

Italy Gets the Boot

Italy's communist government has bulldozed its education system into collectivist management.

By Alessandra Nucci

The Italian school system has always been highly centralized, with everything depending on the education ministry in Rome: curricula, exams, schedules, marking system, hiring system, salaries, etc.

But now, after five years of rule by a communist-run education ministry, the system has become a collectivist pyramid of interlocking bodies, the ground floor of which is made up of schools that have been conned into thinking they are 'autonomous.'

The 1996 elections witnessed the debut at the helm of government of the ex-Italian Communist Party, now called the Democratic Party of the Left, along with a splinter group from the same body, the Communist Re-foundation, in a coalition with smaller Catholic and 'lay' parties.

The new government handed the Ministry of Education to a lifelong communist, Luigi Berlinguer, who in perfect collectivist style is said to have taken with him to the ministry a cadre of party members, 30-strong, to help him carry out school reform.

Leftists had always been highly influential in schools, but now the overhauling of the Italian school system was to begin in earnest.

Under the banner of 'finally' granting autonomy to individual schools, the Ministry began to spew rules, circulars, ordinances, and decrees detailing exactly in what way the schools were to behave autonomously. Since 1996:

- Remedial exams have been abolished;
- Minimum and maximum school sizes have been established;
- Marks for conduct have been banned;
- School curricula are in the process of being shortened by one year;
- The minimum school-leaving age has gone from 14 to 15;
- History syllabi have been brutally overhauled;

- The format of final exams has been completely changed;
- Marking systems are now different;
- Students have been given a charter of rights they never asked for;
- Headmasters have been reassigned; and
- Bureaucracy has skyrocketed.

These are just the main changes. The list goes on, defining changes that have been handed down from Rome in suitably incomprehensible language and formats. If the Ministry were waging a war on its teachers, one might assume that its tactics are to confuse, tire out and conquer.

The major renovation is still in the works, however. It will redeploy teachers within and among schools on the basis of their formal education. As of next September (unless the April elections overturn the status quo), there will be new mechanisms to control the assignment of teachers to subjects, classes, and schools.

Teachers with high school teaching diplomas who used to work in elementary schools will be juggled together with teachers with college degrees who used to teach in middle and secondary schools.

As well, ministerial dictates on 'sizing' have schools constantly banding together, splitting up, and then being joined with different schools. Arbitrary rules and unexpected loopholes govern which teachers and which principals lose their posts and which get to stay on.

Meanwhile, the minimum school-leaving age has risen from 14 to 15, but the government refuses to accreditate the private vocational schools which many 14-year-old graduates from middle school attend.

In order to placate the thousands of teachers who stand to lose their jobs at these schools, the government has offered them jobs in the state-run schools instead.

As if the present amount of confusion and bureaucracy were not enough, Parliament is currently debating a bill to establish up to 24 different types of committees at each school. The idea is that teachers will be represented on most of these bodies, but on none of them will they form the majority.

Outside the schools, the offices handling the paperwork between Rome and the provinces have also been 'reformed,' renamed, and assigned to different tasks.

Within and around these offices, advisory committees and councils have burgeoned, while the real authority has actually been shifted to other committees and officials, all pyramiding up to the masters in Rome who benignly oversee all this newborn autonomy.

With the next election two months away and trailing at the polls, the government has recently announced more changes.

No longer will aural testing be required. Geography is to become the study of 'frames of human societies.' A new subject, civic education, will be studied from grade 1 on. Math is to become simpler and more practical, based on buying and selling or exchanging currency. Literature will now include songs, fairy tales, and legends.

The general thrust is to jumble together categories and events, simplify and dumb down testing, and abolish complex and abstract studies which develop critical thinking.

The desired outcome appears to be the moulding of docile homo fabers who will replace homo sapiens and be pliable tools which can be easily bent to serve the interests of 'society.'

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