**Strategic Partnerships for School Education**

**Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices**

**Reading Early School leaving signals - RESCUE**

**Country Report**

**Italy**

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# **The education system structure in Italy: short description**

In Italy education is compulsory from 6 to 16 years of age, and it is divided into five stages: *pre-primary school* (scuola dell'infanzia), *primary school* (scuola primaria or scuola elementare), *lower secondary school* (scuola secondaria di primo grado or scuola media inferiore), *upper secondary school* (scuola secondaria di secondo grado or scuola media superiore) and *university* (università). Italy has both public and private education systems.

*Pre-primary school* (scuola dell’infanzia) is for children between 3 and 6 years of age and it is not compulsory.

The first cycle of education lasts 8 years, it is compulsory and made up of:

- *primary education* (scuola primaria), lasting 5 years, for children between 6 and 11 years of age;

-*lower secondary school* (scuola secondaria di I grado), lasting 3 years, for children between 11 and 14 years of age.

After completion of the first cycle of education, the final two years of compulsory education (from 14 to 16 years of age) can be undertaken at a State *upper secondary school* (liceo, technical institute or vocational institute), or on *vocational education and training course* which is within the jurisdiction of the Regions. State upper secondary school lasts 5 years for students from 14 to 19 years of age, whereas vocational training course lasts three or four years.

Higher education is offered by *universities*, polytechnics included, and institutes of the Higher Education in Art and Music system (Alta Formazione Artistica e Musicale, AFAM).

Compulsory education refers to both enrolment and attendance. It can be undertaken at either a State school or a non-State, publicly subsidized school (scuola paritaria) or even, subject to certain conditions, through home education or private schools. Regional three-year vocational training courses are offered by the relevant training agencies.

# **Factors contributing to students leaving the education system early in Italy**

Italy is one of the EU-28 countries where the phenomenon of early school leavers is most severe: about 15% of Italian young adults (18-24 years old) do not hold an upper-secondary degree, lagging behind the average European value of 10% and being still a long way from the European targets set by the 2030 Agenda.

In addition to this, the amount of NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) has increased in Italy in the last few years, partly because of the economic crisis: in 2015 the 31,1% of the whole population aged 20-24 doesn’t work and doesn’t study (*vs* an European average of 14,6%).

Individual and family factors contribute to students leaving the education system early. National and international surveys and statistical data show that ESL is associated to gender, national origin, family’s economic and social status.

As regard *gender*, male students tend to leave the education system earlier than female students. This is a common tendency in the EU28, but it is particularly evident in Italy: 20,2% of male students are drop-out *vs* 13,7% of female students, whereas the European average percentage is respectively 13,6% for male and 10,2% for female students.

*National origin* is another factor associated to ESL. Students who were born abroad tend to leave the education system more frequently than Italian students: 34,4% vs 14,8%. Again, Italy lags behind the rest of Europe, where the differences among foreign students and nationals are smaller (22,7% *vs* 11%). Nevertheless, a distinction has to be made among students with a foreign background who were born in Italy (the so-called second generations) and those who were born abroad: the former have a smaller risk to drop out than the latter. Therefore, the differences among Italian and foreign-born students (but also among second generations and foreign-born students) can be partly explained by language barriers (Eurydice 2014, Ismu 2016). In fact immigrant background alone is not the determining factor of ESL.

Disparities depend also on *socio-economic background* of students and their families. ESL is also associated with low household income, parental unemployment, and low level of parental education.

Living in a family affected by poverty coupled with parental low educational levels has a negative effect on children school performances and outcomes, thus on their risk of drop-out.

In Italy 6 children (0-17 years old) out of 10 whose parental level of education is low are at risk of poverty and social exclusion, thus they are at risk of educational disadvantage.

The risk of social exclusion is higher for Italian children than for their European peers, and this is partly due to the economic crisis, which made the families’ economic conditions worse, and particularly affected those families which already were the most disadvantaged (European Union 2016).

In addition to the economic disadvantage, parents with low levels of education are less likely to help children study and do homework, encourage their children’s attendance and investments in education, and develop their cultural capital. They are likely to have unskilled or semi-skilled labor, and they earn less money that those with high levels of education and skilled labors, consequently their children are deprived economically and materially and they do not have enough resources to study. The economic and social exclusion of parents influences the educational paths and outcomes of children, their future job opportunities and their risk to become NEETs. This is also highlighted by data: in Europe nearly a third of low-skilled NEET’s live in a jobless household (OECD, 2016).

**Tab.1 Early schools leavers in Italy (18-24 years old), by sex and national origin (percent) (2014).**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | | 2014 | | |
|  | | | Male | Female | Total |
| **Territorio** | **National origin** |  |  |  |  |
| Italy | Italian |  | 15,8 | 10,2 | 13,1 |
| Foreign |  | 37,4 | 32,4 | 34,9 |
| total |  | 17,7 | 12,2 | 15 |
| North | Italian |  | 11,6 | 6,6 | 9,1 |
| Foreign |  | 32,5 | 27,8 | 30,1 |
| total |  | 14,3 | 9,5 | 12 |
| North-West | Italian |  | 13 | 7,1 | 10,2 |
| Foreign |  | 34,8 | 30,1 | 32,4 |
| total |  | 15,7 | 10 | 12,9 |
| North-East | Italian |  | 9,5 | 5,8 | 7,7 |
| Foreign |  | 29,7 | 25,1 | 27,4 |
| total |  | 12,4 | 8,8 | 10,6 |
| Centre | Italian |  | 10,5 | 6,5 | 8,6 |
| Foreign |  | 38,6 | 39 | 38,8 |
| total |  | 14,1 | 10,7 | 12,4 |
| South | Italian |  | 21,8 | 15 | 18,5 |
| Foreign |  | 57 | 43,2 | 50,9 |
| total |  | 22,8 | 15,7 | 19,4 |

*Source*: Istat (2016a).

*Family-related factors* influence the chance of leaving the education system early. For example living in a large family or in single-parent family affects the disposable income for family members, the availability of parents (or the only one parent) to support children’ education in terms of economic investments and time to participate in their school life (e.g. help them do homework, meet teachers, make sure they attend school, and so on).

In addition to individual and family factors, the chance to leave school early in Italy is associated to the *geographical area* where students live. In most regions, particularly in the South of Italy and Islands, the rates of ESL are very high and far from the target of 10% proposed by the 2030 Agenda. In Sicily and Sardinia one young person out of four does not complete any study/training after the lower-secondary school, in Campania and Puglia the rates are respectively 18,8% and 16,7%. The phenomenon is also present in regions situated in the North of Italy (e.g. in Valle d’Aosta the percentage of ESL is 16,3%) but the progress in reducing rates has been greater here than in the South of Italy (Bes, 2016). The Southern regions and Islands are the most deprived areas in Italy, which mostly suffered the economic crisis: in 2015 the incident rate of absolute poverty for families is 9% in the South, 4,2% in the Centre and 5% in the North; the incident rate of relative poverty for families is 20,4% in the South, 6,5% in the Centre, and 5,4% in the North (Istat, 2016b).

**Tab. 2 Early school leavers in Italy (18-24 years old), by year and region (percent).**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Regions** | **2004** | **2014** | **2015** |
|  |  |  |  |
| Piedmont | 22,5 | 12,7 | 12,6 |
| Valle d'Aosta/Vallée d'Aoste | 21,5 | 16,2 | 16,3 |
| Liguria | 17,7 | 13,6 | 12 |
| Lombardy | 22,1 | 12,9 | 13,1 |
| Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol | 21,6 | 10,9 | 10,9 |
| *Bolzano/Bozen* | *30,2* | *13,1* | *13,1* |
| *Trento* | *12,1* | *8,5* | *8,7* |
| Veneto | 18,1 | 8,4 | 8,1 |
| Friuli-Venezia Giulia | 13,6 | 11,1 | 6,9 |
| Emilia-Romagna | 20,1 | 13,2 | 13,3 |
| Tuscany | 20,6 | 13,8 | 13,4 |
| Umbria | 13,1 | 9,1 | 8,1 |
| Marche | 16,9 | 10,9 | 10 |
| Lazio | 15,4 | 12,5 | 11,3 |
| Abruzzo | 15,7 | 9,6 | 14,2 |
| Molise | 14,9 | 12,1 | 10,1 |
| Campania | 27,6 | 19,6 | 18,8 |
| Puglia | 29,1 | 16,9 | 16,7 |
| Basilicata | 16,3 | 12,2 | 10,3 |
| Calabria | 21,4 | 16,8 | 16,1 |
| Sicily | 29,5 | 24 | 24,3 |
| Sardinia | 29,5 | 23,4 | 22,9 |
| North | 20,5 | 12 | 11,7 |
| Centre | 17 | 12,4 | 11,5 |
| South | 26,7 | 19,3 | 19,2 |
| **Italy** | **22,6** | **15** | **14,7** |

*Source*: Bes (2016).

# **Vulnerable groups of student identifiable as at risk in Italy: schools: facts and figures**

The most recent PISA survey (2015) reveals that Italian students’ performances are below the average. Although Italian students improved their performances in math getting closer to the mean, they score 12 points lower the average in science and 8 points lower in reading.

**Tab. 3 Performances in Science, Reading and Mathematics (OECD average, Italy, first and last country) (2016).**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Science** | | **Reading** | | **Mathematics** | |
|  | **Mean score** | **Score diff. OECD average** | **Mean score** | **Score diff. OECD average** | **Mean score** | **Score diff. OECD average** |
| OECD average | 493 |  | 493 |  | 490 |  |
| Singapore (1°) | 556 | 63 | 535 | 42 | 564 | 74 |
| **Italy (34°)** | **481** | -12 | **485** | -8 | **490** | 0 |
| Dominican Republic (72°) | 332 | -161 | 358 | -135 | 328 | -162 |

*Source*: OECD (2016).

PISA survey confirms differences among students in performances based on gender, nationality, region where they live , socio-economic status.

Male students, students of foreign origin (and particularly those who were born abroad), young people who live in the southern regions, socio-economically disadvantaged students obtain lower performances, and they risk to leave school early.

The PISA survey also reveals that among the 72 countries participating in the survey, Italian students are the most truant. About 55% of Italian students said that they had been absent from school with permission for a day or more in the two weeks prior to PISA test, and 41% said they had been absent a few hours of lesson. In addition, in Italy one student (15 years old) out of 10 has repeated a grade and 10% has repeated a grade at the secondary school.

Thus, PISA survey outlines some issues which could help identify the vulnerable groups and predict drop-out: low performances, irregular attendance at school, repeated grades influence students performances, their school career and their investments in education. These factors are often intertwined with low socio-economic status, immigrant background, gender, place of residence, so that the likelihood to leave the educational system becomes higher.

**Figure 1. Change between 2012 and 2015 in student truancy.**

*Source*: Avvisati F. (2016), OECD (2016).

# **Strategies, policies and measures against early leaving adopted in Italy**

After the Recommendation adopted by the European Education Council in 2011, some European countries (e.g. Malta, Austria, Belgium) adopted a comprehensive strategy to reduce ESL. Some countries already had a strategy, and others were in the process (Eurydice, 2014).

By contrast, Italy has never implemented a comprehensive strategy to reduce ESL. Some strategies, policies and measures already existed in Italy, but they were part of a broad approach aimed at offering equal opportunities to all students. The core of this approach is universalism, which dates back to ‘70 and it is based on egalitarian and inclusive principles. Universalism ensures equal opportunities for all students regardless of their citizenship, gender, religion, etc. It concerns access to the educational system, academic performances and curriculum guidance.

In addition to the principle of universalism, some other measures were adopted in the following decades. In 2006 education became compulsory until age 16 and for at least 10 years (Law 27 Dec. 2006, n. 296). By next policies (Ministerial Decree 22 Agosto 2007, n. 139 and Circular Letter 30/12/2010, n. 101) compulsory education was further improved. Now compulsory education has to be until at least 10 years, and it covers the age group between 6 and 16 years old; it is aimed at obtaining a diploma of higher secondary school or a professional qualification lasting at least 3 years by age 18. Compulsory education is free of charge.

Even though this measure does not necessarily lead to the reduction of ESL, it contributes to the expansion of educational opportunities and influences behaviors of family and students, contributing to a decrease in ESL (European Commission, 2011).

Another important measure introduced in 2006 was the methodology called “alternanza scuola-lavoro” (trad. Alternation School- Work (ASW) – Italian approach to Work-Related Learning), that allows students aged 16 to 18 to continue education, alternating school and work periods. The aim is to introduce flexibility in students’ educational paths and promote the development of personal interests and practical skills.

This methodology could also support students’ motivations and aspirations, avoiding their drop-out and offering them the opportunity to enter the labor market.

Other strategies which could be quoted here are those regarding students of foreign origins. These measures are not directed to prevent immigrant students’ drop out, but they focus on their integration according to an approach that valorizes intercultural education. In line with the universalistic approach of the Italian educational system, intercultural education is a mean to promote dialogue and exchange between people who are culturally different, and offer an inclusive school context. The principles of this intercultural approach are contained in the “Guidelines for the reception and integration of foreign students” (Circular letter 24/2006) and in the document “The Italian strategy for the intercultural school and the integration of students of foreign origin” (2007). The two documents provide an overview of actions, measures and recommendations for the integration of foreign students, paying particular attention to language learning.

As regards this aspect, another Circular Letter was enacted in 2008, i.e. the “National Plan for teaching Italian as a second language” (n. 807/2008), aimed at teaching Italian to foreign students who have been in Italy for 2 years (or less). Also these policies have been not directly issued to prevent ESL, but they promote several actions and recommendations in order to help foreign students, particularly as regards their language learning. Besides these measures, every year the Ministry of Education gives funds to schools which are located in high-risk areas or areas where immigrants are concentrated, to avoid students’ marginalization. With reference to this issue, in 2010 a Circular Letter (n.2/2010) was enacted by the Ministry of Education, with the scope of avoiding foreign students’ concentration in certain schools and/or classes. In particular the Circular Letter made Italian school rearrange classes so that foreign students would represent no more than 30% of all students. Actually, the Circular Letter provoked arguments and disagreements among politicians, civil society actors and teaching staff. It had also been unfeasible in many schools where the percentage of foreign students was 50% or more.

The main interventions specifically enacted against early leavingin the last few yearswere realized thanks to the National Operational Programmes (PON) of the Ministry of Education, financed by the European Structural and Investment Funds.

The 2002-2006 Operational Programme on Education implemented some actions against drop-out, whereas the 2007-2013 Programme provided some specific investments to prevent and reduce early leaving, promoting collaboration between school and civil society actors. The 2014-2020 Operational Programme, building on the experience of the period 2007-2013, will pursue the fight to reduce drop-out and increase the quality of education.

Except from the Operational Programmes, in Italy a comprehensive national action plan to prevent students from leaving the education system early was never implemented.

The recent Law n. 13 July 2015, n. 107, called “Buona Scuola” (trad. Good School), introduced several measures which could contribute to prevent and reduce early leaving. The Law gives more funds to schools and support schools’ autonomy in planning educational programmers; it promotes an extraordinary plan to employ additional teachers; it offers diversified educational pathways, paying attention to developing digital competences, knowledge of different languages, new subjects as economy or sport sciences, etc.). The Law is very recent, therefore we will wait for a few years to evaluate the benefits of the Law in terms of reducing early school leaving.

# **Governance and cross-sector cooperation in the area of early leaving**

As highlighted by the recent study *LOST- Early School Leaving: the cost for the community and the role of Third Sector organizations* (2014) carried out by WeWorld, Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli e Ass. Bruno Trentin, it’s hard to find in Italy cross sector cooperation concerning ESL interventions.

Third sector organizations have been tackling ESL for decades, but interventions are mainly based on singular initiatives, with very diverse backgrounds, as far as organizational structure and economic dimensions of associations are concerned.

Voluntary work is also largely widespread. Throughout Italy, the kind of intervention significantly differs from North to South, depending on different contexts and thus approaches: focus in the north is on activities supporting study and individual tutoring, whereas in the south after- school activities are mainly conceived as social and recreational opportunities.

Schools develop apparently independent projects from Third Sector, based on government or local funds, with the risk of implementing “emergency” or short-term similar initiatives leading to a far lower impact. Furthermore, another emerging issue is that of the lack of acceptance and acknowledgment of mutual roles and expertise between school staff and educational workers.

Nevertheless, in the last few years there was an effort, both from public and private sector, to promote projects on ESL aimed at building a cooperative network among different agencies located in the same territories, so as to strive for a unique goal, thus strengthening the so-called educational community and empowering each single actor involved towards a common good.

The most recent and representative example is a new experimental initiative planned in the last Italian financial law, concerning the establishment of a fund against educational poverty (150 million euros per year, for 3 years), fueled by payments made by banking foundations. Early school leaving becomes an issue included in a larger and multidimensional context to be tackled: educational poverty is defined as “the impossibility for children and teenagers to learn, experiment, develop and freely foster their capacities, talents and aspirations”. This deprivation implies a serious limit to the development of cognitive, social and relational skills which are fundamental for future wellness, for working success and for permitting an active participation in the economy and more generally speaking, in new generations’ society.

Educational poverty is seen as a responsibility of the whole community, including families, teachers, institutions and third sector organizations. Regional and national multi-stakeholders networks are fostered, in order to cooperate and coordinate each other for the creation of inclusive environments. Indeed, priority is given to projects promoting the involvement of schools and families already in the preliminary phase of project planning, through active participation.

Another action linked to the crucial role of schools as core hub of the community is the “Open schools” initiative promoted by the Italian Ministry of Education with a call for tender launched in September 2016, investing €240 million. The objective is to provide schools with funding allowing them to keep open in the afternoon for extracurricular activities mostly aimed at improving the so-called “soft-skills” through alternative learning: creative labs based on sport, theatre, music, art, digital skills and foreign languages. Schools are thus supposed to renovate their essential role not only concerning education, but also, in a bigger picture, as reference points for the community, able to respond to local stakeholders’ needs.

# **The role of education in tackling early leaving: examples of good practices and case analysis**

*Frequenza200* is a national programme promoted by WeWorld, aimed at preventing and fighting ESL, carried out across 7 regions throughout Italy, mainly in urban areas. It is targeted to children and teen-agers aged 8-13 (primary and lower secondary school) and it is based on a common model, then tailored to each local context, implying 4 levels of intervention, basically in line with the idea of giving value to each individual educational agency in the neighborhood: students at risk of dropping out, school, family and community at large.

Core activities, carried out within an after-school hub serving also as the territorial point of reference, mainly consist of tutoring and study support, a wide variety of social and recreational activities improving soft skills, school and vocational guidance. At school, focus is set on global education and non-formal education, with a particular attention to teachers, concerning common planning and training on inclusive methodologies. Families are involved and engaged in activities at Frequenza200 centres, but they also receive tutoring, psychological support and counselling on parental skills. In a wider perspective, the aim is that to make the whole neighborhood (including both citizens and organizations) become sensitized and aware of the project’s goals, thus taking in charge the promotion of education, as far as each can do that within the territory.

*Frequenza200* started in 2012, up to now it has involved 5.335 students, 1.700 families and 1.308 school teachers.

It proved to be a good practice, thanks to steady monitoring of results and activities through both quantitative and qualitative indicators. The majority of children and teenagers enrolled (more than 90%) regularly participate to Frequenza200 activities, turning out an improvement of motivation, self-esteem and social skills.

School results validate individual cases: 92% of students attending the centres successfully moved up to the next year, whereas the rate of students with more than 3 “below average” marks decreased from 32% to 13%.

Cost-effectiveness of the project is confirmed by its cost, that is an average of € 4 per each youngster involved.

Another example of good practice is provided by *Survived* - a survey on elements which are predictive of early school leaving - carried out in 2016 by WeWorld, together with two partner organizations which implemented action research on children attending 4th grade of primary school in two cities with similar local contexts in the North of Italy, e.g. Milan and Turin.

Best practice to be undertaken, in relation to each single condition that highlights potential dropping out, can be summarized as follows:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Predictor of ESL** | **Actions that turned out to be successful** |
| Learning difficulties | Workshops based on alternative teaching  Cooperative learning methodology |
| Behaviour problems | Class workshops with support both from educator and school teacher. It helps improve:  - the child’s self-esteem  - informal relationship with the teacher is encouraged, thus reducing school pressure  - the child’s self-awareness and the relationship with the class group |
| Problems in socialization | Cooperative learning methodology  Mediation between school and family supported by a tutor. It helps improve:  - internal cohesion of the class group thanks to a stronger alliance between parents  - the child wellbeing at school, as relationships between teachers and parents become more relaxed |
| Socio-cultural and socio-economic background | - Periodic meetings between tutor and families and mediation with the teachers: particularly useful for foreign parents, enhance families ‘approach to shared educational and cultural models of school  - The role of tutor: supports parents, strengthening parental skills  - Socialization events involving families, encourage cultural exchange and good practice sharing  - Creation of a mutual support network: enables exchange of information and access to external resources |

# **Final remarks**

Reducing the early school leaving rate to below 10 percent is one of the targets set by the *Europe 2020 Strategy* to be reached by the end of the decade in the field of education and training. Although the phenomenon is steadily decreasing in Italy, it is still a long way from the European targets: in 2015 the percentage of young people who gave up their studies early was 15%.

Several factors influence the phenomenon: gender, national origin, socio-economic background of students and their families, parents’ level of education, territory of residence. The economic recession may contribute to the widespread of ESL: high unemployment rates can discourage young people from engaging in education and training, parents’ unemployment increase the risk of youth leaving education prematurely, families’ poverty encourage children to leave from school and contribute to the household income.

Italian governments have never adopted a structured programme to combat ESL for many years, and interventions have been implemented mainly by third sectors organizations, voluntary organizations or by single schools which enforced short term projects on their own.

Only the last few years there was an effort, both from public and private sector, to promote projects on ESL aimed at building a cooperative network among different agencies and construct an educational community aimed at support the education of young people, especially those at risk of dropping out.

Nevertheless, Italy is still far from the European target and the efforts are not enough. The initiatives of the third sectors organizations and voluntary organizations are important and they have had a crucial role in combat ESL until now. But a significant economic investment in education is also needed in Italy, where funds in education and training are very few, especially compared to other European countries.

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