

EDITORIAL

Combining quality and equity to overcome the current educational challenges

As takes place each year, INVALSI - the national institute for educational and training assessment - has presented the first survey data on the learning of Italian, Mathematics and English in primary schools (years 2 and 5), middle schools (year 3) and the final year of high school¹. In contrast with previous years, the performance of grade 10 pupils (year 2 of high school) was not surveyed, given that tests were suspended throughout Italy following a specific ministerial order for the 2020/2021 school year alone, bearing in mind the continuing COVID-19 emergency².

Interest in the results of the INVALSI tests has always been very high, as they represent a fundamental evaluation tool made available to schools, albeit with all the necessary limitations and reservations, a *«thermometer that can measure temperature, although a different form of assessment is required for the symptoms»*³.

If possible, interest in the 2021 tests has been even more pronounced, as they represent the first standardised surveys of learning since the beginning of the pandemic, given the total suspension of tests in spring 2020 (for the first time since their introduction), following the first lockdown.

The results of the 2021 tests therefore represent a decidedly significant instrument for understanding whether and to what extent long interruptions in classroom teaching have had a major effect on learning performance, following extensive and lively debate about the consequences of distance learning on the levels of learning achieved by pupils.

The picture emerging at national level has certainly not been particularly encouraging, as reported by several authoritative analysts.

Overall, pupil participation in the tests was good, above all in primary schools. In the 8th grade 97.2% of the sample and 93.4% of the overall population was reached, although in some areas of southern Italy (particularly Puglia and Campania) the percentages recorded were decidedly lower. When adopted, computer-based testing systems (CBT) effectively offered a good level of flexibility and made it possible to adapt the assessment protocol to the needs of schools and constraints dictated by Covid-19.

As far as the results are concerned, in brief it is possible to state that while primary schools

1. For an overall panorama see the link <https://www.invalsiopen.it/risultati/risultati-prove-invalsi-2021/>

2. See Ministerial Order no. 132 of 19 April 2021, suspending standardised tests for second year pupils in high schools.

3. Anna Maria Ajello, President of INVALSI, on the occasion of her initial appointment.

(2nd and 5th year) managed not to stray significantly from the levels achieved in 2019, this was not the case in middle and high schools, where there was a significant fall in levels of pupil achievement (above all in high schools), probably due to prolonged closure of schools and greater difficulties in terms of activating effective distance learning systems. In Italy the historic regional differences between the North, Centre, South and Islands were confirmed, becoming even more marked after the pandemic. Nor is it surprising that the worst results were obtained by children with a more fragile social and family background and so-called “resilient” pupils, namely those who had previously succeeded in obtaining good results despite an unfavourable family socioeconomic status.

However, this was not the case in Trentino, where the INVALSI results offer a very different picture. As far as participation is concerned, in the province the highest levels of coverage were rapidly achieved in terms of both the sample and the population, and it was one of the geographical areas where the tests took place with the fewest difficulties, despite the inevitable problems posed by health and safety regulations.

Taken overall, the results of pupils in Trentino are not only among the best in Italy but also show that schools in the province were most effective in containing the negative effects of long periods during which classroom teaching was suspended following the pandemic. More specifically, the province of Trento was the only area of Italy that managed to maintain average results significantly above the national average compared to both 2018 and 2019, despite a general fall in performance.

As seen in previous years, primary school results for the province of Trento were confirmed to be in line with the national average, but at this level of schooling less variability in performance can already be observed compared to the situation at national level. This could represent one of the predictors for the excellent results seen in secondary schools, both middle and high schools. It is indeed known that when it is possible to contain the variability of results among pupils, while maintaining good average performance, there is a positive effect on the equity of the school system, guaranteeing a wide range of students a good chance of educational success.

Specifically, as regards the results for Italian and Mathematics, these are close to the national average in primary schools but are very good at the end of middle school, to arrive at genuine peaks of excellence by the end of high school⁴. Furthermore, in this field, where a significant fall in achievement has been observed in all areas of the country, secondary schools in the province have best succeeded in containing the negative effects on levels of learning and are the only ones that have managed to maintain the average overall results significantly better than the national average obtained in the years preceding the pandemic, both in Italian

4. The average results for the 2021 INVALSI tests in Trentino are given below, in comparison with national results:

- in Italian. Year 2 of primary school: 208 vs 205; year 5 of primary school: 204 vs 205; year 3 of middle school: 209 vs 196; year 5 of high school: 215 vs 190;
- in Mathematics. Year 2 of primary school: 205 vs 198; year 5 of primary school: 199 vs 198; year 3 of middle school: 211 vs 193; year 5 of high school: 221 vs 191.

and Mathematics.

The results of English tests (5th year of primary school, 3rd year of middle school and 5th year of high school) also show our education system has reached levels of national excellence. As the tests proposed by INVALSI are the fruit of international collaboration and the results are established on a scale comparable at European level (QCER), such good results from pupils in Trentino acquire further value, demonstrating levels of competence (reading and listening) in the English language that place them on the same level as the best and most advanced experiences in Europe⁵.

The 2021 INVALSI tests thus show that Trentino schools are capable of obtaining excellent results, also in high schools, where typically, and above all in this phase of the pandemic, there are greater difficulties for some categories of pupils.

There are many reasons for the good INVALSI results and clearly this is not the place to recall and discuss them all in depth. In any event, over and beyond the good average results, it is worth highlighting here that the school system in Trentino has not only demonstrated excellent results in terms of upper and intermediate levels of performance but has also been shown to be one of the most inclusive school systems in the country. Indeed, in Trentino it is possible to note one of the lowest percentages in Italy for pupils with skill levels not in line with the goals of national/provincial indicators. Furthermore, the province is the only area of the country that in 2021 managed to bring down to zero the percentage of particularly fragile pupils (low achievers), namely pupils who have results significantly lower than expected in all the subjects recorded (Italian, Mathematics and English) at the end of high school.

From this point of view, the education system in the province of Trento manages to be very cohesive, and precisely for this reason succeeds in distinguishing itself in terms of “efficacy”. In other words, Trentino succeeds in achieving a particularly high level of performance, positioning itself among the geographical areas in which schools are most efficient and equitable, namely capable of guaranteeing all individuals equal opportunities for learning.

Among other things, this is also in line with the fourth goal of Agenda 2030 in the medium-term: to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, in order to improve people’s lives and achieve truly sustainable development.

The facts briefly presented in this editorial cannot fail to represent grounds for satisfaction and pride for an institution such as IPRASE, which has always been committed to supporting requests for the quality and equity of Trentino schools. It does so by promoting programmes and processes of expert training, coaching and research that must be functional and offer

5. Comparison of percentages achieving the goals established for English, in Trentino and nationally:

- for the A1 goal established for year 5 of primary school. 95% vs 92% in reading and 89% vs 82% in listening;
- for the A2 goal established for year 3 of middle school. 90% vs 76% in reading and 86% vs 59% in listening;
- for the B2 goal established for year 5 of high school. 79% vs 69% in reading and 49% vs 37% in listening.

scope for transformation, thus providing for an impact on schools in terms of innovation and changes for the better. In this way, IPRASE will continue to support the Trentino school system in dealing with emerging educational challenges, with training and research activities taking place inside schools and training organisations, where researchers and teachers can share itineraries for professional development and experimentation, but above all with the scope of institutional change⁶.

Luciano Covi



We continue this editorial by underlining the substance and wealth of the academic articles presented in the “Research” section of this volume.

In her paper, Gabriella Agrusti describes the main features of Ministerial Order no. 172 of December 2020, which introduced new ways of expressing interim and final assessments in Italian primary schools, highlighting in particular the mainly educational orientation underlying these regulatory innovations, and explaining the theoretical reasoning and the implications for teaching.

Valentina Grion and Emilia Restiglian's paper investigates the point of view of a group of primary and secondary school teachers on peer assessment, comparing their perceptions at the end of empirical research and after three years, to verify the impact over time using the Mosaic approach.

In their article, Luciano Pasqualotto and Angelo Lascioli reconstruct the events leading up to the introduction of Individualised Education Programme models for disabled students at national level with Decree no. 182 of December 2020, focusing on the most innovative and interesting elements from the pedagogical-educational point of view, without neglecting reflections on critical issues that need to be resolved.

The article by Bruno Losito *et al.* illustrates the action of IPRASE, together with some initial results, in support of the introduction of “Educazione civica e alla cittadinanza” (civic and citizenship education) as an innovative school subject through Provincial Government Resolution no. 1233/2020. In this context, IPRASE has adopted a dual quantitative and qualitative approach, combining collection and analysis of the data with training of teaching staff and support for individual schools in terms of drawing up curricula and assessment forms.

Alessandro Borri discusses the same subject with reference to adult education programmes, in which adult education, civic and citizenship issues have often been equated with the tests that many European countries require to measure the integration of foreign citizens in the

6. See Ira Vannini, “Un ponte tra ricerca e formazione”, in *RicercaAzione*, Vol. 12 no. 2, December 2020.

country of arrival. His paper is an invitation to review the role of civic and citizenship education in L2 courses and proposes a series of concrete examples designed to develop knowledge and skills allowing migrants to become full citizens.

In their article, Giorgio Vittadini *et al.* present the results of the study entitled “The development of non-cognitive skills in Trentino pupils”, carried out on middle school pupils in the Autonomous Province of Trento. The aim was to verify whether non-cognitive skills lead to an improvement in cognitive skills, as measured by school performance, and whether appropriate educational programmes increase non-cognitive skills.

Rosi Bombieri’s paper highlights the main critical issues that have emerged in international literature regarding social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes, from pre-schooling to high schools. By identifying unresolved questions on the subject, elements useful for informing future research perspectives in the educational field and for rethinking the training of teachers and educators are outlined.

In his article, Giombattista Amenta focuses his attention on ways of dealing with educational complexities recalling a sort of psychological game of hide-and-seek, characterised by the pupil’s scope of hiding the fact that they are responsible for certain mistakes or reprehensible actions, and the teacher’s intention of discovering the culprit, assessing options for effective educational intervention.

In their paper, Roberta Silva and Giorgia Setti illustrate the potential of narrative inquiry (NI) as a qualitative tool for analysis and documentation of educational innovation, and how it can profitably be placed at the service of teacher training. After having outlined NI from a methodological point of view, its potential in concrete terms is shown through in-depth study of the two-year educational project *Challenges for Autonomy*, implemented in the context of the Service Learning project at the University of Verona.

Chiara Giberti and Andrea Maffia’s paper focuses on the field of mathematics, and the interpretation by many students of the equals sign as an “operator” indicating an operation to be performed, rather than as a relationship of equivalence. The authors present the results of a survey aimed at highlighting the contrast between these two different concepts of equality in primary and middle schools.

In their paper, Daniela Di Donato and Cristiana De Santis present the results of research investigating the teaching and organisational activities of teachers at all levels of schooling, together with their perception of efficacy in terms of using digital teaching technology, before and during the lockdown, through the Intrapersonal Technology Integration Scale (ITIS).

Finally, the article by Giorgio Ostinelli and Alberto Crescentini deals with the question of formative evaluation of head teachers. After an introductory section devoted to leadership in the organisational and school context and the subject of evaluation, methodological aspects are dealt with, followed by a description of the structuring and development of an investigative

tool known as the Dual Focus approach. This is based on an underlying vision in which the results are used for non-invasive coaching.

To conclude, we underline the interesting food for thought contained in the section “Experience and Reflections” and the stimulating reports in the “Reviews” section.

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