Education in Italy: results, current challenges, and possibilities ahead

Abstract

In the past 5 years, Italy has devoted considerable efforts on building an integrated data system that can give to each school nationally comparable information on student results in basic subjects, and which can be a reliable data source for investigating the Italian progress towards meeting the school and student related challenges that affect educational quality and equity in the country.

The session will provide examples of how these data have been used to analyze the current situation of education in Italy, and it will solicit debate on the key challenges for further development of the system, which revolve around 5 key topics:

1. Identification, analysis, and treatment of cheating, and especially teacher cheating,
2. Assessment of school value added,
3. Identification of the schools that are in a critical situation and need external support,
4. Identification of the “students with poor competences” in the schools as well as determining to what extent such students cluster in specific schools.
5. Use of the data produced in standardized assessment to devise actions for the improvement of school didactics.

Session summary

1. Objectives of the session

Although some improvements were witnessed in the last five years, the Italian school system is lagging behind with respect to its European counterparts, especially in terms student achievement in basic subjects and student dropout rates.

Among others, the OECD has urged Italy to consider that “accountability needs to be introduced at several levels ... so that those responsible for key decisions such as teacher recruitment, class formation and teaching methods have both appropriate information on which to judge outcomes and incentives to improve” (OECD, Economic Survey – Italy 2009).

In order to address these needs, much has been done especially with the development of INVALSI, the Italian Institute for Educational Evaluation. The Institute runs the National Evaluation Service, which administers yearly standardized tests to students of II, V, VI, VIII, X, and XIII (starting in 2013) grade (INVALSI-SNV http://www.invalsi.it). The Institute also coordinates the Italian participation to all international surveys on student achievement such as OECD PISA or IEA TIMSS and PIRLS, and it carries out ad hoc data collection exercises for specific purposes. Much is being done to link these different databases with administrative data and to make the information publicly available. Yet, the use of these data for investigating the actual effects of educational policies and programs is growing but still very limited.

The objective of the session is threefold:
a. being a showcase for presenting the progress of the Italian education system in the European and international context, and for analyzing the existing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of the policies and programs (of scale) currently being evaluated in the country.
b. being an opportunity for comparative discussion. The US are the “maturity” of educational evaluation, Italy is just a newborn and other EU countries are mere adolescents. What can we learn from each other? What solutions could be found for addressing the challenges ahead of the development of educational evaluation in Italy? Could these answers prove interesting for other fellow systems?
c. being an opportunity for methodological discussion. What are the pros and cons of the methodologies used? Provided the data currently available, how could the evaluation designs be improved.
2. Overview of the presentation

The recipe adopted aims at providing the audience with opportunities for comparing materials and leads for engaging in the discussion. All the papers make use of the data produced by INVALSI and are examples of the extent to which these data can be used in connection with other administrative data sources for investigating the challenges ahead of the Italian school system.

The first two papers, (1) Teacher mobility and student learning (Gianna Barbieri – MIUR; Claudio Rossetti – LUISS; Paolo Sestito – Bank of Italy) and (2) School effectiveness and multiple outcomes of schooling: Some findings regarding school consistency across subjects in Italy (Daniele VIDONI, INVALSI; Maria Magdalena ISAC, European Commission – CRELL; Valentina RASTELLI, INVALSI), focus on existing challenges for the quality of education at system level by addressing the issue of teacher mobility and by looking at how effective are Italian schools across multiple outcomes.

The third paper, (3) Assessing the effectiveness of education programs in Italy: the cases of ICT additional availability and of teacher training in Mathematics and Italian (Daniele Checchi – Università degli Studi di Milano & IZA; Daniele Vidoni – INVALSI), investigates the effectiveness of a variety of education programs in Italy over 3 years by exploiting the quasi experimental variation of results depending from having or not having access to specific educational resources.

Specifically, paper (1) addresses the link between teacher turnover (transfer from one school to another) and student learning. Student achievements are measured by Italian lower-secondary school student results of the literacy and mathematics tests run by INVALSI as part of a national examination. These data are combined with different administrative registries of Italian schools and teachers maintained by the Italian Ministry of Education, data from the 2001 Italian population and housing census, and data from a national examination of Italian lower secondary school students. Among the results, a specific source of concern is the negative effect of teacher mobility and turnover on student achievements in schools serving mainly disadvantaged children (which are the schools that teachers typically try to leave).

Paper (2) investigates the consistency of school effects across different subjects and across cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes of learning. The paper builds on a dataset which combines two sources of information: the Italian data from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2009 and national data on student achievement (mathematics and reading) collected by INVALSI concerning 153 schools and 2599 students in these schools. Confirming hints from the literature, the preliminary results suggest that schools differ more regarding “traditional” cognitive outcomes such as math and reading achievement as compared to non-traditional ones such as civic knowledge. Moreover, in the Italian context, schools appear to not be equally effective in all these cognitive domains.

Paper (3) investigates whether access to ICT resources or to teacher training enhances student learning. The analyses uses propensity score matching techniques over INVALSI and administrative data to identify in the same schools a comparable set of classes used as control group. Then, a panel dataset with the results of the students in the INVALSI national standardized assessments over 3 years is used to investigate the effectiveness of the programs.

3. Scholarly or scientific significance

The session presents the state of the art in educational evaluation in Italy.

4. Structure of the session

The session is organized in 3 parts.

Part one (roughly 10 min): introduction by chair (3-5 min) and brief (5 min) presentation of the background of education in Italy

Part two (50 min): Presentation of the research papers, 15 min each.

Part three (30 min): Discussion.