

THEMATIC PROBE. Primary Education: an International Perspective

Country Description: Italy

This country description was compiled from the *INCA* Archive (www.inca.org.uk).

1. Organisation of school phases=

How are the early years and primary phases organised? (3-5yrs? 5-11yrs?)

Compulsory education in Italy was extended from eight years to nine years in September 1999. Since that time, education has been compulsory for all children aged six to 15 years.

From the age of three to the age of six, children can attend pre-school in the form of the state nursery school (*scuola dell'infanzia*) which, although not compulsory, constitutes the first stage of the schooling system. State nursery schools offer three years' full-time pre-compulsory education and are free of charge.

Compulsory full-time primary education is provided in the primary school (*scuola elementare*), which caters for students aged six to 11 years. All children who have reached the age of six at the beginning of the academic year (1 September) or who will do so by 31 December of that year, can enrol in the *scuola elementare*.

Primary education is divided into two cycles:

- Cycle 1, children aged six to eight years, which is multi-disciplinary.
- Cycle 2, children aged eight to 11, which introduces specific subjects/subject areas.

Students in the *scuola elementare* are grouped according to age, with no reference to ability. However, although students are normally grouped by age, in small schools, children from more than one age group may be combined in one teaching group.

What are the points of transfer between phases?

Pre-compulsory	Compulsory primary	Compulsory lower secondary
3- to 6-year-olds	6- to 11-year-olds	11- 14-year-olds

2. Locus of control

What degree of control over curriculum content and other aspects of primary schools exists at the national, regional, local and/or school levels?

Education in Italy has traditionally been centrally administered. However, since the end of the 1950s, some responsibilities and services have gradually been decentralised. In 1972 many of the State's administrative powers over education were transferred to the local authorities - regions, provinces and communes. Education policy, however, remains centralised, and all schools - state schools, non-state public schools (for example, those run by cities and communes) or private schools - must conform to national regulations, such as curriculum frameworks, if they wish to be legally authorised. Teachers are also centrally recruited and paid directly by the State (although they are allocated to schools by the local authority).

The Ministry of Public Education (MPI) and the Ministry of University and Scientific and Technological Research are the two government departments responsible for the central administration of the education system. At regional and provincial level, the MPI, which has overall responsibility for pre-school, primary and secondary education, uses peripheral offices, through which it implements centrally-defined political and administrative directives and establishes contact with local authorities in order to harmonise activities and services.

Regions

There are 20 regions in Italy, each with its own legislative and administrative responsibilities within the general guidelines set out in state laws. In collaboration with other local authorities, they plan the establishment and construction of new schools, or improvements to existing establishments, and administer funds received from the state for this purpose. They organise medical and psychological support services for students and implement measures to make it possible for all students to complete compulsory education and, as appropriate, to continue their studies. The regions are responsible for vocational education, training and guidance outside upper secondary schools and universities. Day-to-day management may be delegated to the communes.

Provinces

The provinces ensure the provision of premises, equipment, services and non-teaching staff to some upper secondary schools.

Communes

The communes, often representing small residential communities, have their own or regionally or provincially delegated responsibilities for the services needed to run schools, and ensure that young people can attend compulsory education, upper secondary education or vocational training, whatever their financial or physical circumstances. Support services include free school transport, the organisation of school meals in or out of school (which are free or subsidised, depending on family circumstances), the award of purchase vouchers for textbooks, and financial grants.

In order to improve the management of services, small communes often join together as consortia or associations of communes.

School Councils

Within schools, the School Council is responsible for budgetary matters and for the organisation and planning of non-educational school activities. Within the limits of the budget and law, it deliberates the purchase, renewal and maintenance of school equipment and teaching materials and decides on the use of premises and equipment, on extracurricular and sports activities, on remedial and support courses and on cooperation with other schools. The School Council is made up of representatives elected by teaching and non-teaching staff, parents and, in upper secondary schools, students. The principal or headteacher is an ex-officio member. A chairman is elected from parents' representatives. The School Council also elects its own Executive Board, chaired by the principal or headteacher.

Teachers' Assembly and Interclass Council

In primary schools, teaching/educational activity is the joint responsibility of the headteacher or principal, the Teachers' Assembly (*Collegio dei docenti*) and the Interclass Council (*Consiglio di interclasse*). Schools have teaching and educational autonomy within the limits of the curricula formulated at national level and the regulations issued by central government.

The Teachers' Assembly is composed of all the permanent and temporary teachers of each primary school group or individual primary school, and is chaired by the principal or headteacher. It formulates teaching and educational plans for each school year, taking into account specific local requirements, national guidelines and state legislation, and decides on types of interdisciplinary coordination while respecting the pedagogical freedom of individual teachers. It periodically evaluates teaching to check that it conforms to the planned objectives and proposes improvements when necessary. It also selects textbooks and teaching materials, in consultation with the Interclass Council, and makes proposals concerning the organisation of the school and in-service teacher training.

Are there any shifts in the distribution of control between these different levels? (Is it possible to assign percentages to each level, to reflect circumstances in each country?)

Control is gradually becoming more decentralised. For example, a 1999 law on school autonomy gave schools (headteachers) more freedom in the organisation of the school week, on condition that statutory minimum numbers of teaching hours are still provided for students. As a result, although central authorities still determine teachers' working hours and the time to be spent studying key subjects, schools have increased freedom in respect of the organisation of the school day, timetables, holidays, and the organisation of teaching.

At what intervals is the curriculum reviewed? (eg are there established review cycles?)

The Ministry of Public Education (MPI) aims, in principle, to review the national framework curricula every three years with a view to ensuring that they remain current.

3. Curriculum content

What does the statutory curriculum consist of?

The compulsory subjects of the statutory national curriculum included in the framework for primary education are:

- Italian language;
- foreign language (from Year 2 or 3);
- mathematics;
- science;
- history;
- geography;
- social studies;
- art education;
- sound and music education; and
- physical education.

In addition, schools must offer religious education (see below) and schools themselves decide on the content of 20 per cent of the curriculum. Although what is taught during this latter proportion of curriculum time, still has to meet certain nationally-determined objectives/criteria.

What other aspects of the curriculum/teaching in schools are statutory? Are time allocations for subjects statutory?

Religious education

In primary education, the teaching of the Catholic religion (which is not a state religion) is guaranteed by schools, but is optional for students. Families of primary age students usually decide.

No guidelines are provided on lesson times for individual subjects. Instead, the subjects studied at this level are grouped by the Teachers' Assembly (*Collegio dei docenti*) in three or four related areas, for which an individual teacher (the teacher of the module) is responsible. In addition, the Ministry of Public Education (MPI) provides minimum time thresholds as a reference for the organisation of teaching. That is, teachers determine the timetable for the various compulsory subjects, but must bear in mind that a minimum of 27 hours' teaching must be provided each week (see below).

Are there statutory timings for the length of the school day/week?

The administrative school year for pre-compulsory, primary and lower secondary education runs from 1 September to 31 August of the following year and the school year comprises at least 200 days between the beginning of September and the end of June. The Ministry of Public Education (MPI) sets guidelines for terms and holiday periods and the dates of public holidays and final examinations.

The primary school timetable is set at 27 hours per week, increasing to 30 hours in Year 2 (children aged seven) or, more usually, Year 3, with the introduction of a foreign language.

Daily/weekly schedules vary. They are usually either from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm over five days, or from 8:00 am to 1:00 pm or 8:30 am to 1:30 pm over six days. If parents choose, extra-curricular activities may be provided in the afternoon, provided the total hours do not exceed 37 per week, including lunch breaks. Lesson duration is at the teachers' discretion. The minimum number of annual teaching hours is 800 at age seven and 900 at age 10 (when a foreign language should be being studied in addition).

Legislation, dating from 1999, which increased local autonomy in the organisation of the school week has given headteachers of schools which previously only opened on mornings, and consequently had a six-day week, the authority to reorganise their timetable around a five-day week, making more use of afternoons. It is left to headteachers to decide whether a shorter week would better suit them and the community they serve. Headteachers also have the authority (within statutory guidelines) to change the dates and length of school holidays, or to decide to stay open longer in the afternoons to teach subjects such as additional foreign languages or information technology, for example.

What changes have there been to the statutory/non-statutory elements of the curriculum?

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

What government/other initiatives have been introduced? What has been their impact?

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

What other trends are emerging in curriculum development? (eg new subjects/areas of learning being introduced)

One of the aims of recent curriculum reforms in Italy has been to encourage creativity, stimulate children's minds and heighten their critical powers.

What other levers may be having an impact on curriculum content? (eg international studies: PIRLS, IEA, PISA, TIMSS)

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

4. Organisation of the curriculum

What are the common features of curriculum organisation in the primary phase? (single subjects? planning subjects as 'topics'?)

How are subjects labelled?

What examples are there of 'areas' rather than subjects?

What examples are there of clusters of subjects (eg Humanities, made up of geography and history) being brought together?

In the first two years of primary education (the first cycle, Years 1 and 2, children aged six to eight years), teaching is generally multi-disciplinary. Subjects only begin to be taught as individual subjects from Year 3 of primary education (the second cycle, students aged eight to 11 years). Differentiation between subjects develops gradually during this period. Indeed, subjects are not really taught as specific individual subjects until lower secondary education (for 11-to 14-year-olds). It is the purpose of primary education to ensure a gradual transition for students from multi-disciplinary study to beginning to study subjects as individual subject areas/distinct discipline areas.

This organisation of the curriculum is reflected in the fact that classes are taught by a teaching team. That is, primary teachers are not allocated to a specific class but to subject modules, comprising three areas where subjects are grouped together (linguistic-expressive; scientific-logical-mathematical; and historic-geographical-social), and where there are either two classes with three teachers, or three classes with four teachers. Teachers are not subject specialists but, on the basis of their specific competencies, they are responsible for one of the three subject areas covered by each module, and coordinate their own teaching activities with those of the other teachers in the module to ensure coherence and uniformity of teaching. Teachers remain in the same module for a whole cycle.

What are the common features of timetabling? (eg weekly lessons in each subject, English and mathematics taught daily)

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

5. Assessment

What is the purpose, nature and scale of assessment? (eg end of phase assessment, statutory, published test results, optional, national, local, timed tests, teacher-assessment)

Primary school leaving examination

At the end of the final primary school year (Year 5, aged 11) students take the primary school leaving examination (*esame di licenza elementare*). The primary school leaving certificate - acquired on successful completion of the examination - is required for entry to the compulsory lower secondary school (*scuola media* for 11- to 14-year-olds). The examination consists of two written papers, relating respectively to language and expression, and logic and mathematics, and one oral examination covering all subjects together. The examiners for the primary school leaving examination are the students' class teachers and two teachers nominated by the Teachers' Assembly of the school.

Should a student fail the examination, which is extremely unusual, he or she may repeat the year and retake it.

Continuous assessment

Students' progress and levels of attainment, evaluated in the context of their academic potential, willingness to learn, social development and general level of maturity, is assessed throughout the school year, on the basis of individual teachers' observations of written and oral classwork and homework. This continuous assessment aims to measure student achievement to date, to identify student need and to inform decisions on teaching and learning.

For the purposes of this assessment, the school year is divided into periods of three or four months. There is a final assessment, based on the year's work, at the end of the school year. This final teacher assessment also determines admission to the following year, although non-admission to the next class is rare in Italy and only takes place in exceptional cases. Should a teacher consider it necessary to propose that a student should not be admitted to the following year, he or she must submit a report recommending this course of action for the approval of the Interclass Council - an assembly of teachers of all the parallel classes of that year.

A five-level grid was introduced in the summer of 1996 to assist teachers in providing their written evaluation of student performance and progress during compulsory education. This grid provides teachers with five options:

- excellent;
- very good;
- good;
- pass/sufficient (*sufficiente*); and
- fail/insufficient (*non sufficiente*),

from which they are expected to select the relevant category to describe a student's attainment level. The introduction of this grid was intended to provide clarity and to reduce teacher paperwork.

Reports to parents are provided at the end of each of the three- to four-month assessment periods into which the school year is divided. These reports provide evidence of a student's progress and development in line with the above assessment grid.

As mentioned above, failure at any stage is unusual but, should this occur, it generally entails a student having to repeat the year, before promotion to the next school year or access to the next school phase can be granted. In many cases teachers record that a student has been judged as failing in a particular subject area and then allow him or her to progress. (Previously, students had to take September 'resit' examinations in any subject(s) in which they were judged to be failing, prior to being permitted to progress to the next class or phase.)

How far is the curriculum driven by assessments? (eg evidence of teacher preparation for testing, 'booster' or 'catch-up' classes in schools)

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

6. Teaching profession/training

What changes can be identified in initial teacher training programmes?

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

What kinds of continuing professional development/on-going training are provided?

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

To what degree are teachers'/schools' planning subject to scrutiny?

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

To what degree are teachers using electronic formats to plan?

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

7. Pedagogy

Which teaching approaches are dominant or developing a higher profile, and which are receding? (eg collaborative work, whole-class instruction)

To what degree are teaching approaches focusing on developing thinking skills, creativity and building on children's learning styles?

Although the content of the curriculum is defined at national level, the teachers concerned decide how to deliver it. Planning is therefore crucial and teams of teachers meet regularly to discuss programmes of work and to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching strategies.

As one of the aims of recent curriculum reforms in Italy is to encourage creativity, stimulate children's minds and heighten their critical powers, this has significant implications for methodology. In mathematics, for example, primary school children are encouraged to investigate and analyse problems, seek solutions and draw their own conclusions. The same principles apply to the teaching of Italian. When a student makes a spelling mistake, the teacher draws attention to it by marking it with a small dot. It is then the child's responsibility to establish what is wrong and how to correct it.

Language work covers much more than syntax and spelling; it includes language awareness and sensitivity to different registers, plus a wide range of other forms of expression such as images, body movement and mimicry. Teaching from the front of the classroom is a thing of the past. A recent Ministry of Education booklet advocates group work as encouraging "initiative, independence and personal responsibility".

What is the impact of ICT in teaching practice? (eg use of electronic whiteboards, intranets, managed learning environments/local grids)

No information is available via the *INCA* Archive.

8. Resourcing

How far are resources to support teaching made available via government/central/local agencies?

How far, and in which subjects, are resources statutory/ recommended/ subsidised? (eg textbooks, courses, lesson plans for teachers, web-based materials)

In compulsory primary education, textbooks are not prescribed or approved by the State and are produced by commercial publishers. Textbooks are selected for use in class by teachers and the headteacher, and sample textbooks are often offered to schools on a trial basis before any decision is made.

Primary school textbooks are provided free of charge to all primary phase students; the costs are met locally by the commune.