



LITERACY IN ITALY

COUNTRY REPORT

CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

March 2016

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1 Introduction

This report on the state of literacy in Italy is one of a series produced in 2015 and 2016 by ELINET, the European Literacy Policy Network. ELINET was founded in February 2014 and has 78 partner organisations in 28 European countries¹. ELINET aims to improve literacy policies in its member countries in order to reduce the number of children, young people and adults with low literacy skills. One major tool to achieve this aim is to produce a set of reliable, up-to-date and comprehensive reports on the state of literacy in each country where ELINET has one or more partners, and to provide guidance towards improving literacy policies in those countries. The reports are based (wherever possible) on available, internationally comparable performance data, as well as reliable national data provided (and translated) by our partners.

ELINET continues the work of the European Union High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (HLG) which was established by the European Commission in January 2011 and reported in September 2012². All country reports produced by ELINET use a common theoretical framework which is described here: "ELINET Country Reports – Frame of Reference"³.

The Country Reports about Children and Adolescents are organised around the three recommendations of the HLG's literacy report:

- Creating a literate environment
- Improving the quality of teaching
- Increasing participation, inclusion (and equity⁴).

Within its two-year funding period ELINET has completed Literacy Country Reports for all 30 ELINET member countries. In most cases we published separate **Long Reports** for specific age groups (Children / Adolescents and Adults), in some cases comprehensive reports covering all age groups. Additionally, for all 30 countries, we published **Short Reports** covering all age groups, containing the summary of performance data and policy messages of the Long Reports. These reports are accompanied by a collection of good practice examples which cover all age groups and policy areas as well. These examples refer to the **European Framework of Good Practice in Raising Literacy Levels;** both are to be found in the section "Good Practice"⁵.

¹ For more information about the network and its activities see: www.eli-net.eu.

² In the following, the final report of the EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy is referenced as "HLG report". This report can be downloaded under the following link: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/literacy-report_en.pdf.

³ See: <http://www.eli-net.eu/research/country-reports/>.

⁴ "Equity" was added by ELINET.

⁵ See: <http://www.eli-net.eu/good-practice/>.

2 Executive Summary

LITERACY PERFORMANCE DATA

Italy participated in IEA's PIRLS (4th graders reading comprehension) in 2001, 2006 and 2011, in OECD's PISA (15 year-olds' reading literacy) since 2000, and in OECD's PIAAC (adults' reading literacy) in 2012. This means it is possible to describe the changes over time in average reading proficiency, according to different characteristics of the readers, and to compare relative reading levels of proficiencies for different age groups.

Italy performed above the EU average in PIRLS 2011 (541 vs 535 EU-average) and very close to the EU mean in PISA 2012 (490 vs 489 EU average). In PISA, the overall reading score is also very close to the average for European countries on average.

In PIRLS, a limited proportion of pupils (15%) resulted as low-performing readers. This is slightly less than in EU countries on average (20%). These students can read simple texts, retrieve explicit information, or make straightforward inferences, but they are not able to deal with longer or more complex texts, and are unable to interpret beyond what is explicitly stated in the text. The proportion of low performers decreased between 2001 and 2011 in PIRLS. In PISA 2012, the proportion of low-performers was very close to EU average and rather stable over time: among boys, a slight increase was observed (+1.3%), while among girls no change was observed. The proportion of top-performing readers was 10% in PIRLS (vs 9% in the EU). In PISA 2012, the percentage of both low and top performing readers was also very close to the EU average of around 7%.

The gap according to the pupils' socioeconomic background was considerably lower than the EU average in PIRLS (59 vs 76 on average) and almost the same in PISA (84 vs 89). The difference may be due to the fact that the indices of socioeconomic background are not the same in PIRLS and PISA.

In PISA 2009, the gap between native students and students with a migrant background was much higher than in EU countries on average (72 vs 38 EU-average), the equivalent of about two years of schooling. Similarly, in PIRLS, the mean score difference between those who always spoke the language of the test at home, and those who sometimes or never did so was higher than in EU countries (31 vs 26). In PISA, too, this gap according to the language spoken at home was higher than the EU average (62 vs 54).

Girls' and boys' performances were very close, the gender gap (in favour of girls) was then lower than the corresponding EU average differences in PIRLS (3 vs 12), and slightly higher in PISA (46 vs 44). The gender difference in Italy was higher in the two first cycles of PIRLS (8 and 9 points) but always below the EU average. In PISA, the reading performance observed between 2000 and 2012 was similar for girls (+ 3 score points) and boys (+ 2 score points). The trend was slightly different in EU countries on average: between 2000 and 2012 the girls' performance increased by 5 score points while the boys' decreased by the same value.

Unsurprisingly, students in Italy in the top quarter of the Confidence in Reading scale achieved a mean score (569) that was some 57 points higher than students in the bottom quarter (513). The average difference across the EU-24 was 80 points, indicating a relatively weaker relationship between Confidence and performance in Italy.

In conclusion, Italy performed above the EU average in PIRLS and very close in PISA. Results seem stable over time, since PIRLS in 2001 and 2011 show the same scores. The pattern by level of performance is very close to European countries on average in both PISA and in PIRLS except as for the proportion of low-performers which has decreased and is now lower than the EU on average. The gap between low and top-performing readers is smaller in Italy than in the EU on average, and the gap according to socioeconomic status also tends to be smaller than in the EU on average. On the contrary, the gap according to language spoken at home is greater.

As far as adults are concerned, Italy performed below the EU in PIAAC (250 vs 271). The spread of achievement – namely the gap between top and bottom performers - is somewhat lower in Italy than the EU-17-Average (114 vs 117 on average). The proportion of adults performing at or below level 1 in Italy is 28%, much higher than the EU-17 average (16.4%). Females and males performance are very similar (251 vs 250), both well below the EU average (271). The gender gap in favor of females was very low (in EU on average it is 2 score points in favor of males), which is in contrast with what is observed among 15 year-old both in Italy and at EU level: a high gender difference in reading equivalent to about one year of schooling. The gap according to parents' level of education was somewhat lower than in the EU countries on average (39 vs 41), reflecting the same trend as in PIRLS and PISA. The same was observed for the gap according to the language spoken at home: the gap between native and not-native speakers was smaller than the EU-17-average (25 vs 28) and much smaller among adults than among children and adolescents, showing that the gap is growing in Italy due to the increased migration over the last two decades.

KEY LITERACY POLICY AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT (AGE-SPECIFIC AND ACROSS AGE-GROUPS)

Creating a Literate Environment

Parental attitudes to reading

PIRLS 2011 used the “Parents Like Reading Scale” according to their parents’ responses to seven statements about their reading attitude. In Italy, a lower proportion of parents “like” reading (23.8% vs an European average of 35.3 %). Thirty-six percent of parents in Italy reported having few home resources for learning – well above the EU Average of 25%. The difference in achievement between pupils in Italy whose parents reported having many home resources and few resources was 64 score points – 15 points lower than the corresponding EU-24 average (79).

According to PIRLS 2011, in Italy, 16.9% of children belong to families with no or few children’s books at home (European average 11.8%). PIRLS 2011 also reports the percentages of students whose parents (often, never or almost never) engaged in literacy-relevant activities with them before the beginning of primary school. Nine activities are considered: reading books, telling stories, singing songs, playing with alphabet toys, talking about things done, talking about things read, playing word games, writing letters or words, reading signs and labels aloud. If a composite indicator combining all these activities is used, 50.9% of Italian students reported that their parents engaged with them in these activities at least sometimes (European average 57.4%) while only 1.1% reported they “never or almost never” did so (European average 1.9%).

The percentage of children whose parents engaged in specific literacy-related activities with them before the beginning of primary school were the following: read books to them often: 46.4% (European average 58.4 %); told stories to them often: 60.4% (European average 51. 5%); sang songs to them often: 58.4% (European average 50.6%).

The data show that in Italy there is a higher proportion of families than in the EU average who do not read, do not have children’s books and do not engage in literacy relevant activities with their children. Data also show how family attitudes and practices has implications in later school performance. For example, there is a significant differences in reading performance at grade 4 between children whose parents like to read (average achievement 565) and those who do not (average achievement 528).

Family literacy programs

The main family literacy programme in Italy is **Nati per Leggere**⁶, Nati per Leggere (listed as a Good Practice on the ELINET website) promotes the development of emergent literacy competences, parent-child relationship and interest in books. The programme has been active since 1999 and is based on a partnership between the Associazione Italiana Biblioteche (Italian library association), the Associazione Culturale Pediatri (Pediatric cultural association) and the Centro per la salute del Bambino, an NGO which actually manages the programme at national level. Nati per Leggere promotes reading to babies from their first months of life as a family practice through local multi-sector networks involving health professionals, librarians, educators, civil society associations, municipalities and regional governments.

⁶ See: www.natiperleggere.it.

It has been estimated that parents of about 1 out of 3 newborn babies are contacted by the programme. Key strengths of the programme are the involvement of all professionals involved in providing services for children, multi-professional training modules and the mobilisation of thousands of volunteers in over 500 local projects. Through a special agreement with publishers, children's books are provided at low cost. The programme makes attempts to reach out for the poorest families as well as migrants, through multilingual materials. Nati per Leggere in collaboration with local NGOs sets up "Punti Lettura"(reading spots) where public libraries are either not existing or without specific children's sections. However, there is a North-South divide in the programme implementation with the consequence that the many disadvantaged families are the least served by the programme.

There is a national programme, promoted by the Ministry of Health, called "Genitori+"⁷ which supports parents in a series of 8 health-related good practices for children, one of which is home reading, with explicit reference to Nati per Leggere.

Cooperation among parents, day-care centres and kindergarten and health services in reading promotion for pre-primary children is very diverse from region to region, even though cooperation among day care centres and kindergarten and parents is currently considered a priority for the early education system. Recently the project *Dalle scuole allafamiglia* (From schools to family) has been launched and carried out in the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region. The target were kindergarten and pre-school teachers, with the ultimate target population of children aged 2-5 and their parents. Teachers received specific training to understand why and how to better interact with parents to promote home reading and how to collaborate with public libraries and other community services to provide books and teaching aids. A multimedia guide is now available for all teachers⁸.

There is a need to further support programmes that raise awareness of all parents that literacy is a key to learning and life chances and that the basis for good literacy achievement is laid in early childhood, with a focus on supporting all parents and particularly in disadvantaged areas and for families who are at risk of social and cultural disadvantage in understanding and fostering the literacy development of their children.

Providing a literate environment in school

In Italy there is a remarkable decrease in reading motivation from 4th grade (cf. PIRLS 2011) to age 15 (cf. PISA 2009). In PIRLS 2011 about 18% percent of Italian pupils reported that they do not like reading. According to PISA 2009, more than 30 % percent of 15-year-olds do not read for pleasure. In PISA 2009, Italy has a gap of 98 score points – which is equivalent to almost two years and a half of schooling - between the students who report being highly and poorly engaged in reading.

PISA and other studies show a strong and reciprocal correlation between reading for pleasure and reading performance. Families, communities, schools and libraries should therefore do more in order to support reading motivation and a stable self-concept as a reader among adolescents. This should be achieved through a variety of specific initiatives, ideally through collaborative community networks and multisector agreements. The role and specific training of teachers in promoting reading for pleasure should be emphasised. School libraries should be supported in their ability to offer a variety of age-appropriate books.

⁷ See: <http://www.genitoripiu.it/>.

⁸ Available at: <http://www.csbonlus.org/cosa-facciamo/progetti/dalle-scuole-alla-famiglia/>.

The role of public libraries in reading promotion and cooperation between secondary schools, libraries and other agents in literacy promotion for children and adolescents

The National Library Service “combines almost 4,000 libraries, local bodies, universities, schools, academies and private and public institutions into a cooperative system” (EACEA/Eurydice, 2011:126). Public libraries have recently strengthened their action in and for the communities with a variety of programmes that involve teachers and pupils.

A separate national body has been established to promote reading in Italy. The “Book and Reading Centre” (CEPELL) oversees the collaboration between public and private bodies to encourage young readers to read more (EACEA/Eurydice, 2011:123). Through annual campaigns, such as “Il Maggio dei libri” (“May of Books”) and “Libriamoci”, regions, provinces, municipalities, institutions, local bodies, schools, libraries, cultural associations, publishers and bookshops attempt to reach out to people who “do not read”, not only adolescents.

There are other programmes attempting to establish collaborative networks among all community actors and particularly between public libraries and primary schools. **Crescere Leggendo** - <http://crescereleggendo.it/> (also mentioned in the Good Practices Framework) does so by asking for the active support of municipalities through the public libraries network. A number of other similar reading animation programmes exist on a local basis.

Unfortunately, there are only few programmes specifically targeting adolescents. In the Friuli Venezia Region a region-wide programme “Youngsters”, promotes reading for pleasure through a variety of initiatives involving adolescents in reading animation.

Public libraries are an important agent in reading promotion. Proactive action is needed to make libraries widely accessible (opening hours, ability to welcome the public and provide assistance), but also able to reach out to all social groups, with activities aimed at raising awareness of the importance of reading for pleasure. Migrant communities as well as minority groups should see their culture and literature, including children’s books, represented in the library provision.

Although there is an increasing cooperation among different stakeholders aimed at reading promotion, the coverage of the Italian adolescent population is still quite patchy with spots of excellence, usually located in the north and center of the country, coexisting with a general lack of initiatives. The ministry of Culture in collaboration with the Italian Association of Public Libraries (AIB) and the Publishers Association (AIE) recently promoted a national initiative to promote reading at school level.

Initiatives to foster reading engagement among children and adolescents

In Italy, the “Book and Reading Centre” (“Centro per il Libro e la Lettura” - CEPELL) (*Teaching Reading in Europe: Contexts, Policies and Practices*, EACEA/Eurydice, 2011:123), a not-for-profit statutory body founded and supported by the Italian Ministry of Culture, works together with various levels of national and local government bodies and with private parties operating in the book chain. The objectives of the centre are to improve the social value of books and of reading and to increase the number of habitual readers, young and old, from eight to ten per cent of the adult population⁹. The Cepell recently (December 2015) developed a national reading plan (Piano Nazionale per la lettura), which is still to be approved by the Government.

⁹<http://www.cepell.it/langPage.xhtml> (Accessed April 3, 2015).

Fostering digital literacy in and outside schools

In Italy, 14% use a computer at school at least monthly to look up information. The corresponding EU-24 average is 39%. In Italy, 18% of students are in classrooms whose teachers report that the students use computers to write stories or other texts at least monthly. The corresponding EU-24 average is 39% and 33% respectively. In PISA 2009, 89% of the students reported that they spent no time at all on computers during language-of-instruction lessons (OECD average: 74.0%) (OECD, p. 321). More than 70% of students do not spend time using computers in other subjects, such as Science or Mathematics (OECD, 2011, PISA 2009 Results: Students on Line: Digital Technologies and Performance: 321). In comparison to the OECD average and especially in comparison to the well-equipped Nordic countries, the ICT coverage in Italy schools still shows room for improvement. PISA also shows that only 5.3% of Italian students report using laptops at school. In Denmark, for instance, this number is more than 13 times higher (73.2%) (OECD, 2011: 323).

Access to a digital environment is significantly lower in Italy than in most EU countries, but situations are quite diverse across regions, with most southern regions still quite below an acceptable standard. Recognising the gap, the Ministry of Education, as well as many Regional Governments, have recently invested in digital equipment for schools, as well as in professional training on digital literacy for teachers. Each school is required to identify and train a teacher who will be in charge of fostering digital literacy.

There are a number of local initiatives to foster digital literacy. The programme "Laboratori" offers "a series of online activities and workshops for children and adolescents to promote books, library use and a reading culture around works of fiction and non-fiction" (EACEA/Eurydice, 2011:127). There is also "Using Web Comics in Education". This is a project that makes use of internet-based comics to further reading and writing abilities. Students can conceive their own web-comics or read those made by others¹⁰. The project "Lesamol" is another example, which consists of an online platform where adolescents from 11 to 16 (German speaking minority of Italy) can read and review books. All the books that are part of the project can be found in the school libraries of the area¹¹. Furthermore, the German speaking minority of Italy offers access to a web portal¹² where digital entertainment material can be downloaded.

Improving the Quality of Teaching

Pre-Primary Years

Providing free or affordable high quality preschool education for all children / investing more money in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

According to the European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, with an enrolment rate at age 4 of 96.8%, Italy reaches the European benchmark for at least 95% of children between age 4 and 6. The OECD Family Database (2014) offers more differentiated figures of participation rates at age 3, 4 and 5. According to 2010 statistical data, the participation rate is 97.3% for 5-year-olds, 96.8% for 4-year-olds, and 93.0% for 3-year-olds (OECD 2014). The total public expenditure per child in pre-primary

¹⁰ See: <http://www.educomics.org/> (Accessed April 3, 2015).

¹¹ See: <http://www.lesamol.com/> (Accessed April 3, 2015).

¹² See: <http://www.biblio24.it/> (Accessed April 3, 2015).

education as a percentage of GDP in Italy is 0.5%. The range is from 0.04% in Turkey and 0.1% in Ireland to 1.01% in Denmark. Italy belongs to the half of the European countries where the 3-5 years period of ECEC is free. Prior to the age of 3 years, a network of day-care centres provides cover for up to 40% of children 0-3 years. The attendance to these centres is publicly subsidised but families are required to pay a fee proportional to their income.

Improving the quality of literacy instruction in preschool education

The ratio of children to teachers in pre-primary schools in Italy is 11.8 (the range is from 5.8 in Hungary to 23.1 in Turkey). The minimum required level to become a qualified teacher in Italy is now the Master level (ISCED 5), the length of training is 5 years (European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014, p. 101). Continuing Professional Development (5 days per year) is mandatory. According to the findings of the project "Dalle Scuole alla Famiglia" carried out in the Friuli Venezia-Giulia Region and aimed at improving the knowledge and practice of pre-primary schools on shared reading promotion at home, the great majority of teachers include reading for pleasure and telling stories sessions at school. However, most of the teachers recognise that their training and practice can be substantially improved and that many still focus on literacy development and not on reading for pleasure.

Improving early language and literacy screening and training

In Italy, there are no guidelines for early language and literacy screening and training for nurseries. For kindergarten, the learning objectives for ECEC provision include reading literacy. The assessment of children's progress in these areas, as recommended by the Ministry of Education, is based only on observation and does not include any specific screening test.

While the situation is quite satisfactory for children aged 3-6 in terms of both access to and quality of preschool services, the same is not true for the earliest years where there is a dramatic disparity between both access and quality in the northern centre of the country and the southern regions. Teachers' competences and skills in promoting reading for pleasure and raising parents' awareness about the importance of shared reading at home should be strengthened.

Children and Adolescents

Improving literacy curricula in schools

Primary schools: In Italy, reading is included in an integrated Italian language curriculum that also includes listening and speaking, writing and reflecting on language. The curriculum includes goals that are specific to reading, which should be achieved by the end of grade 5.

According to Eurydice's (2011) analysis of curriculum documents, a broad range of word-reading and fluency skills are taught at primary level (Grades 1-5), with a relatively strong emphasis on emergent literacy skills (different functions of printed material; awareness that print carries meaning; organisation of written language) and some emphasis on phonics skills (progression in recognising words; enriching vocabulary; linking sounds to letters/naming and sounding letters of the alphabet) and fluency (repeated practice of reading aloud; gradual shift from reading aloud to reading silently; reading various kinds of texts fluently, without mistakes, and with appropriate intonation).

In 2012, the MIUR, according to European parliament directive 18.12.2006, issued a norm¹³ which details the key competences to be acquired at the end of primary school. The norm focuses on competences in mastering of oral, written language, in both comprehension (ability to identify relevant information, infer and relate concepts, understanding logical relations in a text) and production (oral and written texts including ideation language appropriateness). Literacy competences are separated from other language sectors, for example literature or foreign languages.

Secondary schools: Curricula for secondary schools (Ministerial decree 138, 2007, *Regolamento recante norme in materia di adempimento dell'obbligo di istruzione*) are competence-based. Competences include: "to communicate and understand diverse typologies of messages (everyday, literature, technical, scientific) of varying complexity, using different languages (verbal, mathematic, scientific, symbolic, etc.) and support materials (paper, digital, multimedia, etc.) and to be able to describe events, phenomena, principles, concepts, norms, procedures, attitudes, state of mind, emotions) and based on a variety of disciplines. Students must acquire competences in both comprehension (ability to identify relevant information, infer and relate concepts, understanding logical relations in a text) and production (oral and written texts including ideation and language appropriateness)¹⁴.

Reading instruction

PIRLS 2006 data for a latent class analysis (Lankes and Carstensen, 2007) identified in Italy mainly two types of instruction in fourth grade: teacher-directed instruction in the whole class without individual support and highly stimulating whole-class instruction with didactic materials.

In 2011, pupils in Italy spent more hours per year at school (1085) than on average across EU-24 countries (850 hours). Students in Italy spent 274 hours (about 25% of all instructional hours) on instruction in the language of the PIRLS test, compared to an EU-24 average of 241 hours. In Italy, 63 instructional hours per year are spent on reading as part of language, compared with an EU-24 average of 68.

Activities of teachers to develop students' comprehension skills

PIRLS 2011 provides information on the frequency with which teachers in Italy engage students in specific reading comprehension activities. The percentages of students in Grade 4 in Italy who engage in specified comprehension activities 'every day or almost every day' compare favourably with the EU-24 averages. For example, 69.6% of them explain or support their understanding of what they have read (EU-24 = 61.6%). Based on a scale summarising frequencies across all six items, 73% of students in Italy were deemed to be taught by teachers who implemented instructional practices to engage learning in "most lessons". The corresponding EU-24 average was 70% (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Table I2). In spite of what students reported, several reports show a serious teacher dependency of the textbooks, which is a problem because, as it has already emphasised, textbooks do not include the strategies needed to engage students in reading comprehension. The research also highlights the lack of teachers' knowledge of reading comprehension teaching strategies.

¹³ Indicazioni per il curricolo infanzia e primo ciclo, MIUR, 2012.

¹⁴ A full description of the key competences to be acquired at the end of secondary school can be found in: http://archivio.pubblica.istruzione.it/normativa/2007/allegati/all2_dm139new.pdf.

Level of qualification and length of the required training for primary teachers

Italy requires primary teachers to have a *laurea magistrale* degree which takes five years' study. In ten more European countries – Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, France, Iceland, Portugal, Slovakia and Slovenia – initial education for primary teachers is at master's level and usually takes five years. Teacher training for primary education has been organised at tertiary level since 1998/99, thus the number of teachers with university degrees is gradually increasing (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2012, Fig. E2, p. 112).

Initial Teacher Training has been recently reviewed (Ministerial Decree no. 249/2010). According to this reform, lower and upper secondary teachers must complete a teaching-oriented second-cycle university course (two-year programme corresponding to a master level) within a planned number of available posts and through an admission exam. Training is followed by a one-year traineeship period called "active formative traineeship" (TFA)¹⁵.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

In Italy, in-service training is considered a right and a duty for the full development of school staff¹⁶. Teachers of both primary and secondary schools are entitled to five days per school year for attending CPD programmes¹⁷. The recent school reform (*La Buona Scuola 2015*) has introduced a 500 euros bonus to be spent every year by teachers in accredited CPD activities.

The decision making bodies for CPD planning are the Ministry of Education, which establishes the priority objectives for the organisation and carrying out of formative interventions; the regional school administration which must guarantee professional services to support the planning character of schools; the local school or school associations, which must plan training initiatives and prepare the relevant annual programme, according to school needs.

CPD courses are organised according to specific objectives, contents and times. The methods adopted for the educational interventions are various and include lessons, study cases, simulations, various types of exercises, e-learning and others¹⁸. There is no compulsory continuing professional development (in-service training) for teachers which focuses specifically on literacy development.

Literacy expertise should become a clear standard for teacher education across all grades and subjects for primary and secondary school teachers. Training should cover topics as the teaching of reading, tackling reading difficulties, assessing pupils' reading skills, and supporting those with persistent difficulties. Literacy promotion and literacy instruction across the curriculum should be a systematic part of CPD, addressing teachers of all grades and all subjects.

¹⁵ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Initial_Education_for_Teachers_Working_in_Early_Childhood_and_School_Education (Accessed April 3, 2015).

¹⁶ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Continuing_Professional_Development_for_Teachers_Working_in_Early_Childhood_and_School_Education (Accessed April 3, 2015).

¹⁷ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Continuing_Professional_Development_for_Teachers_Working_in_Early_Childhood_and_School_Education (Accessed April 3, 2015).

¹⁸ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Continuing_Professional_Development_for_Teachers_Working_in_Early_Childhood_and_School_Education (Accessed April 3, 2015).

Digital literacy part of the curriculum for primary and secondary schools

In Italy, digital literacy is implicitly included in curricula, but it is not a separate subject, because other compulsory subjects contain media related competences. Moreover, in primary schools ICT is taught within technology as a subject, and as a general tool for other subjects/or as a tool for specific tasks in other subjects (European Commission, 2013:4). A number of programmes have been launched to provide support on a national level, in Italy, such as "LIM" (provides Interactive White Boards to promote ICT in education). Little information is to be found about the effect of these and similar programmes.

The frequency of use of digital resources is relatively low at the secondary level (European Commission, 2013: 88). Also, Italy shows the lowest percentage of ICT based classroom activities in the EU (European Commission, 2013: 77). The percentage of students in schools without broadband internet access is below the EU average at all grades.

Quite recently, within the Law 107 (*La buona scuola*) approved in late 2015, a national plan for the digital school (*Piano nazionale per la scuola digitale*) has been established. The plan supports the introduction of digital technologies and foresees the introduction of a digital animator in each school (from primary to secondary) to be identified among the existing teachers and trained.

Increasing Participation, Inclusion and Equity

Addressing socio-economic factors which affect literacy development

At 15.9%, Italy is in the upper third of the distribution for child poverty among European countries participating in ELINET. It is therefore a priority to address child poverty as the main contributor to early disadvantage, including in literacy acquisition. The 2015, financial law established a fund to complement the income of poor families with children. Local regional governments may provide benefits for poor families as well. Local authorities provide social services, together with non-governmental organisations or associations in the field.

Schools and social care services collaborate in order to identify and manage situations of socio-economic disadvantage and to prevent problems at the developmental age. For example, the role of teachers is crucial in identifying suspected situations of neglect, abuse or violence, which is also a known cause of language problems and school failure. In these cases, the school should encourage the family to contact social services. Should the family fail to do so, the school can make a referral to the social care service¹⁹.

Encouraging preschool attendance, especially for disadvantaged children

Italy has a high preschool enrolment rate. According to the European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat (2014, Figure C1 p.62), with an enrolment rate at age 4 of 96.8%, Italy reaches the European benchmark for at least 95% of children between age 4 and the start of compulsory education participating in ECEC. The OECD Family Database (2014) offers more differentiated figures of participation rates at age 3, 4 and 5. According to 2010 statistical data, the

¹⁹ See: <http://www.european-agency.org/country-information/italy/national-overview/identification-of-special-educational-needs> (Accessed August 4, 2014).

participation rate is 97.3% for 5-year-olds, 96.8% for 4-year-olds, and 93.0% for 3-year-olds (OECD 2014) (for an overview of European countries see table C2 in Appendix B).

Italy belongs to the half of the European countries where the 3-5 years period of ECEC is free. Prior to 3 years, a network of day-care centres covers from 4 to 40% of children aged 0-3 years. The attendance at these centres is publicly subsidised for poor families. However, the public provision of such services, which is around 15%, is far from the European benchmark of 33%, mostly due to very low provision in southern Regions.

Preventing early school leaving

According to Eurostat, in Italy, the rate of early school leavers was 17% in 2013, down from 17.6% a year before. The target value of the early school leaving (ESL) rate set for 2020 is 15.0-16.0%. A national plan on guidance and dropout was published in 2011 following guidelines on guidance for lifelong learning issued in 2009. The plan, which has been further defined at regional level for full implementation, aims to shift current guidance services from an informative role into a proper career and guidance counselling function. It also provides for the activation of 'local integrated services', ensuring the appropriate reception, needs analysis and response to each individual case.

The main challenge is to reduce the gap in preschool enrolments among regions. In order to prevent early school leaving, collaborations need to be established among different sectors (education, social services) through intersectoral agreements.

Support for struggling literacy learners

According to Eurydia, in Italy, children with special educational needs get support in mainstream Kindergarten and in schools. There is no systematic assessment of children in order to identify language development problems²⁰. The absence of standards at other grade levels and of a testing culture more generally (see below), suggests that teacher judgements play a key role in the early identification of reading difficulties in pre-primary children.

In primary and secondary school, class teachers assess pupils on a daily basis, and summative assessment takes place at the end of each school term. Secondary school students also have a right to a transparent and quick evaluation aimed at starting a self-evaluation process to identify their own strong and weak points and to improve their own performance²¹.

According to the Inter-Ministerial decree (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health Decree (17/4/2013), concerning early detection in school of struggling readers, this category (BES, *Bisogni Educativi Speciali*, Special Educational Needs) includes children with difficulties due to socio-cultural disadvantage and children affected by Specific Learning Disabilities (SLDs). Such difficulties should be detected early, generally starting from the second year of primary education. In case of special educational needs, schools should intervene promptly, in order to proceed with further diagnosis and support.

²⁰ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Assessment_in_Programmes_for_Children_over_2-3_years (Accessed August 22, 2014).

²¹ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Assessment_in_General_Lower_Secondary_Education (Accessed August 14, 2014).

There are multidisciplinary teams that, within the national health system, are in charge of diagnosing the causes of special educational needs whether they are due to socio cultural disadvantage, SLDs or other causes.

Meeting the needs of pupils with special educational needs is mainly a responsibility of the curricular teachers. The Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) has issued guidelines (for the right to education of students with BES, promulgated in July 2011), to help schools support pupils in their education. Schools ought to put in place specific pedagogical and didactical measures to guarantee all pupils' academic achievement. Individualised education plans and the option to take advantage of compensatory tools and dispensatory measures for those with learning difficulties are also recommended. Furthermore, in order to facilitate the educational process of pupils with BES, teachers and school principals at all school levels undergo specific in-service training. Training focuses on the early identification of SLD risk, teaching methods to be adopted both with the pupil and the whole class, assessment procedures, and guidance. Training activities are organised directly by the MIUR or by schools and may involve universities, research institutes, scientific organisations, associations and local health authorities²². Inclusion and teaching of different pupils in one class is also often promoted by having a support teacher (*insegnante di sostegno*) in the classroom. These teachers serve as a partner to the general education teacher and provide instructional support for all pupils.

Based on a question that class teachers answered in PIRLS 2011, it is estimated that 14.4% of students in fourth grade in Italy are considered to be in need of remedial reading instruction. It is also estimated by teachers that 8.9% are receiving remedial reading instruction. Hence, there is a shortfall of 5.5% between those in need and those actually receiving remedial instruction. On average across EU-24 countries, 18.1% of students in Grade 4 are identified by their teachers as being in need of remedial teaching, while 13.3% are receiving such teaching.

The main challenge is to ensure for all Italian children a quality system of school and health services which are able to detect needs timely, and to provide specific support to pupils. There are parts of the country where this is not guaranteed. It might be useful to administer periodically tests to pupils in order to identify as early as possible learning difficulties, and to respond with focused instruction tailored to the individual needs.

Support for migrant children and adolescents whose home language is not the language of school

Another key factor affecting literacy development is whether the primary language spoken at home is different from the language used at school. In PIRLS 2011, 17.8% of students in Grade 4 in Italy reported that they sometimes speak a language other than the test language at home, while 2.9% reported that they never did so. Corresponding EU-24 averages are broadly similar at 17.3% and 3.0% respectively. According to Alivernini, Di Leo and Manganelli (2012), 9% of students in Italian schools in 2010-11 were non-native students, although one half of students with foreign citizenship enrolled in schools that year had been born in Italy.

Foreign students attend common classes, according to their age. The Ministerial Directive 27.12.2012 for pupils with special educational needs includes the area of linguistic and cultural disadvantage and

²² See: <http://www.european-agency.org/country-information/italy/national-overview/financing> (Accessed August 4, 2014).

asks all schools to create a technical group for school integration and develop individualised plans for each pupil with BES.

The law allows schools in Italy to exercise their autonomy to provide specific individualised interventions for groups of students to help them learn the Italian language. Where possible, schools are expected to use their professional resources to provide additional intensive Italian language instruction through specific projects, including additional teaching activities to enrich educational offerings" (Alivernini, Di Leo and Manganelli, 2012,p. 272).

The MIUR has provided specific guidelines on the inclusion of migrant pupils. The guidelines contain a regulatory framework, as well as some suggestions concerning school organisation and teaching. For example, each class can host a maximum of 30% migrant pupils, as a higher proportion may hinder effective inclusion. Recently arrived migrants should be assessed on their language knowledge during the initial period of their integration into local schools. Based on the assessment, schools then organise Italian classes according to the pupils' capacities²³.

Migrant pupils are the direct responsibility of curricular teachers. However, local authorities, as well as associations and organisations working at local level, often provide cultural and linguistic mediators to help teachers and school staff communicate with pupils and their families²⁴. Foreign students attend common classes, according to their age.

The existence of an important gap in literacy competence among children depending on the language spoken at home requires identification of support measures for migrant children who do not have sufficient knowledge of Italian and their families as a priority. Priority actions should include: a) early intervention in families of migrant children to promote the home learning environment with specific focus on supporting emergent literacy development in the host country host language; b) support for early attendance of day care for migrant children; c) implementation of the ministerial directive on BES.

²³ See: <http://www.european-agency.org/country-information/italy/national-overview/identification-of-special-educational-needs> (Accessed August 4, 2014).

²⁴ See: <http://www.european-agency.org/country-information/italy/national-overview/identification-of-special-educational-needs> (Accessed August 4, 2014).

3 General Information on the Education System

The Italian school system is mainly public (over 90%) and therefore free of charge, while private schools may charge fees that in many instances are at least partially waived by local governments.

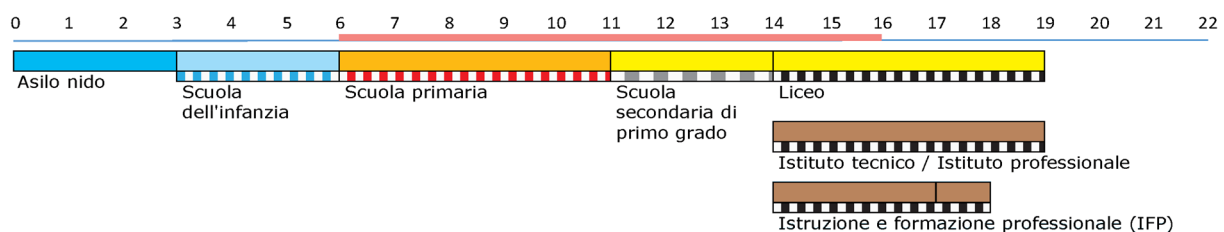
The education system in Italy is organised according to the subsidiary principle and autonomy of schools. The State has exclusive competence on general issues on education, on minimum standards to be guaranteed throughout the country, and on the fundamental principles that Regions should comply with within their competences. Regions share their competences with the State on education issues, while they have exclusive competence on vocational education and training. Schools are autonomous as for didactic, organisational, and research and development activities.

The education system is organised as follows:

- **Pre-primary school** for children between 3 and 6 years of age;
- *first cycle of education* lasting 8 years, made up of:
 - **primary education** (lasting 5 years), for children between 6 and 11 years of age;
 - **lower secondary school** (lasting 3 years) for children between 11 and 14 years of age;
- *second cycle of education* offering two different pathways:
 - State **upper secondary school** (lasting 5 years) for students from 14 to 19 years of age. It is offered by **licei**, **technical institutes** and **vocational institutes**; three and four-year **vocational training courses (IFP)** addressed to students who have completed the first cycle of education. It is organised by the Regions.
- **post-secondary non tertiary education** offered through: post-qualification and post-diploma vocational courses organised by the Regions; Higher technical education and training courses (IFTTS).
- **higher education offered by universities and the High level arts and music education system** (Afam). Higher education is organised in first, second and third levels according to the Bologna structure.

The Italian school system is fully inclusive for all children, and children with disabilities are assessed by a multidisciplinary team in order to obtain a support teacher. Learning of a foreign language starts now in the primary cycle.

Figure 1: Structure of the Italian School System



Kindergarten (*Scuola dell'infanzia*) starts at 3 years and there are "*primavera*" (spring) classes from two years of age. The access to kindergarten is over 88% on average at national level. Kindergarten is also mainly public, however the private offer is in this sector quite significant.

Compulsory education covers the eight-year first cycle (5 years of primary school and 3 years of lower secondary school) and the first two years of the second cycle (DM 139/2007). After completion of the first cycle of education, the last two years of compulsory education (from 14 to 16 years of age) can be accomplished either in State upper secondary schools (*licei*, technical institutes and vocational institutes), or through the three-year vocational education and training courses, (*istruzione e formazione professionale*) falling under the competence of the Regions (law 133/2008).

Compulsory education refers to both enrolment and attendance. It can be accomplished either in a State and a *paritaria school* (accredited private school) and also, under certain conditions, through parental education and merely private schools; regional three-year vocational training courses are offered by the relevant training agencies. Parents or caregivers are responsible for the accomplishment of compulsory education, while supervision on the fulfilment of compulsory education falls under the responsibilities of local authorities where pupils reside and school heads of the schools pupils are enrolled in.

Once compulsory schooling has been accomplished, pupils who don't pursue their studies receive a certification attesting compulsory education fulfilment and competencies acquired; these constitute formative credits for the attainment of any professional qualification.

Access to tertiary education is reserved for students who passed the State exam at the end of upper secondary school. Yet, specific conditions for admission are the responsibility of the Ministry of education, University and Research (MIUR), or of each single university.

4 Literacy Performance Data for Children and Adolescents

4.1 Primary school children

The performance data for primary school children are derived from the IEA’s PIRLS studies.

Inaugurated in 2001 and conducted every 5 years, **PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study)** is an assessment of pupils’ reading achievement at fourth grade organized by the Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The survey was administered in 35 countries in 2001, 45 education systems in 2006, and 50 in 2011. PIRLS assesses different purposes for reading (literary and informational) and different reading processes (retrieve explicit information, make inferences, interpret and integrate ideas and information, examine and evaluate content, language, and textual elements). Both multiple choice and open-ended questions are used.

Combining newly developed reading assessment passages and questions for 2011 with a selection of secure assessment passages and questions from 2001 and 2006, PIRLS 2011 allowed for measurement of changes since 2001. PIRLS 2011 also examined the national policies, curricula and practices related to literacy in participating countries, and included a set of questionnaires for students, parents/caregivers, teachers, and school principals to investigate the experiences that young children have at home and school in learning to read, in particular their attitudes and motivation towards reading.

For all PIRLS data used in this report, detailed tables with data for all participating countries in ELINET are provided, together with the EU averages (see Appendix C: ELINET PIRLS 2011 Data, Appendix D: ELINET PIRLS 2006 Data).

4.1.1 Performance and variation in reading: proportion of low and high performing readers

Students in Italy achieved an overall mean reading score of 541 in PIRLS 2011 (Table 1). Six EU-24 countries had significantly higher mean scores (Finland, Northern Ireland, Croatia, Denmark, Ireland and England). Performance in Italy was broadly similar across reading purposes (Literary, Informational) and reading processes (Interpret, Integrate & Evaluate; Retrieve & Inference) (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Tables A2-A5).

Table 1: Overall Performance on PIRLS 2011 – Italy and EU-24 Average

	Overall Reading – Mean Score
Italy	541
EU-24	535

Significant difference (relative to the EU-24 Average) shown in **bold**.

In Italy, 15% of students performed at or below the low benchmark (see table 2) on overall reading. This is lower than the EU average of 20% (Table 2). Though Italy is behind countries such as Finland (8%), the Netherlands (10%) and Croatia (10%) in terms of the proportion of students performing at or below the Low benchmark, Italy’s standing relative to most EU countries on this indicator is strong

(see ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Table A.6). In Italy, 10% of students achieve at the Advanced benchmark. This is close to the EU average of 9%.

Table 2: Performance by Overall PIRLS Reading Benchmarks 2011 - Percentages of Pupils

	Below 400	400-475 Low	475-550 Intermediate	550-625 High	Above 625 Advanced
Italy	2	13	39	36	10
EU-24	5	15	36	35	9

Italy's standard deviation on PIRLS overall reading is 66, which is 4 points below the EU-24 average indicating a slightly narrower spread of achievement. The difference between the scores of students at the 90th and 10th percentiles in Italy – 167 points – is 13 points below the corresponding EU-24 average of 180.

Table 3: Spread of Achievement – Standard Deviation, 10th, 90th Percentiles, and Difference between 90th and 10th Percentiles on Overall Reading – Italy and EU-24 Average

	Standard Deviation	10 th Percentile	90 th Percentile	90 th -10 th
Italy	66	456	623	167
EU Avg	70	441	621	180

Performance on PIRLS in Italy increased by only 1 point between 2001 and 2011, consistent with the EU-24 average which also increased by one point during that (Table 4). However Italy's performance in PIRLS increased by 11 points between 2001 and 2006, but again fell by 10 points between 2006 and 2011.

Table 4: Trends in Performance 2001-2011 (Overall Scale) – Italy and EU-24 Average

	2001	2006	Change (2006- 2001)	2006	2011	Change (2011- 2006)	2001	2011	Change (2011-2001)
Italy	541	552	11	552	541	-10	541	541	0
EU-24	534	534	0	534	535	1	534	535	1

4.1.2 Gaps in reading

As in every European country there are achievement gaps between different groups.

Parent's educational achievement

Pupils in Italy whose parents attended University or Higher achieved a mean score (575) that was some 59 points higher than students whose parents completed Lower Secondary or below (516) (Table 5). The average difference across the EU-24 was 76 points, indicating a relatively weaker relationship between parents' educational level and performance in Italy. The percentage of parents in Italy with a University or higher degree (20%) is 10% below the EU-24 average of 30%.

Table 5: Percentages of Parents Whose Highest Level of Education was Lower Secondary, and Percentages who Finished University or Higher

Level of Education	Lower Secondary or Below		University or Higher		Difference(Univ or Higher – Lower Sec)
	%	Mean	%	Mean	
Italy	25	516	20	575	59
EU-24	18	495	30	571	76

Statistically significant mean score differences in **bold**.

Primary language spoken at home different from language used at school

In Italy, 79% of pupils reported that they always spoke the language of the PIRLS reading test at home –slightly less than the corresponding EU-24 Average (80) (Table 6). The corresponding EU-24 average percentages are 17% and 3%. The difference in achievement between pupils in Italy reporting that they always or never spoke the language of the test was 60 score points – 1 point higher than the corresponding EU-24 average difference (59).

Table 6: Percentages of Students Reporting that They Always or Sometimes/ Never Speak the Language of the PIRLS Test at Home, and Associated Mean Score Differences – Italy and EU-24 Average

Language of the Test Spoken at Home	Always		Sometimes / Never		Mean Score Difference (Always – Sometimes/Never)
	%	Mean	%	Mean	
Italy	79	549	21	517	31
EU-24 Avg	80	541	20	519	26

Statistically significant mean score differences in **bold**.

Gender

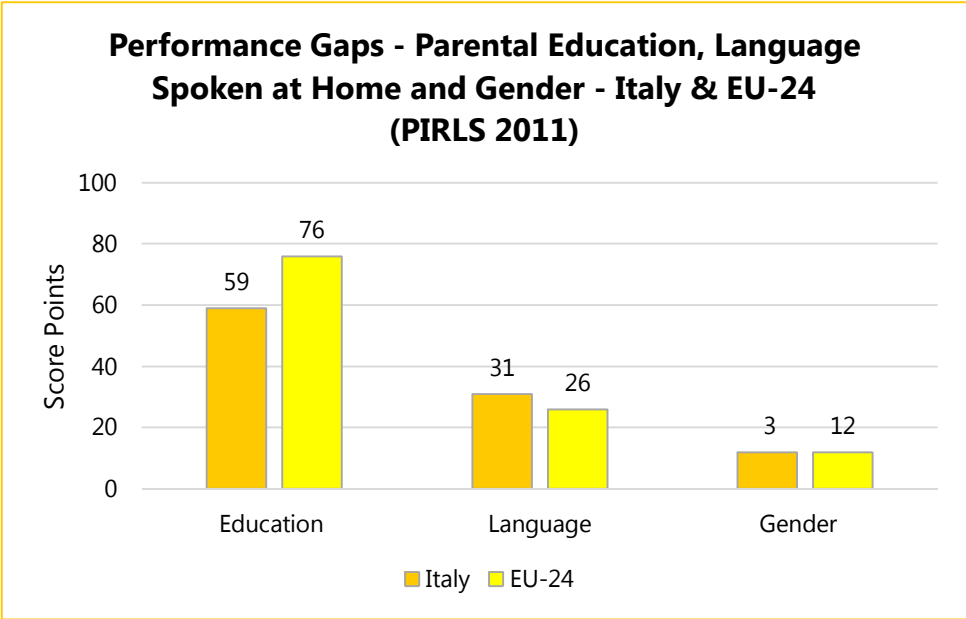
Girls in Italy achieved a mean score on overall reading that was higher than boys by 3 points in 2011, not significantly different from the mean score of boys. The difference in Italy was a quarter of the EU-24 average difference of 12 points (Table 7).

Table 7: Trends in Performance by Gender 2001-2011 (Overall Scale) – Italy and EU-24 Average

	Italy			EU		
	Girls	Boys	Girls-Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls-Boys
2011	543	540	3	541	529	12
2006	555	548	7	541	528	13
2001	545	537	8	542	525	17

Significant differences in **bold**

Figure 2: Performance Gaps in Italy and on Average across the EU-24 - Primary Level



Education: University – Lower Secondary or lower; Language: Language of test spoken always – sometimes/never; Gender: Girls – Boys.

Attitudes to Reading

In 2011, there was a difference of 37 points between pupils at the top and bottom quartiles of the Like Reading Scale in Italy (Table 8). On average across the EU-24, the difference between students in the top and bottom quarters of the Like Reading scale was 52 points, indicating a relatively weaker relationship between liking reading and performance in Italy.

Table 8 Mean Overall Reading Scores of Students in the Top and Bottom Quartiles of the PIRLS Like Reading Scale – Italy and EU-24 Average

Like Reading	Overall Reading Score		
	Top Quartile	Bottom Quartile	Difference (Q4-Q1)
Italy	563	526	37
EU-24	563	511	52

Significant differences in **bold**

Students in Italy in the top quarter of the Confidence in Reading scale achieved a mean score (569) that was some 57 points higher than students in the bottom quarter (513) (Table 9). The average difference across the EU-24 was 80 points, indicating a relatively weaker relationship between Confidence and performance in Italy.

Table 9: Mean Overall Reading Scores of Students in the Top and Bottom Quartiles of the PIRLS Confidence in Reading Scale –Italy and EU-24 Average

Confidence in Reading	Overall Reading Score		
	Top Quartile	Bottom Quartile	Difference (Q4-Q1)
Italy	569	513	57
EU-24	570	490	80

4.2 Adolescents

The data reported in this Performance section come from the PISA study.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) led by OECD²⁵ **assesses the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students every three years in all OECD countries and** in a number of partner countries.

Since 2000, PISA has been testing students in reading, mathematics and science. The OECD assessment also collects information on students' backgrounds and on practices, motivational attributes or metacognition strategies related to reading.

The PISA tests assess different aspects of reading literacy – retrieve information, interpret, reflect and evaluate on texts, and use a variety of texts, continuous (prose) and non-continuous (texts including graphs, tables, maps...). About half of the questions are multiple-choice, the other half open-ended (short or constructed answers). Results are reported on scales defining different levels of proficiency ranging from 1 (low performing) to 6 (high performing). Level 2 is considered as the level all 15 year-olds should reach, and will enable them to participate effectively to society.

The follow-up of students who were assessed by PISA in 2000 as part of the Canadian Youth in Transition Survey has shown that students scoring below Level 2 face a disproportionately higher risk of poor post-secondary participation or low labour-market outcomes at age 19, and even more so at age 21, the latest age for which data from this longitudinal study are currently available. For example, of students who performed below Level 2 in PISA reading in 2000, over 60% had not gone on to any post-school education by the age of 21; by contrast, more than half of the students (55 %) who had performed at Level 2 as their highest level were at college or university. (OECD, 2011: 52)

²⁵ See: <http://www.pisa.oecd.org>.

4.2.1 Performance and variation in reading; proportion of low and high performing readers

Italy has participated in PISA since 2000. It is therefore possible to describe the change in reading performance over twelve years on average, according to different characteristics of the readers.

Table 10: Reading performance in PISA 2012

	Mean	S.E.
Italy	490	(2.0)
EU-27	489	(0.6)

S. E. = standard error; Significant differences between the country and the EU average are shown in **bold**

In PISA 2012, the reading performance of Italian student is very close to the EU's average

Table 11: Trends in reading performance - PISA 2000-2012

	2000		2009		2012		Change 2000-2009		Change 2009-2012		Change 2000-2012	
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.
Italy	487	(2.9)	486	(1.6)	490	(2.0)	-1	(5.9)	4	(3.6)	2	(6.9)
EU-27	489*	(0.7)	486**	(0.6)	489***	(0.6)	-3*	(5.0)	5**	(2.7)	3*	(6.0)

Significant differences between assessment cycles in **bold** *EU21 **EU26 ***EU27

The performances in Italy are constant between 2000 and the last two PISA cycles (2009 and 2012) and close to the EU's average.

Table 12: Spread of achievement. Difference between 10th and 90th percentiles on the reading scale, all students and by gender – PISA 2012

	Difference 90 th -10 th for all students		Difference 90 th -10 th for girls		Difference 90 th -10 th for boys	
	Score diff.	S.E.	Score diff.	S.E.	Score diff.	S.E.
Italy	250	(3.0)	225	(4.0)	263	(5.2)
EU-27	251	(1.3)	230	(1.2)	259	(1.6)

Significant differences between the country and EU in **bold**

In Italy the spread of achievement is close to the average of European countries.

Table 13: Percentage of low-performing (below level 2) and high-performing (levels 5 and 6) students - PISA 2012

	Below level 2		Levels 5 and 6	
	%	S.E.	%	S.E.
Italy	19.5	(0.7)	6.7	(0.3)
EU-27	19.7	(0.2)	7.0	(0.1)

Significant differences between the country and EU in **bold**

In Italy the proportion of low-performers and high-performers is the same as in the EU countries on average.

Table 14: Trends in the proportion of low-performers (below level 2) in reading, all students, and by gender – PISA 2000-2012

	Proportion of students below level 2 in reading					
	All students		Girls		Boys	
	%	S.E.	%	S.E.	%	S.E.
2000	18.9	(1.1)	12.6	(1.4)	24.6	(2.1)
2009	21.0	(0.6)	12.7	(0.7)	28.9	(0.9)
2012	19.5	(0.7)	12.6	(0.7)	25.9	(0.9)

Significant differences between assessment cycles in **bold**

Between 2000 and 2012, the proportion of low-performing readers is stable in Italy (by 0.6 %): among boys a slight increase is observed (+ 1.3 %), while among girls no change is observed.

4.2.2 Gaps in reading performance according to students' background characteristics

Socio-economic status

Table 15: Difference in reading performance between bottom and top national quarters of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status – PISA 2009

Difference between bottom and top national quarters of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status	
	Score diff.
Italy	84
EU-26	89

Significant differences in reading performance between bottom and top national quarters in **bold**.

In Italy the gap in reading performance according to the students' socioeconomic background is close to the European average.

Gender

Table 16: Mean reading performance by gender and gender differences – PISA 2009

	Boys		Girls		Difference (B – G)	
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Score diff.	S.E.
Italy	464	(2.3)	510	(1.9)	-46	(2.8)
EU-26	463	(0.5)	506	(0.4)	-44	(0.5)

Significant differences between boys and girls in **bold**

Gender difference in reading performance in Italy is close to the average of European countries.

Table 17: Trends in reading performance by gender – PISA 2000-2012

	Italy				EU-27			
	Girls		Boys		Girls		Boys	
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.
2000	507	(3.6)	469	(5.1)	506*	(0.8)	473*	(0.9)
2009	510	(1.9)	464	(2.3)	507**	(0.7)	464**	(0.8)
2012	510	(2.3)	471	(2.5)	511***	(0.6)	468***	(0.8)

Significant differences between assessment cycles in **bold** *EU21 **EU26 ***EU27

In Italy, the stability of the reading performance observed between 2000 and 2012 is similar for girls (+ 3 score points) and boys (+ 2 score points). The trend is slightly different in EU countries on average: between 2000 and 2012 the girls' performance increased by 5 score points while the boys' decreased by the same value.

Migration

Table 18: Percentage of students and reading performance by immigrant status – PISA 2009

	Native students				Students with an immigrant background (first- or second-generation)				Difference in reading performance between native and students with an immigrant background	
	Percentage of students	S.E.	Performance on the reading scale		Percentage of students	S.E.	Performance on the reading scale		Score dif.	S.E.
			Mean	S.E.			Mean	S.E.		
Italy	94.5	(0.3)	491	(1.6)	5.5	(0.3)	418	(4.2)	72	(4.4)
EU-26	91.7	(0.0)	490	(0.4)	8.3	(0.0)	452	(6.4)	38	(6.4)

Significant differences between native and students with an immigrant background in **bold**

In Italy, the percentage of students with an immigrant background is low (5.5%). The gap between native students and those with an immigrant background is 72 score points, which is equivalent to almost two years of schooling. The gap between native students and those with an immigrant background is higher in Italy than in EU countries on average.

Language spoken at home

Table 19: Percentage of students and reading performance by language spoken at home – PISA 2012

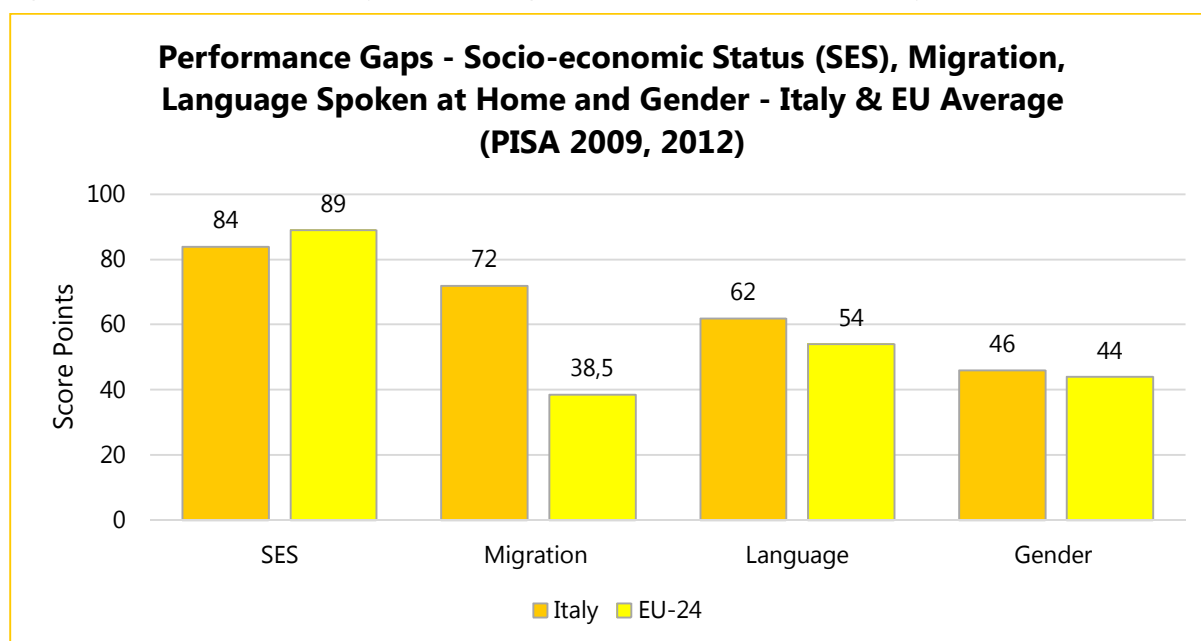
	Speak test language at home				Speak another language at home				Difference in reading according to language spoken at home	
	Percentage of students	S.E.	Performance on the reading scale		Percentage of students	S.E.	Performance on the reading scale		Score dif.	S.E.
			Mean	S.E.			Mean	S.E.		
Italy	85.7	(0.4)	503	(1.4)	14.3	(0.4)	441	(3.0)	62	3.2
EU-27	86.7	(0.02)	494	(0.4)	13.3	(0.02)	441	(5.4)	54	(5.4)

Significant differences according to language spoken at home in **bold**

In Italy the gap between students speaking the test language at home and those who do not (14.3 % of the students) is quite high (62 score points) but close to the EU's average. It is equivalent to one and a half year of schooling.

These performance gaps are summarized in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Performance Gaps in Italy and on Average across EU Countries - Post-Primary Level



SES: Top – Bottom quartile on PISA ESCS scale; Migration: Native – first/second generation immigrants; Language: Speaks language of the PISA test at home – speaks another language; Gender: Girls - Boys

Engagement and metacognition

Table 20: Mean reading scores between students poorly engaged and highly engaged in reading – PISA 2009

	Low quarter		Top quarter		Difference
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	
Italy	444	(2.4)	542	(2.0)	98
EU-26	444	(0.8)	543	(0.8)	99

Significant differences according to the level of reading engagement in **bold**.

In Italy, there is a gap of 98 score points – which is equivalent to almost two years and a half of schooling - between the students reporting being highly engaged in reading (top quarter), and those reporting being poorly engaged (bottom quarter) in that activity. Not surprisingly, students who report being engaged in reading perform better in the PISA test.

Table 21: Mean reading scores between students in low and top quarters of understanding and remembering strategies

	Low quarter		Top quarter		Difference
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	
Italy	436	(2.5)	529	(1.7)	94
EU-26	433	(0.8)	531	(0.8)	98

Significant differences according to the degree of awareness of efficient reading strategies (understanding and remembering strategies) in **bold**.

In Italy, there is a gap of 94 score points - equivalent to almost two years and a half of schooling - between the students who know which strategies are the most efficient to understand and remember a text, and those who have a limited knowledge of that. This difference reflects how closely reading proficiency and awareness of efficient reading strategies are linked. It is close to the EU countries on average (98 score points).

Table 22: Mean reading scores between students in low and top quarters of summarizing strategies

	Low quarter		Top quarter		Difference
	Mean	S.E.	Mean	S.E.	
Italy	430	(2.6)	531	(1.6)	101
EU-26	440	(0.8)	530	(0.7)	90

Significant differences according to the degree of awareness of reading strategies (summarizing strategies) in **bold**.

In Italy the gap of 101 score points – which is equivalent to two years and a half of schooling - between the students who know which strategies are the most efficient to summarize a text, and those who have a limited knowledge of that is higher than the EU's average. This difference between students in low and top quarters reflects how closely reading proficiency and awareness of efficient reading strategies are linked.

5 Policy areas

The High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (2012, p. 38) recommended that all EU Member States should focus on the following areas as they craft their own literacy solutions:

- 1) Creating a more literate environment
- 2) Improving the quality of teaching
- 3) Increasing participation, inclusion and equity (with the term "equity" was added by ELINET).

The following parts refer to these three key issues, however some overlapping may occur.

5.1 Creating a literate environment for children and adolescents

The EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy stated the following in relation to **creating a more literate environment**:

"Creating a more literate environment will help stimulate a culture of reading, i.e. where **reading for pleasure** is seen as the norm for all children and adults. Such a culture will fuel reading motivation and reading achievement: people who like to read, read more. Because they read more, they read better, and because they read better they read more: a virtuous circle which benefits individuals, families and society as a whole." (HLG report 2012, p. 41).

Parents play a central role in children's emergent literacy development. They are the first teachers, and shape children's language and communication abilities and attitudes to reading by being good reading role models, providing reading materials, and reading to the child.

Schools play an important role in offering a literate environment for students. Schools may foster reading motivation and reading for pleasure by establishing school and classroom libraries, offering a wide variety of books and other reading material in different genres, providing sheltered and comfortable spaces for individual reading activities (like reading clubs), and not forcing children into having to express and exchange their individual (intimate) reading experiences.

However, schools do not have sole responsibility. A broad range of actors may shape literacy motivation, from parents and peers to libraries. Parents may provide role models and influence children's attitudes towards literacy practices. Also, libraries have a vital role if they offer free books, especially for families who cannot afford to buy books. Regional or national campaigns may inspire children and their parents to engage in reading activities. (Cf. ELINET Country Reports, Frame of Reference, pp. 29ff.)

Adolescence is a crucial phase in life where young people develop long-term *identities and self-concepts* which include media preferences and practices (*media identity*). In this perspective, it is of great importance that families, schools and communities offer young people rich opportunities to encounter the *culture of reading* and develop a stable *self-concept as a reader/writer* and member of a literary culture. This includes access to a broad variety of reading materials (in print and electronic forms) and stimulating literate environments in and outside of schools; it also includes opportunities to get actively involved in engaging with texts, and communicating, reflecting on and exchanging ideas about texts with peers and 'competent others', such as teachers or parents (Ibid., pp. 45f).

5.1.1 Providing a literate environment at home

The **home learning environment**, particularly in the first three years, is extremely important (Brooks et al. 2012). It determines the quantity and quality of interactions between the infant and the primary caregivers, who are the most powerful agents of language development, both receptive and expressive, in the context of everyday activities and experiences. During these years, experience-dependent creation of synapses is maximal. We know that the more words the children are exposed to, the more they can learn. Caregiver-child relations in their turn strongly influence the ability to learn, by influencing self-esteem, general knowledge and motivation.

Several indicators are used to describe the literate home environment of very young children in this report, drawing on data from international sources (PIRLS) that are comparable across countries. It is important to acknowledge that some of the PIRLS data are self-reported and may be biased by social desirability and the ways in which questions are interpreted by parents within countries.

Parental attitudes to reading

PIRLS 2011 used the “Parents Like Reading Scale” according to their parents’ responses to seven statements about reading and how often they read for enjoyment. The figures are presented below with the percentage of students whose parents “like”, “somewhat like” or “do not like” reading” as reported by PIRLS 2011 (Mullis et al. 2012a, Exhibit 4.4 – Parents Like Reading, p. 120).

- Like: 23.8% (European average 35.3 %)
- Somewhat like: 66.0% (European average 52.6 %)
- Do not like: 10.2% (European average 17.9 %)

(For an overview of European countries see table B1 in Appendix B).

Compared to the other EU countries, the proportion of pupils in Italy with parents who like or somewhat like reading, although partially compensated by a lower proportion of parents who do not like to read, is relatively high. Importance of parental attitudes to reading is well known: in Italy, as in many other countries, there are significant differences in reading performance at grade 4 between children whose parents like to read (average achievement 565) and those who do not (average achievement 528).

Home Educational Resources

Thirty-six percent of parents in Italy reported having few home resources for learning – well above the EU Average of 25% (Table 23). Similarly a 13 percentage points gap between the EU Average (25) for many resources, and the Italian average (12) suggests that pupils in Italy have less access to home resources. The difference in achievement between pupils in Italy whose parents reported having many home resources and few resources was 64 score points – 15 points lower than the corresponding EU-24 average difference (79).

Table 23: Percentages of Pupils Whose Parents Reported Having Few or Many Home Resources for Learning, and Corresponding Mean Overall Reading Scores – Italy and EU-24 Average

Level of Home Resources	Few Resources		Many Resources		Difference (Many - Few)
	%	Mean	%	Mean	
Italy	36	522	12	586	64
EU-24	25	495	25	573	79

Statistically significant mean score differences in **bold**.

Number of children's books in the home

The PIRLS 2011 database provides the figures below about the number of children's books in the home based on the report of parents:

- 0-10: 16.9% (European average 11.8%)
 - 11-25: 28.4% (European average 19.7%)
 - 26-50: 31.5% (European average 29.4%)
 - 51-100: 16.4% (European average 23.4%)
 - >100: 6.8% (European average 15.7%)
- (for an overview of European countries see table B2 in Appendix B)

Early Literacy Activity Scale

PIRLS 2011 reports the percentages of students whose parents (often, never or almost never) engaged in literacy-relevant activities with them before the beginning of primary school (Mullis et al. 2012a, exhibit 4.6 - Early Literacy Activities Before Beginning Primary School, p. 126). Nine activities are considered: reading books, telling stories, singing songs, playing with alphabet toys, talking about things done, talking about things read, playing word games, writing letters or words, reading signs and labels aloud. A composite indicator combining all these activities has been used and is reported below for Italy (for an overview of European countries see table B3 in Appendix C):

- Often: 48.0% (European average 40.7%)
- Sometimes: 50.9% (European average 57.4)
- Never or almost never: 1.1% (European average 1.9%).

Thus, in Italy, there are more children whose parents often do early literacy activities with them and less whose parents never do it, compared with the EU 24. The Early Literacy Activity Scale correlates with later reading performance in grade 4. The average reading score of pupils who were engaged often in these activities was 553, as compared with 537 for those pupils who were engaged only sometimes in these activities with their parents before the beginning of primary school. These figures demonstrate the importance of the time devoted to literacy-related activities in early childhood and their association with achievement in Grade 4.

While the Early Literacy Activity Scale is a composite score it is of interest to look at single items. If only the category "often" is considered, the percentage of pupils in Italy whose parents engaged in literacy-related activities with them before the beginning of primary school are the following:

- read books to them often: 46.4% (European average 58.4 %)
- told stories to them often: 60.4% (European average 51. 5%)
- sang songs to them often: 58.4% (European average 50.6%)
- played games involving shapes (toys and puzzles) with them often: 69.4%
- (European average 63.5%).

(For more details and an overview of European countries see table B 4 – B 7 in Appendix B).

Cooperation among families, day-care centres and kindergarten, libraries and health services in reading promotion for pre-primary children is very diverse from region to region, even though cooperation among day care centres and kindergarten and parents is currently considered a priority for the early education system. Recently the project *Dalle Scuole alla Famiglia* (From schools to family) has been launched and carried out in the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region. The target were kindergarten and pre-school teachers, with the ultimate target population of children 2-5 and their parents. Teachers

received specific training to understand why and how to better interact with parents to promote home reading and how to collaborate with public libraries and other community services to provide books and teaching aids. A multimedia guide²⁶ is now available for all pre-primary teachers.

Challenge: Since reading to the child is a predictor of future literacy achievement, it is a matter of concern that there are important differences among parents related to this practice with the consequence that gaps based on social class, migrant status or other factors are established very early in children's lives. There is a need for programmes **that raise awareness of all parents** that literacy is a key to learning and life chances and that the basis for good literacy achievement is laid in early childhood. In particular, there is a need for more family literacy programmes with **a focus on supporting all parents and particularly those who may be at risk of social and cultural disadvantage** in understanding and fostering the literacy development of their children.

5.1.2 Providing a literate environment at school

As we know from the PISA and other studies, there is a high correlation between reading for pleasure and reading performance: there is a crucial difference between students who perform well in the PISA reading assessment and those who perform poorly.

In Italy there is a remarkable decrease in reading motivation from 4th grade (cf. PIRLS 2011) to age 15 (cf. PISA 2009). In PIRLS 2011 about 18% percent of Italian pupils reported that they do not like reading. According to PISA 2009, more than 30 % percent of 15-year-olds report they do not read for pleasure. In PISA 2009, Italy has a gap of 98 score points – which is equivalent to almost two years and a half of schooling - between the students reporting being highly engaged in reading and those reporting being poorly engaged in that activity.

Availability and use of classroom library

Based on data provided by their teachers, PIRLS shows that 73% of pupils in Italy were in classrooms which had class libraries – the same as the corresponding EU-24 average of 73% (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Table H2). In Italy, 25% of students were in classrooms with more than 50 books, below the EU-24 average of 32% (ibid.).

Challenge: Families, community, schools and libraries should do more in order to support reading motivation, reading habits, and a stable self-concept as a reader among adolescents.

School libraries should be supported in their ability to offer a variety of age-appropriate books.

5.1.3 Providing a digital environment

Digital environment of primary students

A literate environment can also be created by incorporating digital devices into the school environment.

According to teachers' reports, 24% of students in Italy have a computer available for reading lessons, compared to the EU-average of 45% (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix Table I6). In Italy, 14% use a computer at school at least monthly to look up information. The corresponding EU-24 average is 39%

²⁶ See: <http://www.csbonlus.org/cosa-facciamo/progetti/dalle-scuole-alla-famiglia>.

(ibid). In Italy, 18% of students are in classrooms whose teachers report that the students use computers to write stories or other texts at least monthly. The corresponding EU-24 average is 33%.

Digital environment of secondary students

In PISA 2009, 89% of the students reported that they spent no time at all on computers during Language-of-instruction lessons (OECD average: 74.0%) (OECD, p. 321). More than 70% of students do not spend time using computers in other subjects, such as Science or Mathematics (OECD, 2011, PISA 2009 Results: Students on Line: Digital Technologies and Performance: 321). In comparison to the OECD average and especially in comparison to the well-equipped Nordic countries, the ICT coverage in Italy schools still has room for improvement.

PISA also shows that only 5.3% of Italian students report using laptops at school. In Denmark, for instance, this number is more than 13 times higher (73.2%) (OECD, 2011: 323).

Challenge: Access to a digital environment is significantly lower in Italy than in most EU countries. Recognising this gap, the Ministry of Education, as well as many Regional Governments, have recently invested some resources in digital equipment for schools, as well as in professional training on digital literacy for teachers. The situation, however, is dramatically unequal across regions, with most southern regions still quite below an acceptable standard.

5.1.4 The role of public libraries in reading promotion

Public libraries are an important agent in reading promotion. In Italy there are 17,598 libraries (Istituto Centrale per il catalogo Unico delle Biblioteche Italiane e per le informazioni bibliografiche, March 2006²⁷).

Proactive action is needed to make libraries widely accessible (opening hours, ability to welcome the public and provide assistance), but also able to reach out to all social groups, with activities aimed at raising awareness on the importance of reading for pleasure. Migrant communities, as well as minority groups, should see their culture and literature, including children's books, represented in the library provision.

Cooperation between secondary schools, families, libraries and other agents in literacy promotion for adolescents

Cooperation between public libraries, schools, municipalities has been recently promoted with a variety of initiatives by the Centre for Book and Reading of the Ministry of Culture (see below), in collaboration with the Italian Association of Public Libraries (AIB) and the Publishers Association - Associazione Italiana Editori, AIE²⁸. Although increasing and with spots of excellence, cooperation among different stakeholders aimed at reading promotion is still quite patchy and too often confined to the north and centre of the country.

²⁷ For more information please go to <http://anagrafe.iccu.sbn.it/opencms/opencms/>.

²⁸ See: <http://www.cepell.it/index.xhtm>.

5.1.5 Improving literate environments for children and adolescents: programmes, initiatives and examples

Family literacy programmes

The main family literacy programme in Italy is **Nati per Leggere**²⁹, Nati per Leggere (listed as a Good Practice) promotes the development of emergent literacy competences, parent-child relationship and interest for books. The programme has been active since 1999 and is based on a partnership between the Associazione Italiana Biblioteche (Italian library association), the Associazione Culturale Pediatri (Pediatric cultural association) and the Centro per la salute del Bambino, an NGO which actually manages the programme at national level. Nati per Leggere promotes reading to babies from their first months of life as a family practice through local multi-sector networks involving health professionals, librarians, educators, civil society associations, municipalities and regional governments. It has been estimated that parents of about 1 out of 3 newborn babies is contacted by the programme. Key strengths of the programme are the involvement of all professionals involved in providing services for children, multi-professional training modules and the mobilisation of thousands of volunteers in over 500 local projects. Through a special agreement with publishers, children's books are provided at low cost. The programme makes attempts to reach out to the poorest families as well as migrants, through multilingual materials. Nati per Leggere in collaboration with local NGOs sets up "Punti Lettura"(reading spots), where public libraries are either not existing or without specific children's sections. However, there is a North-South divide in the programme implementation, with the consequence that the many disadvantaged families are the least served by the programme. Recently, the Centre for Book and Reading of the Ministry of Culture has promoted the In Vitro project, which has supported the promotion of reading between the ages of 0 and 18 years in 7 Italian provinces.

There is a national programme, promoted by the Ministry of Health, called "Genitori+"³⁰ which supports parents in a series of 8 health-related good practices for children, one of which is home reading, with explicit reference to the promotion of shared reading at home from the age of six months.

Challenge: There is a need to further support programmes that raise awareness of all parents that literacy is a key to learning and life chances, and that the basis for good literacy achievement is laid in early childhood, with a focus on supporting all parents and particularly in disadvantaged areas and for families who are at risk of social and cultural disadvantage in understanding and fostering the literacy development of their children.

Programmes for introducing parents and children to libraries and bookshops

The programme Nati per Leggere promotes early introduction of young children to libraries where reading sessions are organised for parents and children to promote shared reading. Many public libraries and some bookshops have their own independent initiatives. Although in Italy there are no national literacy policies specifically targeting poorest parents, there is an extensive network of public libraries making books available for all. However, the network is insufficient in most southern regions.

²⁹ See: www.natiperleggere.it.

³⁰ See: (<http://www.genitoripiu.it/>).

Initiatives to foster reading engagement among children and adolescents

A national body has been established by the Ministry of Culture to promote reading in Italy. The "Book and Reading Centre" (Centro per il Libro e la Lettura, Cepell) is a not-for-profit statutory body and oversees the collaboration between public and private bodies to encourage young readers to read more (EACEA/Eurydice, 2011:123). It works together with various levels of government and with private parties operating in the book chains. The objectives of the centre are to improve the social value of books and of reading, and to increase the number of habitual readers, young and old, from eight to ten per cent of the adult population³¹. Through annual campaigns, such as "Il Maggio dei libri" ("May of Books") and "Libriamoci", regions, provinces, municipalities, institutions, local bodies, schools, libraries, cultural associations, publishers and bookshops attempt to reach out to people who "do not read", not only adolescents. Through the project "In Vitro", the Cepell made accessible age-appropriate books for pre-primary, primary and secondary schools in 7 provinces.

There are several local programmes attempting to establish collaborative networks among all community actors, and particularly between public libraries and primary schools. For example, "Crescere Leggendo" (also mentioned in the Good Practices Framework) does so by asking for the active support of municipalities through the public libraries network. A number of other similar reading animation programmes exist on a local basis and are linked through a national association of reading promoters.

Unfortunately, there are only few programmes specifically targeting adolescents. In the Friuli Venezia Region for example, a region-wide programme called "Youngsters", promotes reading for pleasure through a variety of initiatives involving adolescents in reading animation.

Role of public libraries in reading promotion and cooperation between secondary schools, libraries and other agents in literacy promotion for children and adolescents

The National Library Service "combines public libraries, local bodies, universities, schools, academies and private and public institutions into a cooperative system" (EACEA/Eurydice, 2011:126). Public libraries have recently strengthened their action in and for the communities with a variety of programmes that involve teachers and pupils. In Italy there are no national literacy policies specifically targeting poorest parents or migrant communities. There is an extensive network of public libraries making books available for all. However, the network is underfunded and insufficient in most southern regions, with civil society-driven programmes such as "Nati per Leggere" and others, attempting to fill the gaps in the public offer in literacy promotion, including for migrant communities.

Challenge: Public libraries are an important agent in reading promotion. Proactive action is needed to make libraries widely accessible (opening hours, ability to welcome the public and provide assistance) but also able to reach out to all social groups, with activities aimed at raising awareness of the importance of reading for pleasure. Migrant communities as well as minority groups should see their culture and literature, including children's books, represented in the library provision.

Fostering digital literacy in and outside schools

In Italy, 14% use a computer at school at least monthly to look up information. The corresponding EU-24 average is 39%. In Italy, 18% of students are in classrooms whose teachers report that the students

³¹ See: <http://www.cepell.it/langPage.xhtml> (Accessed April 3, 2015).

use computers to write stories or other texts at least monthly. The corresponding EU-24 average is 39% and 33% respectively. In PISA 2009, 89% of the students reported that they spent no time at all on computers during language-of-instruction lessons (OECD average: 74,0%) (OECD, p. 321). More than 70% of students do not spend time using computers in other subjects, such as Science or Mathematics (OECD, 2011, PISA 2009 Results: Students on Line: Digital Technologies and Performance: 321). In comparison to the OECD average and especially in comparison to the well-equipped Nordic countries, the ICT coverage in Italian schools still shows room for improvement. PISA also shows that only 5.3% of Italian students report using laptops at school. In Denmark, for instance, this number is more than 13 times higher (73.2%) (OECD, 2011: 323). Access to a digital environment is significantly lower in Italy than in most EU countries, but situations are quite diverse across regions, with most southern regions still quite below an acceptable standard. Recognising the gap, the Ministry of Education, as well as many Regional Governments, have recently invested in digital equipment for schools, as well as in professional training on digital literacy for teachers. Each school is requested to identify and train a teacher who will be in charge to foster digital literacy.

Quite recently, within the Law 107 (*La buona scuola*) approved in late 2015, a national plan for the digital school (*Piano nazionale per la scuola digitale*) has been established. The plan supports the introduction of digital technologies and foresees the introduction of a digital animator in each school (from primary to secondary) to be identified among the existing teachers and trained.

There are a number of local initiatives to foster digital literacy. The programme "Laboratori" offers "a series of online activities and workshops for children and adolescents to promote books, library use and a reading culture around works of fiction and non-fiction (EACEA/Eurydice, 2011:127). There is also a "Using Web Comics in Education". This is a project that makes use of internet based comics to further reading and writing abilities. Students can conceive their own web-comics or read those made by others³². The project "Lesamol" is another example, which consists of an online platform where adolescents from 11 to 16 (German Speaking minority of Italy) can read and review books. All the books that are part of the project can be found in the school libraries of the area³³. Furthermore, the German speaking minority of Italy offers the web portal³⁴ where digital entertainment material can be downloaded. This is not restricted to reading material, but rather includes audio and video files as well. For the Italian speaking rest of the country, the web portal provides reading lists for adolescents aged 10-14. There seem to be no lists for older youths³⁵.

³² See: <http://www.educomics.org/> (Accessed April 3, 2015).

³³ See: <http://www.lesamol.com/> (Accessed April 3, 2015).

³⁴ See: <http://www.biblio24.it/> (Accessed April 3, 2015).

³⁵ See: <http://www.girolibro.it/> (Accessed April 3, 2015).

5.2 Improving the quality of teaching

To improve the quality of teaching, important aspects need to be considered:

- The quality of preschool
- coherent literacy curricula
- high-quality reading instruction,
- early identification of and support for struggling literacy learners
- highly qualified teachers (cf. Frame of Reference for ELINET Country Reports).

Especially crucial is the quality of teaching and of teachers, as the McKinsey report “How the world best performing school systems come out on top” (McKinsey et al. 2007) states: “The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.” (McKinsey et al. 2007)

5.2.1 Quality of preschool

While early childhood education has long been neglected as a public issue, nowadays early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been recognized as important for “better child well-being and learning outcomes as a foundation for lifelong learning; more equitable child outcomes and reduction of poverty; increased intergenerational social mobility; more female labour market participation; increased fertility rates; and better social and economic development for the society at large” (OECD 2012 *Starting Strong III*, p. 9). In all European countries pre-primary education is an important part of political reflection and action.

The EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy stated:

“Increasing investment in high-quality ECEC is one of the best investments Member States can make in Europe’s future human capital. ‘High quality’ means highly-qualified staff and a curriculum focused on language development through play with an emphasis on language, psychomotor and social development, and emerging literacy skills, building on children’s natural developmental stages.” (High Level Group Report, 2012a, p. 59).

While there is no international or Europe-wide agreed concept of ECEC quality, there is agreement that quality is a complex concept and has different dimensions which are interrelated. In this report we focus on *structural quality* which refers to characteristics of the whole system, e.g. the financing of pre-primary education, the relation of staff to children, regulations for the qualifications and training of the staff, and the design of the curriculum. There are some data concerning structural quality, but there is a lack of research and data about process quality, practices in ECEC institutions, the relation between children and teachers, and what children actually experience in their institutions and programmes.

Annual expenditure on pre-primary education

According to Eurostat (2014, Figure D3), the total public expenditure per child in pre-primary education as a percentage of GDP in Italy is 0.5%. The range is from 0.04% in Turkey and 0.1% in Ireland to 1.01% in Denmark (for an overview of European countries see table D1 in Appendix B)

Ratio of children to teachers in pre-primary school

The ratio of children to teachers in pre-primary schools in Italy is 11.8. The range is from 5.8 in Hungary to 23.1 in Turkey. For the other European countries, OECD (2014, p.324) provides information

about the student/teacher ratio in pre-primary schools (for an overview of European countries see table D2 in Appendix B).

Percentage of males among preschool teachers

No accurate data are available. The proportion of male preschool teachers in Italy is extremely low, well below 5%.

Preschool teachers' qualifications

The minimum required level to become a qualified teacher in Italy is now the Master level (ISCED 5), the length of training is 5 years (European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014, p. 101). Continuing Professional Development is mandatory (Eurostat 2014, pp. 104–105).

Preschool language and literacy curriculum

The design of the kindergarten curriculum is an important aspect of quality. Therefore it is included in this section and not in the next section "Literacy curricula in schools". It also takes into consideration that young children have learning needs that are sometimes different to those of school children. Preschool programmes should focus on developing children's emergent literacy skills through playful experience rather than systematic training in phonics or teaching the alphabet. There is no evidence that systematic instruction of reading in preschool has any benefit for future learning (Suggate 2012).

Fostering the development of emergent literacy skills through playful activities is an important function of pre-school institutions, providing a basis for formal literacy instruction in primary school. We consider the following to be key components: oral language development, including vocabulary learning and grammar, familiarisation with the language of books (e.g. through hearing stories read and told), being engaged and motivated in literacy-related activities, experiencing a literacy-rich environment, developing concepts of print, and language awareness (for more information see the frame text of country reports).

In Italy, preschool curricula are proposed at national level but then interpreted and adapted by regional governments, through the *uffici scolastici regionali* (regional school directorates) and further detailed by local school authorities. These school plans include details on the activities carried out, which usually follow a 'routine' consisting of: play, rest, meals, and children's health care and cleaning. In addition, plans could include activities with the participation of families (e.g. parents and grandparents reading stories). From this perspective, activities aim at helping socialisation and children's development.³⁶

The Nati per Leggere programme provides training for educators (nurseries) and kindergarten teachers in order for them to propose reading activities and support parents in shared reading at home.

Improving early language and literacy screening and training

Literacy competence strongly builds on oral language proficiency, word knowledge, and syntactic knowledge. Measures must be taken by governments and institutions to ensure that children with poor language development (second-language speaking children and those from a low socio-cultural background, as well as others who experience difficulty in learning language) acquire adequate levels

³⁶ See https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Teaching_and_Learning_in_Programmes_for_Children_under_2-3_years (Accessed October 18, 2015).

of oral language in kindergarten, preschool institutions and in school. It should be ensured that at age 4 at the latest all children are diagnosed in their oral language proficiency, and that there are obligatory courses for children falling behind in their acquisition of language competence. The aim should be that all children entering school can speak the language of the school so that they can profit from reading instruction.

In Italy, there are no guidelines for early language and literacy screening and training for nurseries. For kindergarten, the learning objectives for ECEC provision are the following (Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe. 2014: 121):

- personal, emotional and social development;
- language development and communication skills;
- physical development and health education;
- reading literacy;
- numerical and logical reasoning;
- understanding the world
- expressive arts and development of creativity;
- adaptation to school life.

The assessment of children's progress in these areas, as recommended by the Ministry of Education, is based only on observation and does not include any specific screening test (*Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe. 2014: 125*).

Challenge: While the situation is quite satisfactory for children aged 3-6 in terms of both access to and quality of preschool services, the same is not true for the earliest years, where there is a dramatic disparity between both access and quality in the northern centre of the country and the southern regions.

5.2.2 Literacy curricula in schools

Curricula provide a normative framework for teachers and a guideline for their teaching aims, methods, materials and activities. However, one should keep in mind that there is a difference between the intended curriculum, as outlined in official documents, and the implemented curriculum – what actually happens in the schools.

Primary schools curricula

Among the European countries participating in PIRLS 2011 six countries had a national curriculum specifically for reading, namely France, Hungary, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, the Russian Federation, and Sweden (Mullis et al. 2012b, Vol.1, exhibit 5, p. 30).

In Italy, reading is included in an integrated Italian language curriculum that also includes listening and speaking, writing and reflecting on language (Alivernini, Di Leo & Manganelli, 2012). The curriculum includes goals that are specific to reading, which should be achieved by the end of grade 5. These include:

- Read and compare information from different texts to learn about a certain topic and find interesting points about which to speak.
- Search for information in texts of different nature and origin for practical or cognitive purposes, while applying simple techniques to aid comprehension (e.g., highlighting, annotating information, and making maps and diagrams).

- Read a well-known text aloud and, in the case of dialogues, read with other pupils, and learn to speak at the right moment, respecting pauses and varying the tone of one's voice (Alivernini, Di Leo & Manganelli, 2012, p. 369-370).

Reading for pleasure in primary schools

According to PIRLS 2011 Encyclopedia, reading for pleasure is given emphasis in the above mentioned language/reading curriculum (Mullis et al. 2012b, Vol.1, exhibit 9, p. 36)

According to the findings of the project "*Dalle Scuole alla Famiglia*" (From schools to families) carried out in the Friuli Venezia-Giulia Region to improve the skills on reading promotion among pre-primary school teachers, the great majority of teachers include reading for pleasure and telling stories sessions at school. However, after the specific training offered in this respect, most of the teachers recognise that their training and practice can be substantially improved. For example, some teachers are still focusing on reading aimed at literacy development and not at reading for pleasure³⁷.

Contents of literacy curricula

The Eurydice report "Teaching Reading in Europe" offers a broad range of information about the content of reading literacy curricula and official guidelines (European Commission/EACEA/ Eurydice 2011). In order not to duplicate this work only two aspects were addressed in the ELINET country reports whose importance might not yet be acknowledged and therefore might be missing in the literacy curricula and official guidelines: explicit instruction of grapheme-phoneme correspondences (phonics), and reading strategies.

Explicit instruction of grapheme-phoneme correspondences

According to Eurydice (2011) analysis of curriculum documents, a broad range of word-reading and fluency skills are taught at primary level (Grades 1-5), with a relatively strong emphasis on emergent literacy skills (different functions of printed material; awareness that print carries meaning; organisation of written language) and some emphasis on phonics skills (progression in recognising words; enriching vocabulary; linking sounds to letters/naming and sounding letters of the alphabet) and fluency (repeated practice of reading aloud; gradual shift from reading aloud to reading silently; reading various kinds of texts fluently, without mistakes, and with appropriate intonation). The Eurydice report (2011) identifies Italy's curriculum as one which focuses on and then discontinues phonological and metaphonological instruction after the first or middle stage of primary education.

Teaching of reading strategies in primary schools

While literacy instruction in the early years is more focused on code-based skills, in later stages it is important to develop and foster a wide range of comprehension strategies with all children. Explicit teaching of comprehension strategies is effective for improving reading comprehension among readers with different levels of ability. These strategies include:

- Drawing inferences or interpretations while reading text and graphic data
- Summarising text and focusing selectively on the most important information
- Making connections between different parts of a text
- Using background knowledge
- Checking/monitoring own comprehension

³⁷ See: <http://www.csbonlus.org/cosa-facciamo/progetti/dalle-scuole-alla-famiglia>.

- Constructing visual representations
- Pupils reflecting on their own reading process (Eurydice 2011, p. 55).

According to the analysis of steering documents by Eurydice (2011, p.60, Figure 1.4), the following reading strategies are mentioned in literacy curricula at primary level: summarizing text, making connections between parts of a text, and constructing visual representations. Strategies not covered include: drawing inferences, using background knowledge, monitoring own comprehension, pupils reflect on own reading process. This last strategy is rarely mentioned in literacy curricula in European countries (Eurydice 2011), a remarkable result because self-monitoring of comprehension or reflecting on one's own reading process is a very important aspect in reading comprehension.

In 2012, the Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca (MIUR), according to European parliament directive 18.12.2006, issued a norm³⁸ which details the key competences to be acquired at the end of primary school. The norm focuses on competences in mastering of receptive and expressive oral and written language, text comprehension (ability to identify relevant information, infer and relate concepts, understanding logical relations in a text) and production (oral and written texts including ideation language appropriateness), reflective cognition about the use of language. Literacy competences are separated from other language sectors, for example literature or foreign languages.

Literacy curricula in secondary schools

Curricula, according to the Ministry (Ministerial decree 138, 2007, *Regolamento recante norme in materia di adempimento dell'obbligo di istruzione*) are competence-based. Competences include: "to communicate and understand diverse typologies of messages (everyday, literature, technical, scientific) of varying complexity, using different languages (verbal, mathematic, scientific, symbolic, etc.) and support materials (paper, digital, multimedia, etc.) and to be able to describe events, phenomena, principles, concepts, norms, procedures, attitudes, state of mind, emotions) and based on a variety of disciplines. Students must acquire competences in both comprehension (ability to identify relevant information, infer and relate concepts, understanding logical relations in a text) and production (oral and written texts including ideation and language appropriateness)³⁹.

Digital literacy as part of the curriculum for primary and secondary schools

In Italy, digital literacy is implicitly included in curricula, but it is not a separate subject, because other compulsory subjects contain media related competences (Pérez-Tornero, 2014). Moreover, in primary schools, ICT is taught within technology as a subject, and as a general tool for other subjects, or as a tool for specific tasks in other subjects (European Commission, 2013:4).

A number of programmes have been launched to provide support on a national level in Italy. For instance: "LIM" provides Interactive White Boards to promote ICT in education (Pérez-Tornero, 2014). Unfortunately, little information is to be found about the effect of these and similar programmes.

The official steering documents define that students and teachers at all levels must be able to use ICT in all subjects for complementary activities and also in class at secondary education level. Despite this recommendation, there is a high percentage of students who claim to hardly ever apply ICT in lessons (European Commission, 2013: 64). The frequency of use of digital resources is relatively low at the

³⁸ Indicazioni per il curricolo infanzia e primo ciclo, MIUR, Roma, settembre 2012.

³⁹ A full description of the key competences to be acquired at the end of secondary school can be found in: http://archivio.pubblica.istruzione.it/normativa/2007/allegati/all2_dm139new.pdf.

secondary level (European Commission, 2013: 88). Also, Italy shows the lowest percentage of ICT-based classroom activities in the EU (European Commission, 2013: 77). The percentage of students in schools without broadband internet access is below the EU average at all grades.

The *Information Literacy State-of-the-Art Report* states that a lot of effort has been put into developing digital literacy, since the deficiencies in this area became obvious in the 2000s. However, the author also claims that “all this emphasis on computer literacy and internet use reflects important deficiencies Italian students have in searching information, text comprehension and reading literacy” (Ballestra, 2010: 2).

Within the Law 107 (*La buona scuola*) approved in 2015, a national plan for the digital school (Piano nazionale per la scuola digitale) has been established. The plan foresees the introduction of a “digital animation expert” in each school (from primary to secondary) to be identified among the existing teachers and trained.

Challenge/need for action: There is a need to further mainstream reading and writing literacy across the curriculum and to offer content area literacy instruction in all school subjects throughout secondary education, whether academic or vocational, according to the newly issued ministerial guidelines. The promotion of reading for pleasure should become a specific component of teachers’ training and of all school curricula from pre-primary to secondary schools.

5.2.3 Reading Instruction

While most literacy researchers have clear concepts about effective literacy instruction, we do not know much about what is actually going on in classrooms in Italy or other European countries. In order to describe the practice of reading instruction we would need extensive observational studies. However, there are only rare observational studies (Philipp 2014). There is a noteworthy shortage of data on actual reading instruction in school. Only PIRLS offer some data for primary schools, albeit based on self-reports by teachers (PIRLS) which might not be valid and may be biased by social desirability.

In PIRLS 2006, fourth-grade reading teachers reported about instructional materials, strategies and activities. In a latent class analysis Lankes and Carstensen (2007) identified 5 types of instruction:

Type 1: Teacher-directed instruction in the whole class without individual support

Type 2: Individualized child-centred instruction, seldom whole-class instruction

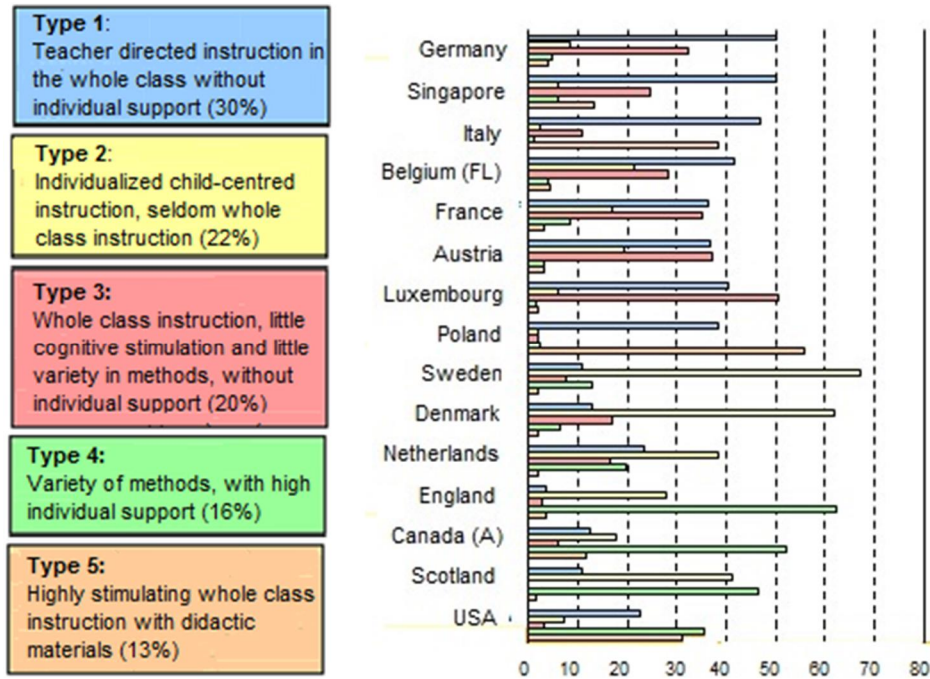
Type 3: Whole-class instruction with little cognitive stimulation and little variety in methods, without individual support

Type 4: Variety of methods with high individual support

Type 5: Highly stimulating whole-class instruction with didactic materials.

There were significant differences between countries concerning these types of instruction (Lankes and Carstensen 2007). Also, the analysis of PIRLS 2011 teacher self-reports revealed differences between the approaches to reading instruction in European countries (Mullis et al. 2012a, Tarelli et al. 2012). PIRLS 2006 data for a latent class analysis (Lankes and Carstensen, 2007) identified in Italy mainly two types of instruction in fourth grade: teacher-directed instruction in the whole class without individual support and highly stimulating whole-class instruction with didactic materials.

Figure 4: Distribution of types of Reading Instruction (PIRLS 2006 data)



Source: Adapted from Lankes & Carstensen 2007

In PIRLS 2011 principals and teachers provided some information on language and reading instruction. Concerning the **instructional time spent on language and reading**, the following results are of interest

In 2011, pupils in Italy spent more hours per year at school (1085) than on average across EU-24 countries (850 hours). Students in Italy spent 274 hours (about 25% of all instructional hours) on instruction in the language of the PIRLS test, compared to an EU-24 average of 241 hours. In Italy, 63 instructional hours per year are spent on reading as part of language, compared with an EU-24 average of 68, though the EU-24 average is itself low relative to, for example, the United States and New Zealand (both 131 hours). Teachers in Italy report allocating less time to teaching reading across the curriculum and in reading classes (137 instructional hours per year) than on average across EU-24 countries: 147 hours (PIRLS 2011, Mullis, Martin, Kennedy et al., 2012, p. 214, Exhibit 8.4). EU averages from PIRLS 2011 database, see ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Table I3).

No comparable data are available for secondary schools.

Activities of teachers to develop student's comprehension skills and to engage them

The proportion of students in Italy whose teachers reported that various comprehension strategies were implemented by students on a 'daily or almost daily' basis were equivalent to or exceeded the corresponding EU-24 averages, with the exception of 'making generalisations or inferences', which was implemented less often in Italy (25% of students implemented it daily) than on average across the EU-24 (37%) (PIRLS 2011). The following are the percentages of students in Grade 4 in Italy and on average across the EU-24 who engage in specified comprehension activities 'every day or almost every day' (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Table I1):

- Locate information within the text: 78.9% (EU-24 = 65.5%)
- Identify main ideas of what they have read: 77.1% (EU-24 = 55.5%)

- Explain or support their understanding of what they have read: 69.6% (EU-24 = 61.6%)
- Compare what they have read with experiences they have had: 39.6% (EU-24 = 34.7%)
- Compare what they have read with other things they have read: 25.2% (EU-24 = (22.4%))
- Make predictions about what will happen next in the text: 26.8% (EU-24 = 22.4%)
- Make generalisations and inferences: 25.0% (EU-24 = 36.5%)
- Describe the style or structure of the text: 43.5% (EU-24 = 22.7%)
- Determine the Author's Perspective or Intention: 37.4% (EU-24 = 21.0%)

Source: PIRLS 2011 database. See Mullis et al. 2012a, Exhibit 8.8, p. 226 for data for 'at least weekly', s. also Table I.1 in Appendix C.

In spite of what teachers reported, the Eurydice (2011) analysis of curriculum documents found that relatively few comprehension strategies were included in official curricula in Italy, and that not all teachers have sufficient knowledge of reading comprehension teaching strategies.

PIRLS also assessed which instructional practices teachers use to engage students in learning (for an overview of responses in other European countries see Table I.2 in Appendix C). PIRLS 2011 demonstrates that students whose teachers used instructional practices to engage students learning in most lessons (items: summarizing the lesson's goals, relating the lesson to students' daily lives, questioning to elicit reasons and explanations, encouraging students to show improvement, praising students for good effort, bringing interesting things to class) had higher scores in reading than those with such practices used in only about half the lessons or less (Mullis et al. 2012a, exh. 8.6, p.220).. Based on a scale summarising frequencies across all six items, 73% of students in Italy were deemed to be taught by teachers who implemented instructional practices to engage learning in "most lessons". The corresponding EU-24 average was 70% (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Table I2).

It is well documented in research studies that explicit teaching of comprehension strategies may improve reading comprehension among readers with different levels of ability. While there are no data available for secondary schools, some PISA data also suggest that there is a need for explicit instruction of reading strategies. As pointed out in the performance section of the Report there are remarkable gaps in reading achievement - equivalent to more than two years of schooling – between students with good knowledge of reading strategies and those who have a limited knowledge of strategies, including meta-cognitive ones. Some PISA data also suggest that there is a need for explicit instruction of reading strategies: there is a gap of 94 score points between students who know which strategies are the most efficient to understand and remember a text (529 score points) and those who have a limited knowledge of that (436 score points); there is also a gap of 94 score points between students who know which strategies are the most efficient to summarize a text (531 score points) and those who have a limited knowledge of that (430 score points).

Challenge: There is the need to improve teachers' knowledge of reading comprehension teaching strategies, including use of textbooks that are designed to promote comprehension skills.

5.2.4 Early identification of and support for struggling literacy learners

Effective assessment tools upon entry to primary school will help teachers identify literacy skills from the very beginning of formal education. Regular formative assessment throughout primary school will ensure that literacy problems do not continue to go unrecognised, and that students receive the support they need through education that matches their learning needs. This should prevent children

leaving school with unrecognized literacy problems (EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy 2012a, p. 67).

Standards as basis of assessment of reading difficulties

Standards of reading achievement allowing teachers, parents and school leaders to understand the rate of progress of learners and to identify individual strengths and needs should be integrated in the curriculum and should be the basis of assessments. The High Level Group pointed out that there is a need to establish minimal standards of literacy achievement (benchmarks) for each grade, and to administer regular tests based on these standards, to allow for identification of struggling readers/writers (EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy 2012a, p. 43).

All EU countries have defined learning objectives in reading to be reached at the end of primary and secondary education cycles. However, only a few Member States have detailed standards (benchmarks) at each grade (school year) which form the basis of assessments allowing for early identification of reading difficulties and subsequent allocation of attention and resources. These standard-based assessments allow teachers and school leaders to judge children's progress and to target additional reading support. In Italy there are national standards for reading (and for writing, speaking and listening, and reflecting on language) for the end of primary schooling (Grade 5). The absence of standards at other grade levels and of a testing culture more generally (see below), suggests that teacher judgements play a key role in the early identification of reading difficulties. In Italy, the key competences, including on reading and writing, to be acquired at the end of primary school have been identified by Ministerial guidelines in 2012 (see above, section on contents of curricula).

Screenings for reading competence to identify struggling readers

Eighty-two percent of students in Italy in PIRLS 2011 were taught by teachers who placed a 'major emphasis' on evaluation of students' ongoing work to monitor students' progress in reading (similar to the EU-24 average of 84%). However, 64% of students in Italy were taught by teachers who placed a similar level of emphasis on classroom tests, compared to an EU-24 average of 21%. Furthermore, only 11% of students in Italy were taught by teachers who placed a major emphasis on national or regional tests, compared with an EU-24 average of 25%. (see Table I8, Appendix C).

There is a State exam at the end of the third year of lower-secondary school. The exam consists of a national written test developed by the Invalsi (National institute for the evaluation of the education system) and of four written tests on the following subjects: Italian, mathematics and rudiments of Science and ICT, and the two studied Community languages. However this regards all students and has not the purpose to identify struggling readers.

In addition, class teachers assess pupils on a daily basis, and summative assessment takes place at the end of each school term. Secondary school students also have a right to a transparent and quick evaluation aimed at starting a self-evaluation process to identify their own strong and weak points and to improve their own performance⁴⁰.

According to the Inter-Ministerial (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health Decree (17/4/2013), concerning early detection in school of struggling readers, the category of BES (*Bisogni Educativi Speciali*, Special Educational Needs) includes all categories of children with difficulties in reading

⁴⁰ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Assessment_in_General_Lower_Secondary_Education (Accessed August 14, 2014).

and/or writing, including disabilities with a neurobiological/neuropsychological basis and difficulties due to socio-cultural disadvantage. Policies for the early identification, and support for all these categories are detailed in section 6.

Number of struggling readers receiving remedial instruction

PIRLS offers some data concerning issues of remedial instruction in primary schools. One question was whether all pupils receive remedial instruction when needed. Based on a question that class teachers answered in PIRLS 2011, it is estimated that 14.4% of students in fourth grade in Italy are considered to be in need of remedial reading instruction. It is also estimated by teachers that 8.9% are receiving remedial reading instruction (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Table K1). Hence, there is a shortfall of 5.5% between those in need and those actually receiving remedial instruction. On average across EU-24 countries, 18.1% of students in Grade 4 are identified by their teachers as being in need of remedial teaching, while 13.3% are receiving such teaching.

In Italy, 15% of students in fourth grade performed at or below the PIRLS low benchmark on overall reading (ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Table A.6). Hence, the percentages of students in Italy in receipt of remedial reading instruction (13.3%) is a little below as the percentage who performed poorly on PIRLS.

Kind of support offered

It is crucial that teachers provide support measures to help struggling readers. European Countries differ widely in their approaches, from in-class support with additional support staff (reading specialists, teaching assistants or other adults) working in the classroom together with a teacher, to out-of-class support where speech therapists or (educational) psychologists offer guidance and support for students with reading difficulties.

According to Liverini, Di Leo and Marganelli (2012), the Law of October 8, 2010 (number 170) provides for specific educational interventions and teaching support for students with dyslexia. The interventions include tutoring, compensatory measures such as alternative means and tools for learning (such as educational technology), and possible exemptions from certain tasks.

Based on teacher responses to a series of questions in PIRLS 2011 (Table 24), 11% of students in Italy are in classrooms where there is access to a teacher aide, compared with an EU-24 average of 13.2%. Fewer than 1% of students in Italy are in classrooms where there is access to an adult/parent volunteer. This is below the corresponding EU-24 average of 2.8%.

Table 24: Percentages of Students in Classrooms with Access to Additional Personnel to Work with Children with Reading Difficulties, Italy and EU-24 Average

Access to...	Italy			EU-24 Average		
	Always	Sometimes	Never	Always	Some-times	Never
Specialised professional	1.0	14.3	84.7	24.9	41.8	33.3
Teacher aide	10.8	32.0	57.3	13.2	33.6	53.2
Adult/parent volunteer	0.2	4.9	94.9	2.8	17.5	79.7

Source: ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Tables K2-K4

According to responses provided by teachers in PIRLS 2011, 32% of students in Italy are in classes where the teacher arranges for students falling behind in reading to work with a specialised professional such as a reading professional (Table 25). The corresponding EU average is higher at 55%. Fifty-five percent of students are in classes whose teachers wait to see if performance improves with maturation – again higher than the corresponding EU-24 average of 37%. Ninety-one percent of students in Italy are taught by teachers who spend more time working on reading individually with a student who falls behind – just above the EU-24 average (90%). Finally, 98% of students in Italy and 97% on average across the EU-24 are taught by teachers who ask parents to provide additional support to a student who falls behind in reading.

Table 25: Percentages of Students in Classrooms Where Teachers Engage in Specified Activities to Support Students Who Begin to Fall Behind in Reading, Italy and EU-24 Average

	Italy (Yes)	EU-24 Average (Yes)
I have students work with a specialised professional	31.8	55.2
I wait to see if performance improves with maturation	55.2	36.6
I spend more time working on reading individually with the student	90.7	90.1
I ask the parents to help the students with reading	97.8	96.9

Source: ELINET PIRLS 2011 Appendix, Tables K5-K8.

Support for struggling readers – a legal right?

As noted above, there are legal rights around the identification and support of students with Special educational needs, which, according to the Ministerial Decree 17/4/2013, includes all categories of children, including those with socio-economic or cultural disadvantage.

There are also legal rights around the identification and support of students with dyslexic difficulties. The position is less clear regarding struggling readers who do not have a diagnosis of dyslexia.

Law 170/2010 recognizes dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthographia and dyscalculia as specific learning disorders (SLD). Subsequent Guidelines (Action Decree 5669 Guidelines) specify educational and didactic measures to support the teaching and learning processes. Schools are also responsible for early detection⁴¹.

Entry requirements for Initial Teacher Education

In Italy – besides the general requirements for entry to tertiary education – there are specific selection criteria for admission to initial teacher education. According to European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, (2013, Fig. A5, p. 32), a third of all European countries (including Finland, Italy, Lithuania and Scotland) use specific selection methods such as satisfactory performance in a specific aptitude test or interviews in which candidates are asked about their motivation for becoming teachers.

⁴¹ See: <http://www.european-agency.org/country-information/italy/national-overview/legal-system> (Accessed August 4, 2014).

The European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2013, Fig. A5, p. 32) provides the following information for Italy:

- Certificate of final examination of upper secondary education
- A (written or oral) examination specifically for admission to teacher education

5.2.5 Level of qualification and length of the required training for primary teachers

Italy requires primary teachers to have a *laurea magistrale* degree which takes five years' study. In ten more European countries – Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, France, Iceland, Portugal, Slovakia and Slovenia – initial education for primary teachers is at master's level and usually takes five years. In recent years, an increase in the minimum length of initial teacher education can be noted for many countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2012, Fig. E2, p. 112).

In Italy, initial teacher training for primary education has been organised at tertiary level since 1998/99, thus the number of teachers with university degrees is gradually increasing (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2012, Fig. E2, p. 112).

More information about reading teachers' formal education is offered by PIRLS 2011 (Mullis et al. 2011, exh. 7.1, p. 188). 4% of fourth grade students have teachers who completed a Postgraduate University Degree, 17% had teachers who completed a Bachelor's Degree or equivalent but not a Postgraduate Degree, 3% had teachers who completed post-secondary education but not a Bachelor's Degree, and 76% had teachers with no further than upper secondary education. The EU-24 average for the last category is 6% (indicating that the level of qualification of teachers of reading in Italy is quite low).

A Ministerial decree (DM 850/2015) foresees a one-year (120 teaching hours) supervised training for all newly employed teachers (pre-primary/kindergarten, primary and secondary) before obtaining the confirmation as teacher. This training includes an initial competence profile and a consequent plan for addressing any weakness identified in the initial assessment.

Teaching practice for prospective teachers of reading: the duration of in-school placement in Initial Teacher Training

The minimum time allotted to in-school placements during ITE in Italy is not stated, since it is within institutional autonomy. There is considerable variation in Europe: for primary teachers, this time ranges from 40 hours in Latvia to 900 hours in Austria (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2011, Fig. 2.6, p. 102).

Length of required training of secondary teachers

Initial Teacher Training has been recently reviewed (Ministerial Decree no. 249/2010). According to this reform, lower and upper secondary teachers must complete a teaching-oriented second-cycle university course (two-year programme corresponding to a master level) within a planned number of available posts and through an admission exam. Training is followed by a one-year traineeship period called "active formative traineeship" (TFA)⁴².

⁴² See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Initial_Education_for_Teachers_Working_in_Early_Childhood_and_School_Education (Accessed April 3, 2015).

The role of literacy expertise in initial teacher Training

According to the information available on Eurypedia, generally, teacher education programmes, at all levels, are aiming at the acquirement of competences on specific subjects, pedagogic, didactic and organisational competences. It is also foreseen the acquisition of competences on languages, because recent reform of the second cycle of education has introduced CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), it means the teaching in a foreign language of a non-linguistic subject) at *licei* and technical institutes. In order to provide teachers with the competences necessary to teach their subject in a foreign language, universities could start courses addressed to qualified teachers with language skills corresponding to the level C1 of the European common framework of references for languages. Courses correspond to at least 60 CFU credits, including at least 300 hours (12 CFU credits) of traineeship (Ministerial Decree no. 6/2012)⁴³. Thus, there is no explicit reference to “content area literacy”.

Important teachers' tasks include a) the assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each individual student, b) selection of appropriate instructional methods and c) instruction in an effective and efficient manner. These topics should therefore be addressed in teacher training.

In PIRLS 2011, primary teachers were asked to indicate the level of emphasis given to a number of topics deemed relevant to teaching literacy in their pre-service teacher education. (Mullis et al. 2012a, exh. 7.2, p. 190). In Italy, 87% of the fourth grade students had reading teachers with an educational emphasis on language, 44% had teachers with an emphasis on pedagogy/ teaching reading, and 21% had teachers with an emphasis on reading. Last two figures are below the corresponding EU-24 means. On average across the EU-24, 74% of the fourth grade students had reading teachers with an educational emphasis on language, 59% had teachers with an emphasis on pedagogy/teaching reading, and 30% had teachers with an emphasis on reading (PIRLS 2011 Database).

Table 26: Percentages of Students Taught by Teachers who Reported each of Several Topics to be Areas of Emphasis during Initial Teacher Education

Topic	Test Language*	Reading Pedagogy	Reading Theory
Italy	87	44	21
EU-24	74	59	30

Source: PIRLS 2011 Database (see Mullis et al., 2011, Exhibit 7.2, p. 190).

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

In Italy, in-service training is considered a right and a professional duty for the full development of school staff⁴⁴.

In Italy, all teachers from pre-primary to secondary schools are entitled to five free days per school year for attending CPD programmes⁴⁵. The recent school reform (Law 107/2015 *La Buona Scuola*) has introduced a 500 euro bonus to be spent every year by teachers in accredited CPD activities.

⁴³ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Initial_Education_for_Teachers_Working_in_Early_Childhood_and_School_Education (Accessed April 3, 2015).

⁴⁴ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Continuing_Professional_Development_for_Teachers_Working_in_Early_Childhood_and_School_Education (Accessed April 3, 2015).

⁴⁵ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Continuing_Professional_Development

The decision making bodies for CPD planning are:

- the Ministry of Education, which establishes the priority objectives for organisation and carrying out of formative evaluations; the distribution of available financial resources in agreement with the criteria established in the labour contract; the role of the different actors, bodies and institutional levels;
- the Regional School Offices (Uffici Scolastici Regionali) which guarantee support to the planning process of schools, and the development of interventions to address territorial peculiarities in order to guarantee equal opportunities;
- the local school or school associations, which must plan training initiatives and prepare the relevant annual programme, according to school needs.

Furthermore, the Teachers' Assembly of every school decides upon the annual planning for CPD programmes that fit the teachers' individual development plans⁴⁶.

The CPD courses are organised according to specific objectives, contents and times. The duration could range from a half-day intervention to courses running over a multi-year time span.

The methods adopted for the educational interventions are various and include lessons, study cases, simulations, various types of exercises, e-learning and others⁴⁷.

Time spent on professional development related to literacy

There is no compulsory continuing professional development (in-service training) for teachers which focuses specifically on literacy development in Italy.

No data are available concerning the participation rate of teachers in literacy-related professional development, with one exemption: in PIRLS 2011, teachers were asked how much time they had spent on reading professional development in the past two years before the study. In Italy, 21% of the students have teachers who spent 16 hours or more (EU-24 average: 18%), 48% had teachers who spent some time but less than 16 hours (EU-24 average 53%), and 30% had teachers who spent no time (EU-24 average 29%) (Mullis et al. 2012a, exh. 7.4, p. 196).

Challenge: Literacy expertise should become a clear standard for teacher education in all grades and subjects for primary and secondary school teachers. Training should cover topics such as the teaching of reading, tackling reading difficulties, assessing pupils' reading skills, and supporting those with persistent difficulties.

Literacy promotion and literacy instruction across the curriculum should be a systematic part of CPD, addressing teachers of all grades and all subjects.

5.2.6 Digital literacy as part of initial teacher education

All initial teacher training courses include the acquisition of digital competences (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2011), such as the capacity of using multimedia languages for representing and communicating knowledge, for using digital contents, and for simulated environments and virtual labs, as foreseen by the Recommendation of the EU Parliament and Council

_for_Teachers_Working_in_Early_Childhood_and_School_Education (Accessed April 3, 2015).

⁴⁶ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Continuing_Professional_Development_for_Teachers_Working_in_Early_Childhood_and_School_Education (Accessed April 3, 2015).

⁴⁷ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Continuing_Professional_Development_for_Teachers_Working_in_Early_Childhood_and_School_Education (Accessed April 3, 2015).

of 18 December 2006⁴⁸. In Italy, the inclusion of digital literacy as part of initial teacher education largely depends on University curricula, which vary across the country. However, the recent National Plan for the Digital School⁴⁹ promotes the incorporation of digital literacy in the curricula

In Italy, curricula for teachers' education are now gradually incorporating digital literacy. School planning for CPD may include digital literacy development, however, this is up to each school district.

Challenge: Fostering digital literacy skills of teachers and students needs a stronger emphasis. Infrastructure as well as teaching methodologies need to be improved country-wide.

5.2.7 Improving the quality of literacy teaching for children and adolescents: Programmes, initiatives and examples

In 2012, the *Ministero dell'Istruzione, Dell'Università e della Ricerca* (MIUR), according to European parliament directive 18.12.2006, issued a norm⁵⁰ which details the key competences, including on reading and writing, to be acquired at the end of primary school. These competences represent the general objectives for planning at school level and for CPD.

A Ministerial decree (DM 850/2015) foresees a one-year (120 teaching hours) supervised training for all newly employed teachers (pre-primary/kindergarten, primary and secondary) before obtaining the confirmation as teacher.

Within the Law 107 (*La buona scuola*) approved in late 2015, a national plan for the digital school (*Piano nazionale per la scuola digitale*) has been established. The plan introduces evaluation teams, including an external evaluator, for assessing the teachers' competencies and quality of work, increases the proportion of teachers who have a permanent contract, which ensures continuity, and supports the introduction of digital technologies.

Within the national regulatory framework, and within the large autonomy devolved at regional (*Uffici Scolastici Regionali*) and local level (*Istituti Comprensivi* which include usually several pre-primary, primary and lower secondary schools) a wide variety of initiatives have been taken to improve the quality of teaching. The *Istituti* are requested to develop and implement their plans based on specific objectives, which are defined at school level within the national regulatory framework and guidelines.

5.3 Increasing Participation, Inclusion and Equity: key issues, policies and programmes

5.3.1 Factors and conditions which affect literacy development and performance

The High Level Group of Experts on Literacy drew attention to persistent gaps in literacy, namely the socio-economic gap, the migrant gap and the gender gap (HLG Final report 2012, pp. 46–50). These gaps derive from the reading literacy studies that repeatedly show unequal distribution of results among groups of children and adolescents (PIRLS, PISA).

The **socio-economic gap** in literacy refers to the fact that children and adolescents from disadvantaged families have lower mean performance in reading than students from more advantaged

⁴⁸ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Initial_Education_for_Teachers_Working_in_Early_Childhood_and_School_Education (Accessed April 3, 2015).

⁴⁹ Piano Nazionale per la Scuola Digitale, Ministero dell'Istruzione, Università e Ricerca, 2015.

⁵⁰ Indicazioni per il curricolo infanzia e primo ciclo, Ministero dell'Istruzione, Università e Ricerca, 2012.

families. However, the degree to which family background relates to the reading literacy performance varies from one country to another even in Europe. Family background measured as parents' educational level and/or occupation or measured as economic, social and cultural status is one of the most important predictors of reading literacy performance (World Bank 2005, Naudeau et al. 2011). Socio-economic background also influences biological risks to children, by determining early exposure to risk factors and increased susceptibility (Jednoróg et al. 2012).

The **migrant gap** refers to unequal distribution of learning outcomes between the native students and immigrant students who in most countries have lower levels of performance in reading than the native students. In many countries the migrant gap is associated with the socio-economic gap but this explains only a part of it, because the migrant gap is also associated with home language differing from the language of instruction at school which increases the risk of low performance in reading (Sylva et al. 2004). It is noteworthy that even language minorities with high status in the society (and above-average socioeconomic background) show below average performance if the language of school is not supported at home, which signals the importance of a good command of the language used at school.

Another alarming gap in reading literacy in many countries is the **gender difference**, which is more vital for adolescents than for children. In all PISA studies, 15-year-old girls outperformed boys in reading in all the European countries, and boys are frequently overrepresented among the low performers. PISA 2009 results showed that these differences are associated with differences in student attitudes and behaviours that are related to gender, i.e. with reading engagement, and not gender as such. Therefore the gender gap is also related to growing up in a family or in a school environment that values reading and learning and considers reading as a meaningful activity.

Besides the socio-economic and cultural factors, there are several conditions that may arouse prenatally or after birth that hamper reading and writing acquisition, such as genetic diseases, congenital anomalies, cognitive impairment and specific learning disabilities.

To achieve fairer and more inclusive participation in literacy learning we need to close these gaps, which already start in early childhood. Although these gaps are present in all countries, their relative importance vary from country to country. In chapter 4 we have seen how these gaps reflect in literacy performance. In the following sections information will be provided on the importance of these gaps and on how current policies are addressing them. More specifically, we will see how policies in Italy are:

- Addressing socio-economic disadvantage, and particularly child poverty
- Ensuring early identification and support for children with special educational needs
- Supporting for migrant children and adolescents whose home language is not the language of school.
- Promoting preschool attendance, especially among disadvantaged children
- Preventing early school leaving
- Addressing the gender gap among adolescents.

In order to describe the socioeconomic and cultural factors that influence emergent literacy, several indicators were used which stem from international surveys, thus providing comparability across Europe (for more information concerning the concepts and indicators see Appendix A).

Gini index

The Gini index is the most commonly used measure of inequality, and represents the income distribution of a nation's residents with values between 0% (maximum equality) and 100% (maximum inequality). In the European countries participating in ELINET the range is from 22.6% in Norway to 35% in Spain (for an overview of European countries see table A1 in Appendix B). With 31.9% Italy is in the middle of the distribution.

Child poverty

An indicator of child poverty is the percentage of children living in a household in which disposable income, when adjusted for family size and composition, is less than 50% of the national median income (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre 2012). At 15.9% Italy is at the upper third of the distribution of all European countries participating in ELINET. The range is from 4.7% in Iceland to 25.5% in Romania (for an overview of European countries see table A2 in Appendix B). At 15.9%, Italy is at the upper third of the distribution for child poverty among European countries participating in ELINET. It is therefore a priority to address child poverty as one of the main factors contributing to early disadvantage including in literacy acquisition.

Mother's education level

The PIRLS 2011 database offers information about mother's level of education referring to ISCED levels. The figures for Italy are presented below. The proportion of mothers with no or very low schooling (only primary education), is in the middle of the distribution, compared with the average figures for the countries participating in PIRLS (shown in parentheses) (for an overview of European countries see table A3 in Appendix B).

- No schooling: 0.5% (0.6%)
- ISCED 1: primary education: 2.7% (5.3%)
- ISCED 2: Lower secondary education: 29.1% (16.7 %)
- ISCED 3: Upper secondary education: 44.2% (36.1%)
- ISCED 4: Post-secondary non-tertiary education: 6.4% (7.1 %)
- ISCED 5B: Tertiary education (first stage) with occupation orientation: 1.4% (9.5%)
- ISCED 5A: Tertiary education (first stage) with academic orientation 13.0% (13.9%)
- BEYOND: 2.3% (10.1%)
- Not applicable: 0.4% (0.9%).

Teenage mothers

According to UNICEF (2001), Italy, with a proportion of teenage mothers of 6.6%, belongs to the lower third of the distribution. The range for the European countries participating in ELINET is from 5.5% in Switzerland to 30.8% in United Kingdom (for an overview of European countries see table A4 in Appendix B).

Single parent

According to Eurostat (2012, Figure A 7), in Italy, the percentage of children living mainly with a single parent is 4.3%. Italy belongs to the lower third of the distribution. The range for the European countries participating in ELINET is from 1.4% in Croatia to 30% in Denmark (for an overview of European countries see table A5 in Appendix B).

Migrant parents and primary language spoken at home different from language used at school

According to PIRLS 2006 (Mullis et al. 2007, Exhibit 3.12 – Students' Parents Born in Country), in Italy, the proportion of children with parents born outside the country (6%) or only one parent born outside the country (8%) remains in the lower third of the distribution.

In PIRLS 2011, 17.8% of students in Grade 4 in Italy reported that they sometimes speak a language other than the test language at home. Corresponding EU-24 averages are broadly similar at 17.3%. According to Alivernini, Di Leo and Manganelli (2012), 9% of students in Italian schools in 2010-11 were non-native students, although one half of students with foreign citizenship enrolled in schools that year had been born in Italy.

Policies against child poverty

The 2015 financial law establishes a fund to complement the income of poor families with children. Local regional governments may provide benefits for poor families as well.

Local authorities provide social services, together with non-governmental organisations or associations in the field. Schools and social care services collaborate in order to identify and manage situations of socio-economic disadvantage and to prevent problems in developmental age. For example, the role of teachers is crucial in identifying suspected situations of neglect, abuse or violence. In these cases, the school should encourage the family to contact social services. Should the family fail to do so, the school can make a referral to the social care service⁵¹. Schools can also create personalised education plans that take the pupil's needs into account, and provide different forms of support (e.g. exemption from some fees)⁵².

The Policy Guidelines (Atto di Indirizzo from November 8, 2011) for 2012 by the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research also underline the importance of equal access. While ensuring every young person gets to take part in education and promoting processes of social mobility especially in disadvantaged areas, it is also seen as crucial to provide effective possibilities of access to labour market (International Bureau of Education, 2012).

Challenge: Among the many socio-economic factors that affect literacy development and performance, child poverty is a priority which still has to be effectively addressed in Italy through redistributive fiscal policies and specific interventions for poor families.

5.3.2 Ensuring early identification and support for children with special educational needs

Not only children from economically, socially or culturally disadvantaged families are "at risk" in their literacy development but also those with conditions that, originating from genetic diseases or arising from diseases and complications during pregnancy, childbirth and the first years of life are associated with developmental, cognitive and sensory disabilities, which frequently imply reading and writing difficulties. Among the conditions that put children at risk of learning disabilities, prematurity, and particularly severe prematurity (gestational age less than 32 weeks), cognitive and sensory disabilities play a major role. According to PERISTAT (2010, Figure 7.11, p.149) the percentage of live births with a birth weight under 2500 grams in Italy was 6.2%. The range is from 3.0% in Iceland to 8.8% in Cyprus

⁵¹ See: <http://www.european-agency.org/country-information/italy/national-overview/identification-of-special-educational-needs> (Accessed August 4, 2014).

⁵² See: <https://www.european-agency.org/country-information/italy/national-overview/special-needs-education-within-the-education-system> (Accessed August 4, 2014).

(for an overview of European countries see table E1 in Appendix B). According to PERISTAT (2010, Figure 7.14, p.155) the percentage of live births with a gestational age <32 weeks was 1.0 % in Italy (with a range from 0.7% in Iceland to 1.4% in Hungary).

According to the *Terzo Rapporto Censis*⁵³ in the school year 2013-2014, 3% of pupils suffered from cognitive, sensory or motor disabilities which require educational support. In Italy, almost all these children are attending public schools from the beginning of kindergarten. They have the right to specific support by adjunctive support teachers. Socio-economic factors and developmental disabilities may also coexist, with consequent even greater difficulties.

In Italy, there is no systematic assessment carried out at pre-primary school level to identify children with language or other development problems at pre-primary school⁵⁴. The absence of standards and of a testing culture suggests that teacher judgements play a key role in the early identification of reading difficulties in pre-primary children. However, children with delays in their language development or with cognitive and communication difficulties are identified by the health professionals in charge of well-child visits and then referred to specialists for diagnosis, treatment and rehabilitation (EURYDICE et al., 2014, p. 109).

Inclusion is greatly supported and all children, including children with disabilities, are taught in regular classes regardless of the severity of their impairment. Since the 1970s, laws in Italy (f. ex. 118/1971) have been supporting integration and educational inclusion of the disabled. At present, Law no. 104 of 1992 is the reference legislation on this matter. It has systematically reorganised all previous rules concerning the rights of handicapped persons. The law 104/92(16) defines the general objectives of the integration of the disabled at school as follows: The aim of the integration at school is the development of the potentials of the handicapped person in learning, communication, relationships and socialisation. The right to education cannot be hindered by learning difficulties or other difficulties deriving from disabilities connected with the handicap⁵⁵.

In Italy, almost all these children are attending public schools from the beginning of kindergarten. They have the right to specific support by adjunctive support teachers. For example 82% of Down children attend kindergarten, and over 97% of them attend primary school⁵⁶.

According to Eurypedia, in Italy, children with special educational needs get support in mainstream Kindergarten. In primary and secondary school, class teachers assess pupils on a daily basis, and summative assessment takes place at the end of each school term. Secondary school students also have a right to a transparent and quick evaluation aimed at starting a self-evaluation process to identify their own strong and weak points and to improve their own performance⁵⁷.

According to the Inter-Ministerial decree (Ministry of Education, University and Research and Ministry of Health Decree 17/4/2013), concerning early detection in school of struggling readers, the category of BES, *Bisogni Educativi Speciali*, Special Educational Needs includes several categories of children: those with difficulties due to socio-cultural disadvantage, including children with a primary language

⁵³ See: www.censis.it.

⁵⁴ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Assessment_in_Programmes_for_Children_over_2-3_years(Accessed August 22, 2014).

⁵⁵ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Educational_Support_and_Guidance (Accessed August 14, 2014).

⁵⁶ See: http://www.censis.it/7?shadow_comunicato_stampa=120959(Accessed August 22, 2014).

⁵⁷ See: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Assessment_in_General_Lower_Secondary_Education (Accessed August 14, 2014).

spoken at home which differs from the school language, and those affected by Specific Learning Disabilities (SLDs) and other developmental diseases and intellectual and communication impairments such as Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorders and other genetic conditions. While children with major problems are detected earlier by the health services, many SLDs, such as dyslexia, can be identified later, generally starting from the second year of primary education. There are multidisciplinary teams that, within the national health system, are in charge of diagnosing the causes of special educational needs, whether they are due to socio-cultural disadvantage, SLDs or other causes, such as pervasive intellectual disabilities or chronic diseases.

The Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) has issued guidelines for the right to education of students with BES, promulgated in July 2011, to help schools support pupils in their education. Inclusion and teaching of different pupils with specific learning disabilities or other cognitive impairment in one class is also ensured by having a support teacher (*insegnante di sostegno*) in the classroom. These teachers serve as a partner to the general education teacher and provide instructional support for all pupils (Gabel & Danforth, 2008). The state, regions and municipalities provide school funding in Italy. The state takes care of pupils with special educational needs by offering 'special funds' to foster teacher training, promote inclusion and improve student outcomes, as well as the use of information and communications technology⁵⁸.

Schools ought to put in place specific pedagogical and didactical measures to guarantee all pupils' academic achievement. Individualised education plans and the option to utilise compensatory tools and dispensatory measures for those with learning disorders are also recommended. Furthermore, in order to facilitate the educational process of pupils with BES, teachers and school principals at all school levels undergo specific in-service training. Training focuses on the early identification of children at risk, teaching methods to be adopted both with the pupil and the whole class, assessment procedures, and guidance. Training activities are organised directly by the MIUR or by schools and may involve universities, research institutes, scientific organisations, associations and local health authorities⁵⁹.

Several programmes have been adopted in various Regions to further implement the rights of children with BES to a fully inclusive and quality education. For example, the project called "I learn this way!" has been adopted in parts of the country and has held workshops for primary and secondary school pupils to help them develop efficient study methods, which especially benefits pupils with dyslexia (Fusi&Mehrnoos, 2013).

Challenge: strengthening remedial support

Once again the main challenge is to ensure, for all Italian children, a quality system of school and health services, able to detect needs timely, and provide specific support to all pupils. There are large parts of the country where this is not guaranteed. It might be useful to administer periodical tests to pupils in order to identify as early as possible learning difficulties and to respond with focused instruction tailored to the individual needs.

⁵⁸ See: <http://www.european-agency.org/country-information/italy/national-overview/financing> (Accessed August 4, 2014).

⁵⁹ See: <http://www.european-agency.org/country-information/italy/national-overview/financing> (Accessed August 4, 2014).

5.3.3 Promoting preschool attendance, especially among disadvantaged children

Italy has a high preschool enrolment rate. According to European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat (2014, Figure C1 p.62), with an enrolment rate at age 4 of 96.8%, Italy reaches the European benchmark for at least 95% of children between age 4 and the start of compulsory education participating in ECEC. The OECD Family Database (2014) offers more differentiated figures of participation rates at age 3, 4 and 5. According to 2010 statistical data, the participation rate is 97.3% for 5-year-olds, 96.8% for 4-year-olds, and 93.0% for 3-year-olds (OECD 2014) (for an overview of European countries see table C2 in Appendix B).

The benefits of attending preschool institutions have been proven in many studies. The duration of attendance is associated with greater academic improvement (Mullis et al. 2012b).

There is a positive relationship between the length of preschool education attendance in Italy and the average reading score in grade 4, as PIRLS 2011 data show (Mullis et al. 2012a, Exhibit 4.7, p. 128). These are the figures for Italy:

- 3 years and more: 75% (average reading score 549)
- Between 1 and 3 years: 23% (average reading score 530)
- 1 year or less: 1%
- Did not attend: no data are available

(For an overview of European countries s. table C3 in Appendix B).

Pre-primary education is free from 3 years of age. However, families pay a small contribution, from which low-income households are exempted, for transport and canteen services⁶⁰. Italy belongs to the half of the European countries where the 3-5 years period of ECEC is free.

Prior to 3 years a network of day-care centres covers from 4 to 40% of children 0-3 years, with large disparities across Regions. The average public provision of such services, which is around 15%, is far from the European benchmark of 33%, due to very low provision in southern Regions.

Challenge: The existence of a gap in the provision of day-care services for children aged 0-3, and of large disparities across regions, highlights the provision of day care for children 0 to 3, in particular for southern regions, as a national priority.

5.3.4 Support for migrant children and adolescents whose home language is not the language of school

Another key factor affecting literacy development is primary language spoken at home different from language used at school. In PIRLS 2011, 17.8% of students in Grade 4 in Italy reported that they sometimes speak a language other than the test language at home, while 2.9% reported that they never did so. Corresponding EU-24 averages are broadly similar at 17.3% and 3.0% respectively. According to Alivernini, Di Leo and Manganelli (2012), 9% of students in Italian schools in 2010-11 were non-native students, although one half of students with foreign citizenship enrolled in schools that year had been born in Italy.

The law allows schools in Italy to exercise their autonomy to employ specific individualised interventions for groups of students to help them learn the Italian language. Where possible, schools are expected to use their professional resources to provide additional intensive Italian language

⁶⁰ See: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Italy:Overview> (accessed August 21, 2014).

instruction through specific projects, including additional teaching activities to enrich educational offerings” (Alivernini, Di Leo and Manganelli, 2012,p. 272).

In February 2006, the Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca (MIUR) has issued specific guidelines on the inclusion of migrant pupils. The guidelines contain a regulatory framework, as well as some suggestions concerning school organisation and teaching. For example, each class can host a maximum of 30% migrant pupils, as a higher proportion may hinder effective inclusion. Recently arrived migrants should be assessed on their language knowledge during the initial period of their integration at local schools. Based on the assessment, schools then organise Italian classes according to the pupils' capacities⁶¹.

Personalised education plans can be created, too, if socio-economic, cultural or linguistic disadvantages affect learning remarkably. Schools can also set up language laboratories, either individually or in groups, to facilitate language learning. Migrant pupils are the direct responsibility of curricular teachers. However, local authorities, as well as associations and organisations working at local level, often provide cultural and linguistic mediators to help teachers and school staff communicate with pupils and their families⁶². Foreign students attend common classes, according to their age. Language gaps between immigrant and native students are addressed through special Italian classes⁶³.

The Ministerial Directive 27.12.2012 for pupils with special educational needs (BES, *Bisogni Educativi Speciali*) includes the area of linguistic and cultural disadvantage and asks all schools to create a technical group for school integration and develop individualized plans for each pupil with BES. The Inter-Ministerial (Ministry of Education, University and Research and Ministry of Health) Decree 17/4/2013, concerning early detection in school of struggling readers, includes children with primary language spoken at home which differs from the school language among BES, *Bisogni Educativi Speciali*, and consequently these children are entitled to specific support if needed.

Challenge: The existence of an important gap in literacy competence among children depending on the language spoken at home should lead to giving priority to: a) early intervention in families of migrant children to promote the home learning environment with specific focus on supporting emergent literacy development in the host country language; b) support for early attendance at day care for migrant children; c) full implementation of the ministerial directive on special educational needs.

5.3.5 Preventing early school leaving

One important, but certainly not sufficient, precondition for raising performance levels in literacy for adolescents is literacy provision during secondary schooling, as functional literacy is mainly acquired in school-based learning. Thus, the provision of secondary education for all adolescents and the prevention of early school leaving may serve as indicators for the opportunities of adolescents to improve their literacy performance especially related to basic functional literacy.

⁶¹ See: <http://www.european-agency.org/country-information/italy/national-overview/identification-of-special-educational-needs> (Accessed August 4, 2014).

⁶² See: <http://www.european-agency.org/country-information/italy/national-overview/identification-of-special-educational-needs> (Accessed August 4, 2014).

⁶³ See: <https://www.european-agency.org/country-information/italy/national-overview/special-needs-education-within-the-education-system> (Accessed August 4, 2014).

According to Eurostat, in Italy, the rate of early school leavers was 17% in 2013, down from 17.6% a year before. The target value of the early school leaving (ESL) rate set for 2020 is 15.0-16.0%. The duration of compulsory education in Italy is 10 years. Children start school at the age of 6; compulsory schooling ends at 16 years (European Commission, 2014: 2).

As concerns students (ISCED 1-6) aged 15-24 years, in Italy, 56.4% were in some form of education in 2011, which was below the average EU-27 value of 61.9%. This indicator further decreased by 2012, when it stood at 56.0%. The percentage of 18-year olds in education was 79.1% in 2011, which situated Italy close to the EU- 27 average (80.7%). By 2012, this indicator however dropped to 78.5% (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2012).

Schools and social care services are asked to collaborate in the identification and management situations of socio-economic disadvantage and in preventing problems in developmental age, which are among the main causes of early school leaving. For example, the role of teachers is crucial in identifying suspected situations of neglect, abuse or violence, which is also a known cause of language problems and school failure. In these cases, the school should encourage the family to contact social services. Should the family fail to do so, the school can make a referral to the social care service⁶⁴.

In Italy, a national plan on prevention of dropping out of education was published in 2011, following the guidelines on lifelong learning issued in 2009. The plan, which has been further defined at regional level for full implementation, aims to shift current guidance services from an informative role into a proper career and guidance counselling function. It also provides for the activation of 'local integrated services', ensuring the appropriate reception, needs analysis and response to each individual case (European Commission, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2013a: 30).

The Consortium of the Tuscany Professional Associated Institutes and other Italian and European partners implemented the "Stay@School" project, financed by the European Commission in the framework of the Lifelong Learning Programme (Leonardo – Transfer of Innovation). Its main objective⁶⁵ is to promote, develop and foster the use of the School Inclusion Portal⁶⁶ and therefore to provide school teachers with the necessary skills and competences to prevent early school leaving. The specific objectives of the project are to provide school teachers with a wide collection of reviews of publications on the issue of early school leaving, promote a transnational dialogue between teachers based on sharing their experiences on the issue, provide school teachers with a selection of training initiatives in Europe addressing the early school leaving phenomenon, involve teachers in a blended learning course aiming at developing teachers' competences to identify students at risk of early school leaving, effectively communicate and deal with them, and assess their learning results.

5.3.6 Addressing the gender gap among adolescents

Data provided by PISA 2012 show that in Italy, the difference in Reading performance between boys (471 score points) and girls (510 score points) is 39 score points (table 17). Gender-specific approaches are lacking and are urgently needed, keeping in mind that, in absence of a specific gender approach, reading animation programs for all adolescents may even increase the existing gap.

⁶⁴See: <http://www.european-agency.org/country-information/italy/national-overview/identification-of-special-educational-needs> (Accessed August 4, 2014).

⁶⁵ See: <http://stayatschool.pixel-online.org/info/> (Accessed April 3, 2015).

⁶⁶ See: <http://schoolinclusion.pixel-online.org/index.php> (Accessed April 3, 2015).

Challenge: In order to prevent early school leaving, collaboration needs to be established among different sectors (education, social services) through intersectoral agreements. A gender approach is urgently needed to tackle the increasing gender gap in literacy performance and to address early school leaving which predominantly affects male adolescents.

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