the Ministry of Education. With national funding, the initial priorities were for economically depressed areas and rapidly growing urban areas; but the 1970s saw an explosion of provision along with an acceleration of female labor force participation. The Materna are 10-month programs open from about 8:30 am to 4:30, 5:00, or 6:00pm, depending on location and program. One such program in Reggio Emilia is world renowned for its quality and creativity.

Italian leaders in the field account for the explosion in demand for public preschools to five factors: (a) increasing awareness of the value of a group experience for a child's social development and a child's right to have such an experience; (b) the recognition of the value of preschool as preparation for primary school; (c) smaller families and parents concern about the growing isolation of young children (e) the declining availability of qualified staff in religious schools; and (e) parental belief that state schools were of higher quality and more convenient because of their longer hours. Almost 60 percent of the children attend public preschools while only 19 percent are in church programs and 10 percent in private secular programs. About 1/3rd of the facilities are religious while almost all the remainder are public.

Asilo Nido (Child Care Centers). The Asilo Nido is the publicly funded and largely publicly operated child care program serving children aged three months to three years, open 11 months of the year, and charging income-related fees. The program emerged out of the same history and institutions as the scuola materna. However, national legislation enacted in 1971 gave all mothers the right to use these programs for the under threes, but gave working mothers priority for places; other priorities now are children of lone mothers, poor mothers, and handicapped children. Yet despite these criteria for eligibility, most children who attend are from middle and upper class families.

The law decreed that the national government should play an active role in funding these facilities, employers should contribute 1 percent of payroll taxes to support them, but that regional and local governments should have responsibility for their operation. Today, regional and local governments are the responsible agencies for funding and operating the program.

The Asilo Nido began first as a social service, then became a support service for working women, and only recently has begun to be viewed as an important developmental experience for children generally. It is still not viewed in the same way as the Scuola Materne which is now universally viewed as an essential socialization and educational experience for all children.

The Asili Nidi cover the full workday and are often open 11 hours a day from 7:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. They are designed to serve children from three months of age, but children usually begin at 9 months or 1 year, when the parental leave ends. Typically, centers serve from 30 to 60 children. Coverage is modest, nationally, at about 6 percent of the age group, but in the north in some regions such as Emilia-Romagna, coverage may reach 30 percent. All centers are public and almost all are operated under municipal auspices. Quality varies enormously, but is excellent in certain parts of the north. There is little or no family day care and most children of working mothers are still cared for by domestic servants who provide in-home care.

The Emilia-Romagna region has been in the forefront of these developments, as it has with regard to Scuola Materna, and has established an innovative system of infant and toddler care under the auspices of the public education system. Given the shortage of places, and the conviction that a group experience is important even for the very young, this region has developed part-day and part-week programs serving all caregivers of very young children, both at-home parents, grandparents, and "nannies".

According to the OECD Thematic Review, *Starting Strong*, a proposal has been submitted to transfer responsibility for the 0-3s from regions and municipalities to the Ministry of Education. There is also an effort to improve the sharing of knowledge and expertise between the northern and southern municipalities with regard to developing ECEC programs. Further enhancements include increasing staff training and skills, such as requiring teachers and coordinators to have a university degree. Other contact staff will be required to hold a 3-year, tertiary diploma.

Elementary and Secondary Education

The Current System

The difference between elementary and secondary education in Italy is less clear than in the US since the Italian school system is currently divided into three levels. The first, *scuola elementare*, begins at age six and lasts for five years. Upon completion, students move on to the *scuola media*. This is most comparable to the three years of study in American middle schools. If the students have performed satisfactorily, they receive a *Diploma di Licenza di Scuola Media*, with the opportunity to continue their education at a *scuola superiore* after age 14. Mandatory schooling ends with graduation from a *scuola media*.

The length of study at a *scuola superiore* is four or five years, depending on the type of school and program in which the student is enrolled. Students may choose among different high schools, known as *licei*, for specific courses of study in the arts, sciences, linguistics, and what is known as a classical education. Other institutes (*istituti*) offer students preparation for teaching at the elementary school level and for technical, industrial, and commercial careers.

After completion of their chosen courses of study in a scuola superiore, students must pass a state examination to earn a Diploma di Maturità and the ability to continue their studies at a university.

Changes Underway

The new education system in Italy will raise the age for compulsory school attendance from 14 to 16. The extra two-year period (biennio) will involve a course of general studies that will precede three years (triennio) of optional specialized study at a liceo. These new study options will be offered to better prepare students to attend a university.

Higher Education

The Current System

Universities in Italy focus mainly on two tasks—teaching and research. This approach provides considerable academic autonomy and freedom for students to pursue courses of study. Educating over 1.25 million students, the four types of Italian institutions are:

- 42 state universities
- 6 private universities
- 3 technical universities, Politecnici
- 12 university institutes with special status

Recent investments in the university system have led to the creation of four new universities and substantial upgrading of the existing ones through additions such as language laboratories and multimedia centers.

Major Italian universities include those in Bologna (the world's oldest, founded in 1088), Turin, Rome, Florence, Ferrara, Naples, Modena, and many others.

The Courses

Universities offer four main courses of study:

1. University Diploma, Diploma universitario: A fairly new addition to Italian higher education, the Diploma universitario helps to synthesize Italian education with the education systems of the rest of Europe. The internationally-recognized baccalaureate courses last two to three years and are specialized within certain vocations. These courses have not yet been developed in all fields of study, so admission is competitive.
2. Bachelor of Arts/Science, Diploma di Laurea: The Laurea is a more in-depth course of study than the University diploma. It takes four to six years to complete, and students who choose this level of education are able to create their own study plans (piani di studi), subject to approval by the university. Qualification for the Diploma di Laurea is achieved through numerous exams and a thesis (tesi).
3. Research Doctorate, Dottorato di Ricerca: This level of education is considered

postgraduate. It is characterized by extensive scientific research and an annual report for each of the three to four years of study. A student obtains a doctorate through documentation of research and a final dissertation. Admission to a Dottorato di Ricerca program is competitive and limited to only those who have completed the Laurea or a European equivalent.

4. Diploma of Specialization, Diploma di Specializzazione: This is also post-graduate education. Lasting two to three years, it includes practical vocational experience in a specific career and requires a final examination and a thesis.

Changes Underway

Current reforms in the University system reflect a general restructuring of the higher education process.

Italian Universities will be asked to adopt a 'three-cycle system':

1. The first cycle will be three years long and focused on a curriculum of professional training. It will culminate in a first-level degree (Laurea).
2. The second cycle will last two years and will end with awarding of a Laurea Specializzata.
3. The third cycle, lasting between one and two years, will earn a student either a doctorate or a postgraduate specialized degree.

All courses must be based on the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

The Italian government intended for these changes to be in place by the end of the 2001 academic year. However, the managerial autonomy that Italian universities have traditionally enjoyed and continue to enjoy - politically, organizationally, and operationally - is at variance with centrally-managed change.