Italy

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Introduction

Overview of Education System

The Italian Constitution recognizes and guarantees the right to education for all its citizens.[1] It requires the State to maintain a public school system and allows for the coexistence of State and non-State schools.[2] The Republic establishes general norms for education, and the overall responsibility for education lies with the Ministry of Education (*Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca*, MIUR). At the national level, MIUR is responsible for organizing the various education levels, managing personnel in public schools, and establishing curricula for public and private schools.[3] At the local level, regions are responsible for vocational training, while provincial and municipal authorities are often responsible for preprimary schools. Schools have autonomy about didactics, organization, research, experimentation, and development.[4]

Education is compulsory from ages 6 to 16 or until a professional qualification is obtained.[5] The school system is organized into preprimary education (ages 3 to 6) followed by two education cycles. The first cycle comprises five years of primary school and three years of lower secondary school. Students who wish to progress to upper secondary education are required to pass a State examination. National guidelines for curriculum are set for all levels within the first cycle of education. The second cycle of education consists of five years of upper secondary school and vocational education and training. Upper secondary schools—including general schools (*Lycee*), technical institutes, and vocational institutes—are governed by the State. Vocational training is provided by certified education and training agencies that are governed by the regions.[6,7]

In 2013, the National Evaluation System (SNV) was set up to steer school policies and promote the full implementation of school autonomy. The SNV is responsible for evaluating the efficacy and efficiency of the school system and aims to improve the quality of education and student achievement.[8] Within the SNV, schools are required to submit an annual self-evaluation report based on a national format and to set up an improvement plan consistent with the improvement goals identified in the self-evaluation report.[9]

Use and Impact of PIRLS

National assessment frameworks have been inspired by Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), PIRLS, and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) frameworks and are updated periodically.

Information and training sessions on international (e.g., TIMSS, PIRLS, and PISA) and national assessments and their results were held from 2010 to 2012 for teachers of Italian, mathematics, and science at all school types and levels. This training initiative had three strategic objectives: to spread a culture of evaluation in primary and secondary schools by providing teachers with diversified tools and materials (e.g., tests and scoring guidelines),[10] to improve students' reading comprehension and mathematical skills, and to reduce student dropout rates by increasing teachers' familiarity with the evaluation methodology applied in these assessments.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

In 2012, the Ministry of Education published new national curricular guidelines for preprimary school and for the first cycle of education (*Indicazioni nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo di istruzione*).[11] This document represents a framework for schools to define and implement local primary and lower secondary curricula. Schools are free to determine content and methods of instruction autonomously, provided they are consistent with the learning objectives established by the national guidelines.

Learning objectives at the primary level define what students are expected to achieve by the end of their third and fifth years of primary education. Exhibits 1 and 2 summarize the content areas and learning objectives in the language curriculum at the primary level.

Exhibit 1: Learning Objectives at the End of Third Grade

Content Area	Objectives and Expectations
Listening and Speaking	▪ Be able to participate in communication exchanges (e.g., dialogues, conversations, discussions) while choosing the right time to speak ▪ Understand the main information from class lessons ▪ Listen to narrative and expository texts while showing understanding of the overall meaning; be able to re-expose the content of a text in a clear way for the listeners ▪ Understand and give simple instructions for a game or a well-known activity ▪ Report personal facts or fictional stories, respect the chronological order, and explain the essential information for the listener to foster comprehension ▪ Use spoken language to explain the different phases of an experience from school or other contexts
Reading	▪ Master word reading (at the decryption level) techniques for both aloud and silent reading ▪ Predict the content of a simple text according to its title and illustrations; understand the meaning of unknown words through their context ▪ Understand different kinds of text (narrative, descriptive, informative); understand the general topic, identifying the main information and its connections ▪ Understand different types of continuous and noncontinuous texts for practical, entertainment, or leisure purposes ▪ Read simple and short literary texts, both poetic and narrative, showing an understanding of the overall meaning ▪ Read simple informative texts and collect useful information to widen knowledge on a well-known topic
Writing	▪ Acquire manual, perceptual, and cognitive skills that are essential to learning handwriting ▪ Write by dictation while paying attention to spelling ▪ Produce simple texts (e.g., functional, narrative, and descriptive texts) connected with specific purposes (e.g., for personal use, to communicate with others, to remember something) and linked with everyday contexts (e.g., school or family environments) ▪ Communicate by using simple and compound sentences structured in short texts with respect for spelling and punctuation rules
Vocabulary	▪ Read short texts and understand the meaning of unknown words using the context and the intuitive knowledge of words' families ▪ Develop vocabulary through school activities, extracurricular activities, reading, and verbal communication ▪ Use newly learned words appropriately ▪ Perform simple searches of words and phrases found in texts to develop vocabulary
Grammar	▪ Understand elements of explanatory grammar and reflect on the uses of language ▪ Compare texts to identify specific characteristics (e.g., higher or lower effectiveness and differences between oral and written text) ▪ Recognize whether a sentence is complete by understanding whether it is composed by all its essential elements (i.e., subject, verb, necessary complements) ▪ Recognize words' spelling in texts and apply spelling knowledge in personal writing

Exhibit 2: Learning Objectives at the End of Fifth Grade

Content Area	Objectives and Expectations
Listening and Speaking	▪ Interact collaboratively during a conversation, discussion, or dialogue about a subject related to personal experience, ask questions, give answers, and provide explanations and examples ▪ Understand the theme and essential information of a presentation and the different purposes and topics of media communication (e.g., announcements or newsletters) ▪ During or after an explanation, formulate focused and relevant requests for clarification or in-depth discussion ▪ During a debate, understand the points of view expressed by schoolmates and be able to refer to their opinion on the topic in a clear and relevant way ▪ Speak about personal experiences or tell invented stories, organizing the narrative distinctly with respect for chronological and logical order, and use suitable descriptive and informative elements ▪ Present a simple speech about a theme addressed in class using a prepared presentation; be able to make an exposition on a study subject using a speech outline
Reading	▪ Master silent reading and expressive techniques of reading aloud ▪ Use appropriate strategies to analyze the content of different kinds of texts, ask oneself questions to foster understanding at the beginning of and during reading, and find relevant clues to comprehend the most difficult text passages ▪ Use the title, pictures, and captions in a text to get a preliminary idea of the text ▪ Read and compare information from different texts in order to identify a topic that could be a starting point for oral and written production ▪ Search for information in different types of texts from various sources (e.g., modules, schedules, charts, maps) for practical or learning purposes while applying different techniques to foster understanding (e.g., underlining, annotating information, creating maps and diagrams) ▪ Follow written instructions related to creating a product, regulate behaviors, perform a task, and realize a process ▪ Read narrative and descriptive texts (fictional or real); distinguish literary fiction from reality ▪ Read narrative texts in contemporary Italian and simple poems with an understanding of the meaning of the most obvious formal features and the author's communicative intention; express a supported personal opinion of the text

Content Area	Objectives and Expectations
Writing	▪ Gather ideas and organize them in sections to plan the draft of a story or a report of an experience ▪ Produce written reports of personal experiences or those of others, including essential information about people, place, time, situation, and actions ▪ Write letters to known recipients, open letters, or short news articles for the school newspaper or website, adapting the text to the subject and the situation ▪ Express through writing emotions and states of mind in the form of a diary ▪ Edit texts (e.g., by paraphrasing, summarizing, transforming, or completing them) and compile new texts by using a word processor ▪ Process texts (e.g., by paraphrasing, summarizing, transforming, or completing them) and create new texts by using a word processor ▪ Write simple texts or regulatory schemes for the execution of tasks (e.g., recipes or game rules) ▪ Realize collective texts for reporting on school experiences and study topics ▪ Produce creative texts based on example models (e.g., nursery rhymes, short stories, poems) ▪ Freely experiment (with and without the use of computers) with various forms of writing, adapting vocabulary, structure, layout, and graphic solutions to the chosen textual form and integrating the text with multimedia materials ▪ Produce texts with proper spelling, syntactic structure, lexical form, and punctuation
Vocabulary	▪ Acquire and expand a receptive and productive vocabulary ▪ Understand and appropriately use a basic vocabulary of fundamental and frequently used words ▪ Enrich the vocabulary through speaking, reading, and writing while activating knowledge of the main meaningful relationships among words (e.g., their similarities, differences, and semantic fields) ▪ Understand that words have different meanings and identify the specific meaning of a word in a text ▪ Understand the figurative meaning of words and their use in simple and frequent cases ▪ Understand and use specific terms related to different study subjects ▪ Use the dictionary as a reference tool
Grammar	▪ Understand elements of explanatory grammar and reflect on the use of language ▪ Understand the changes of language in time and in geographical, social, and communicative space ▪ Know how words are created (e.g., simple, derivative, and compound words) ▪ Understand the main relationships of meaning among words (e.g., their similarities, differences, and semantic fields) ▪ Recognize the core structure of a simple sentence (i.e., subject, verb, and other terms required by the verb) ▪ Recognize the main grammatical features of a sentence and the most frequently used conjunctions (e.g., "and," "how," "but," "in fact," "why," and "when") ▪ Know basic spelling rules and be able to review one's written work and correct mistakes

Reading practice is considered central throughout the first cycle of education and has a dual learning function as a fundamental means of socialization and the exchange of ideas, and as a way to foster autonomy and individual study. Reading practice is key to fostering students' learning

progress and maturation. Reading also contributes to the development of attention skills and an attitude of critical reflection. Being able to read is considered a fundamental ability to search for information, develop new knowledge, and find relevant answers. Spontaneous and individual forms of reading linked to aesthetics or emotion are promoted in the national curriculum.

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

A university degree in primary school teacher education (*Scienze della formazione primaria*) has been a requirement for obtaining teacher qualification at the primary and preprimary levels in Italian schools since 1997. The degree has restricted access with an admission test and a limited amount of annual enrollment. Most of the study subjects are common for all graduates and mainly related to cross-disciplinary content (e.g., psychology, pedagogy, didactics, evaluation, class organization), with a minor part of the degree dedicated to specific school subjects (e.g., reading, mathematics, geometry, literature). The degree may be completed in five years and includes a 600-hour internship in primary school classrooms. It is also possible for teachers to specialize further in a particular disciplinary field during their school internship. Student teachers are required to write a final graduation thesis and a report on their internship to complete the degree and certification requirements for teaching at the primary and preprimary levels.

Upper secondary certificates obtained before 2001 from *Scuola magistrale* (the former secondary school for primary teachers) or *Liceo psicopedagogico* (secondary school focusing on pedagogy and education psychology) still constitute a qualification to become a primary school teacher.

An extended supervised practicum is required for newly appointed teachers, which lasts 180 days, including 120 days of classroom teaching. It involves a mentor teacher and includes a final assessment.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Every year, students are given two report cards attesting to their progress in learning: the first given in the first 3 to 4 months after the start of the school year (midterm) and the second given at the end of the school year. Starting in 2020, Ministerial Order 172/2020 and related guidelines[12] have provided for the replacement of the numerical grade on the report card with four types of judgment: in the process of initial acquisition, basic, intermediate, and advanced. MIUR has issued accompanying guidelines that require judgments to be linked to students' levels of performance based on four dimensions: autonomy in carrying out the task, familiar or unfamiliar situation in which the task is carried out, resources used, and continuity in the manifestation of learning.

In primary school, repeating a school year due to academic failure is possible only in exceptional cases. Students graduate from primary to lower secondary school based on an evaluation carried out by the class council at the end of fifth grade; there is no State examination

at this level. In daily practice, teachers have the autonomy to determine how to assess students at all levels through oral, written, and practical testing (depending on the subject). Teachers present student judgments in their respective discipline to the class council, at which point the council discusses and approves final student judgments by a majority vote.

Since 2004, the National Institute for Educational Evaluation (INVALSI) has sought to improve the quality of Italy's education system through the administration of national and international student assessments.[13] External assessments of student performance in reading, grammar, and mathematics are administered in Grades 2, 5, 8, 10, and 13.[14] As of the 2017–2018 academic year, an English test was also introduced in Grades 5 and 8. In the 2018–2019 academic year, it was introduced in Grade 13 as well.

Special Reading Initiatives

Some initiatives at the national level to promote reading include the following:

- Since 2014, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture have been promoting a project called *Libriamoci, giornata di Lettura nelle scuole* ("Libriamoci," reading day in schools). It is a one-day national campaign addressed to schools of all levels, from Kindergarten to high school, inviting them to organize initiatives to read aloud with the aim of spreading and increasing the love for books and the habit of reading. Schools have responded with moments of listening and active participation such as literary challenges and marathons between classes, the creation of audiobooks, living book performances, expressive reading competitions, meetings with external voluntary readers, and debate competitions based on single novels.

- *Cento Libri - Leggere leggeri* is a project promoted by the Ministry of Education where writers collaborate with schools for events dedicated to the promotion of reading.

- *#ioleggoperché* is a major national initiative to promote reading by collecting and donating books to support school libraries. It is a one-week national campaign promoted by the Italian Publishers Association, supported by the Ministry of Culture, which involves teachers, students, booksellers, publishers, and the general public. More than 1 million books have been donated to schools through this project to date.

- *Nati per leggere* is a national project developed by Associations, Libraries and the Child Health Centre. In all Italian regions, it offers free reading activities to families with children ages 0 to 6. These activities are an important experience for the cognitive development of children and for the development of parents' ability to grow with their children.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the 2019–2020 academic year, shortly after the World Health Organization (WHO)'s declaration of a pandemic (March 2020), there was the first closure of all schools throughout the country, approximately three months before the end of the school year and with no return to class.

In the 2020–2021 academic year, the situation was dependent on the region and the relative pandemic situation. This led to a significant disparity in terms of opportunity to take advantage of in-person instruction. For instance, while primary schools in Rome and Milan stayed open for the entire school year, schools in Bari were open for only 48 days (less than 50 percent of planned days).

During school closures, the Ministry provided extra funds to local governments for the purchase of laptops, tablets, and internet connection devices to be loaned to households in need. In many cases, teachers took advantage of that option as well. After a few days of closure, schools began delivering distance education, providing students with a platform to communicate and share materials.

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

After the suspension of INVALSI national assessments in academic year 2019–2020, the INVALSI surveys were carried out as usual in academic year 2020–2021. In a preliminary analysis, the data collected have been compared with the results of academic year 2018–2019, highlighting differentiated effects by school order and by discipline evaluated. More in-depth analysis will be necessary, but it seems that there were no significant deviations in the reading test in primary schools from the prepandemic period, while there was a general worsening in mathematics, especially in secondary school.[15]

Policy and Practice Changes

In the 2021-2022 academic year, the situation has been different from school to school; each of them, in the face of frequent quarantines, has organized itself to offer the so-called DiD (*Didattica Integrata a Distanza*, integrated distance instruction) where some students attend lessons from home while others attend school in person.

This teaching approach was established by Ministerial Decree 39/2020 and the related Guidelines for Integrated Digital Teaching, which specifies that "local administrations and schools work to guarantee school attendance in the presence of pupils with disabilities with the involvement of support staff. The possible involvement of these students in supplementary DiD activities must be carefully evaluated, together with their families, verifying that the use of technological tools constitutes a real and concrete benefit for them in terms of educational effectiveness. For these students, it is more necessary than ever that the teaching team or class council agree on the daily workload to be assigned and ensure the possibility to record and listen to lessons, since the difficulties in managing ordinary educational materials are well known."[16]

A general principle established by various regulations issued during the pandemic (e.g., Law No. 41/2020,[17] Decree Law No. 30/2021,[18] Ministerial Note No. 662/21[19]) is that schools not only should allow attendance of students with special education needs (SEN) but also, to make the principle of inclusion effective, should consider having other students in the same class group attend school so that SEN students can continue to experience appropriate relationships in their peer group and maintain a constant educational relationship with the teaching and nonteaching staff present at school. However, it has not always been possible to put this principle into practice.

DiD will likely remain, even beyond the pandemic, as a regular organizational mode to be offered to students unable to attend school in person for whatever reason.

A large amount of funds—both national and European—has been made available to schools, particularly those in southern Italy, for the upgrading and enhancement of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) equipment and connectivity.

Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

The pandemic did not compromise data collection procedures for PIRLS 2021, as primary schools were generally open with in-person instruction. Only one school declined to participate for reasons related to COVID-19 (only 30 percent of students at that school were attending in person), and in a few classes, participation was below 70 percent with no possibility of doing makeup sessions due to quarantines. Extending the administration period until the end of the school year made it possible to reach all schools in the sample.

Suggested Readings

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Vegliante, R. (2020). Il miglioramento della comprensione del testo attraverso l'insegnamento reciproco: la sperimentazione didattica del programma Reading Comprehension-Reciprocal Teaching [Improving text comprehension through reciprocal teaching: The didactic experiment of the Reading Comprehension-Reciprocal Teaching program]. *Formazione & Insegnamento. Rivista internazionale di Scienze dell'educazione e della formazione, 18*(2), 237–252.

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