

The School reform 2008-2009 in Italy

The economic situation

A huge reform of education which concerns all its sections has been going on for last three years in Italy. Starting with the world financial crisis of 2008 Italian government began to implement an austerity budget plan, which strongly affected the education system. The cuts of education financing, initiated by the Italian Minister of Education Mariastella Gelmini, included 300 millions Euro in 2010 and 1 billion 300 millions in 2011 from a total sum of 7,4 billions.

The reason for such strict and unpopular measures is a highly vulnerable economic situation in the country. The **budget deficit** (5,3% of GDP) and a **huge public debt**, the biggest in Europe (120% of GDP) are making the economic position of Italy unstable and preoccupy the European Union, taking to account the recent financial problems of Greece and Ireland. Reasons for the deficit are high tax evasion on the black market, aging and low fertility rate and high unemployment (8%). The country has no money for welfare and tries to economise on it. Budget cuts should reduce the budget deficit, especially the cuts in social spheres (education, culture). This approach of Italian government is very risky because budget cuts on welfare inevitably lead to dissatisfaction of population and instability. The situation aggravates with the political crisis.

The political situation

Italy is suffering from **political crisis** at least from 2006 with unstable governments, party struggle and political scandals. Silvio Berlusconi is Italian prime minister for the fourth time from 1994 and his parties (Forza Italia and then Popolo della Liberta) are opposed by the Democratic party.

The political power is rather fragmented in Italy, because there is a parliamentary system with symmetrical bicameral parliament, which consists of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. There is a mixed proportional-majoritarian electoral system and coalition-based governments, what makes a leading party dependent on smaller ones, which enter into its coalition, and induces different actors to search for consensus. Also pro-welfare coalitions, represented by trade unions, are rather strong. There are three major trade unions in Italy which count about 40% of all workers as members.

Education system

In Italy there is a universalistic education system. It has five stages: kindergarten from 2,5 to 5 years (scuola materna), elementary school from 6 to 11 (scuola elementare), middle school from 11 to 14 (scuola media), high school from 14 to 19 (scuola superiore) and university from 19 to 24 (università). Education is compulsory and free from 6 to 16 years, universities are inexpensive with tuition fees varying around 800 Euro per year. There are both public and private sector in education. Private schools constitute 21,76% of all schools with 10,30% of all pupils, half of them are catholic. The average tuition fee is about 3-4000 Euro per year.

The Reforms of Kindergartens, Primary and Middle Schools

These reforms are part of the 2008-2010 Education reform, which were approved in September 2009. They deal with the first three stages of education system. What changes were made? We will try to answer this question, using the three-dimensions of reforming approach of Paul Pierson. He names such dimensions as re-commodification (augmenting dependence of citizens from the labour market), recalibration (reviewing of the present system in order to improve it because of its deficiencies or new life-conditions) and cost-containment (reducing of financing).

The cuts of financing, which we talked about in the beginning, touched these stages also, with reducing of working places of teachers and non-teaching personal. In the Primary school was introduced 1 teacher instead of 3 for a class. His work hours were increased with increase of salary. Undoubtedly, the **cost-containment** dimension of reforming can be seen.

Other important change happened in kindergartens, where children from 2,5 years can enter now, while before the minimum age was 3 years. It means that the parent who cares about the child, usually mother, can continue working earlier then before, after putting his offspring into a kindergarten. This change encourages women to return to the labour market half a year earlier. The **re-commodification** dimension is clearly observed.

We can find also the last dimension in the reform. **Recalibration** is present in two variations. For example, in the Middle School 2 hours more of foreign language (usually English) are introduced, also the use of digital technologies is stimulated (e-books, online school record books). This is **up-dating** to the new life-conditions. In the global world the knowledge of English language is necessary and digital progress is everywhere around us, so we can not ignore it.

On the other hand, national exams of Italian language and Math in the form of quiz are established. This measure obviously is thought to decrease the level of corruption. It's a feature of **rationalization** of reform.

In conclusion, the Italian school reform is a complex one, it has as an aim to reduce budget spending, to push workers on the labour market and to improve the system, correcting its deficiencies and un-dating it according to modern situation. Though, it seems as the cost-containment is the most apparent dimension.

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