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Primary school and primary school teacher education in Italy

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ITALY

Simone Seitz

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Abstract

This article provides an insight into the development and distinctive features of Italy's primary school system and explores the historical and political context of primary school teacher education. Building on this foundation, the article analyses current university curricula and academic discourses surrounding the teaching profession. The qualification system for primary school teachers in Italy is examined in depth, with a focus on two key aspects. Firstly, the single-phase qualification structure is discussed, reflecting upon how it interweaves different types of knowledge in student teacher qualification processes. Secondly, the article explores Italy's well-developed and mandatory inclusion-specific qualification for all primary school student teachers. Finally, the article addresses current challenges in primary school teacher education in Italy, emphasizing the value of international perspectives in shaping future developments in the field.

Keywords: Italy, Teacher Education, Primary School, Professionalisation, Inclusion

1 Introduction

Pathways to a primary school teaching qualification vary significantly across countries (Hargreaves, 2000), partly due to differing developments in the academisation of the primary school teaching profession, which is still not established at university level in all European countries (e.g., Austria; Soukup-Altrichter, 2020). Within Europe, a gap exists between international policy recommendations for primary schooling and primary school-related teacher education and the limited prioritisation of the primary education sector in most national education budgets (Bokdam & van den Ende, 2014). Moreover,

discussions on education policy and European comparisons of teacher education tend to focus primarily on secondary education (Casale et al., 2021; Eurydice, 2021).

At an international level, however, primary school teacher education currently faces various crucial challenges, particularly the demands of teaching in a rapidly digitalising world shaped by geopolitical instability and ecological crises in the Anthropocene. These challenges coincide with growing neoliberal tendencies and trends towards accountability, which goes hand in hand with an increasing standardisation of university study programmes (Skerritt, 2022; Bronzini & Spina, 2018, p. 84). Additionally, increasing emphasis is placed on equipping teachers with the skills needed for inclusive education, sustainability, and reducing social inequalities, as outlined in the 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2015). However, these international challenges and trends regarding teacher professionalism encounter diverse national traditions and standards in (primary) teacher education, as well as variation in structure of education systems, so that reform concerns and international programmes are specifically recontextualised here (Gewirtz et al., 2009) and transformed into study programmes at universities (e.g., specific courses focussing on education for sustainability). Based on these assumptions, this article examines the structures and challenges of primary school teacher education in Italy.

Since academic discourses on teacher professionalisation, the professionalism of primary school teachers and teacher education structures reflect underlying normative and cultural influences (Scott, 2014), this study considers Italy's educational framework in relation to its historical and political context. The analysis explores university curricula and academic perspectives on the teaching profession, followed by an in-depth examination of the primary school teacher qualification system, with a focus on two key aspects: the single-phase qualification model, which integrates different types of professional knowledge throughout the qualification process, and the mandatory inclusion-specific qualification required for all primary school student teachers.

2 Primary School in the Italian Educational System

In Italy, public education is currently mandatory for children between the ages of six and sixteen. Compulsory schooling may also take the form of attending a pre-vocational school after completing eight years of education. It is free of charge for all resident children, regardless of nationality. The total government expenditure on education is 4.1 % of the gross domestic product, a relatively low percentage compared to other European countries (Eurostat, 2022).

Kindergartens (in Italian: *scuole dell'infanzia*) cater to children aged three to six and are part of the educational system, although attendance is not compulsory.

Primary education (in Italian: *scuola primaria*) begins at the age of six and lasts for five years, with children typically completing primary school by the age of eleven but also attending the subsequent three-year lower secondary school (in Italian: *scuola media*) without tracking (Marsili et al., 2021). The primary school system, like the broader educational framework, is inclusive and does not operate a special school system. Only some primary schools, the majority of which are in northern Italy, offer both morning and afternoon sessions (in Italian: *tempo pieno*; Catarsi, 2004; Ferrero, 2023a).

The education system of Italy is organized centrally while at the same time individual schools in Italy have a high degree of autonomy in management, particularly in staff deployment and certain curricular aspects (Campione, 2013) counterbalanced by a limited autonomy of teachers through accountability and constant evaluation of schools (Bronzini & Spida, 2018, p. 84). Within this framework schools are required to develop a 'three-year educational programme' (in Italian: *piano triennale dell'offerta formativa*), which outlines their pedagogical principles as well as structural and curricular decisions (Seitz et al., 2025). The incorporation of aspects related to inclusive education is mandatory (Eurydice, 2022). The national curriculum, structured in a spiral format from primary to lower secondary school, is adapted to the specific circumstances of each school (Allemann-Ghionda, 2013).

The historical development of primary education in Italy is characterised by constant changes, many reforms, complex political and cultural influences and significant regional disparities (Bronzini & Spina, 2018, p. 84). The first national decree on education, issued in 1859, placed the school system in the newly founded nation state under public administration (Polenghi, 2021) with the local authorities assuming financial responsibility for primary schools which led to significant regional differences (Schneider, 1999, p. 36). However, compulsory schooling was initially limited to only the first two (later three) years of a four-year primary education, which explains why the state education system did not lead to a significant increase in the general level of education, but to a perpetuation of social inequities (Schneider, 1999, p. 36). Existing lyceums and grammar schools remained elitist institutions. Conceptually, they were clearly influenced by the French education system, reflecting the primacy of humanistic education, while primary education was largely modelled on the Austrian-Habsburg approach (Polenghi, 2019). One influential teaching method introduced in Milan's first teacher training programs was the *metodo normale* (normal method), which structured knowledge into systematic tables to enhance teaching effectiveness (Polenghi, 2009; Pruneri, 2023, p. 109).

At the turn of the 20th century, and in the wake of the industrial revolution, compulsory schooling was extended to children aged six to twelve, and the state assumed financial responsibility for primary schools (Schneider, 1999,

p. 37). This period saw an intensive political debate on the question of comprehensive schooling (without tracking) at the lower secondary level. However, the prevailing view was that education should primarily serve the recruitment of the social elite rather than promote social mobility (Schneider, 1999, p. 37). The economic crisis and the First World War meant the issue faded into the background.

The brief period between the end of the First World War (1918) and the rise of fascism (1922) in Italy prevented progressive education from fully establishing itself, unlike in other countries. Instead, a positivist and scientific approach to education dominated (Allemann-Ghionda, 2020). Although Maria Montessori gained international recognition, her educational methods were short-lived in Italy. Developed within the *case dei bambini* (children's houses), first established in 1907 in Rome, Montessori's method was initially embraced by the fascist regime (De Giorgi et al., 2021). The kindergartens and schools she founded, however, were later shut down in 1936.

During the fascist era (1922-1945), the entire school system underwent a major reorganisation. Paramilitary drills and patriotic rituals in and outside of school were integral to youth indoctrination. Named after the philosopher and then-Minister for Education, Giovanni Gentile, the 'Gentile reform' of 1923 was influential (Ostenc, 1981). The reform emphasized children's spirituality and artistic spontaneity in primary education. Art and religious instruction, simplified as a form of philosophy, were prioritised within the curriculum (Allemann-Ghionda, 2000, p. 55). Although compulsory schooling was extended to age fourteen under international pressure, access to different types of lower secondary and secondary schools remained restricted through the introduction of entrance examinations and Latin as compulsory subject (Schneider, 1999). Gentile's philosophy that theory and practice represented different worlds that should not intersect, legitimised the establishment of such a selective education system (Allemann-Ghionda, 2000, p. 57). This approach in turn reinforced the separation between 'higher' and 'lower' social functions. The structural division of school types into different sections with extremely differing curricula from lower secondary level epitomised a static society and perpetuated social immobility (Allemann-Ghionda, 2000, p. 57).

After the Second World War, the Italian constitution of 1948 formally established the right to education, with a strong emphasis on equal access and social justice:

It shall be the duty of the Republic to remove those obstacles of an economic or social nature which constrain the freedom and equality of citizens, thereby impeding the full development of the human person and the effective participation" (Italian Constitution, Art. 3; translated by Simone Seitz).

Cementing that right they declared:

Schools are open to everyone” and “primary education, given for at least eight years, is compulsory and free of tuition” (Italian Constitution, Art. 34; translated by Simone Seitz).

In an effort to clearly distinguish itself from the fascist ideals of the past, Italy drew inspiration, among others, from John Dewey’s democratic education theories (Dewey, 1916/2011; Allemann-Ghionda, 2000). The introduction of a new subject entitled ‘moral and civil education’ (*educazione morale e civile*) aimed to change the thinking and spirit of the new generation in a free society. For example, each class was to hold elections and through this practice, realize self-determination. Shortly after, however, the subject was abolished in 1955, as part of broader primary curriculum revision seeking to restore previous practices.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Italy had undergone a definitive transformation from a primarily agricultural country to an industrial country and the population’s literacy rate, which had been low until then, was catching up, with disparities between the north and south (Schneider, 1999, p. 57). Until the early 1960s students needed to pass an entrance exam and study Latin in order to progress from primary to lower secondary school (*scuola media*), which in turn determined later access to upper secondary schools (*licei*) and to university education (Ambrosoli, 1982). Therefore, many children, and in particular those with a lower socio-economic background, pursued vocational training at lower secondary school (*scuola di avviamento al lavoro*) and were thus excluded from further access to higher education. Others without the entrance examination entered the workforce directly. The end of primary school was therefore a pivotal point in a child’s life in terms of their later social status. This system reinforced social inequalities and was widely criticized (Schneider, 1998, p. 40). In response, the *scuola media unica* reform of 1962 introduced a compulsory, non-tracked lower secondary school for all students (Rugio & Scarangelo, 1967, p. 351).

At a conceptual level, it was not until the later reforms of the 1960s that many ideas of progressive education were embraced more broadly. In particular the works of Dewey from the 1930s, which were published in Italy at the end of the 1940s, now had a significant influence (Striani, 2022). Dewey’s theoretical foundations and ideas on democratic education (1916/2011) as well as his insights into the relationship between theory and practice in learning and experience were especially impactful (Dewey, 1938).

In this context, the critical ‘Letter to a Teacher’ (*Lettera a una professoressa*, Milani, 1967) emerged as a collective work by the students of the Barbiana School, inspired by their teacher. This letter denounced the shortcomings and

inequities within the education system and had a profound effect on public discourse (Ferrero, 2023b). Linked pedagogical approaches were nourished by a growing educational movement (in Italian: *Movimento di Cooperazione Educativa*) promoting explorative learning, collaboration, and participation, clearly reflecting the influence of progressive education. Additionally, the Reggio Emilia educational approach pioneered by Loris Malaguzzi and an engaged group of kindergarten educators remains influential today (Malaguzzi, 1994; Munari, 1996; Hall et al., 2010). This approach includes ideas of child-centeredness, situation-orientation, self-expression and strategies like explorative learning in ateliers, learning in projects and documentation. These principles were later partially integrated into primary teacher education and inclusion-related training (Canevaro & de Anna, 2010).

In the wake of the democratic movements of 1968 and the anti-psychiatry movement (Basaglia, 1968), in 1977 special schools / classes were legally abolished in Italy. It was mandated that mainstream schools assume responsibility for the education of all children and develop inclusive education strategies (Devecchi et al., 2012; Canevaro et al., 2021; Marsili et al., 2021). Various reforms promoting open and democratic schooling were introduced in the 1980s, alongside growing demands for greater educational equity (Pacchi & Ranci, 2017; Ferrero, 2023b). For example, extended learning opportunities and all-day-schooling were strongly promoted, emphasising the development of children's personalities, fostering participation and advancing democratic education (Damiano, 2003, p. 244; Baur, 2005, p. 74). Additionally, teamwork was structurally reinforced through the introduction of class teams and numerical grading in primary schools was abolished for the first time (though it was reinstated between 1994 and 2020 and again in 2025). In the following decades, the implementation of these reforms in practice was increasingly weakened by various directives, limitations in teacher professionalization, and restricted resources (Catarsi, 2004; Triani, 2018). The ratification of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) in Italy in 2009 received relatively little attention (Ferri, 2017), particularly compared to the almost simultaneous introduction of national standardised assessments in 2006. Since then, INVALSI – the National Institute for the Evaluation of the School System – has implemented these assessments in various subjects in primary schools. Primary school curricula apply to all children. Since 1992, children diagnosed with 'Special Educational Needs' have received an individual education plan. The plan is intended to serve as a bridge between individualization and commonality in primary education. It is developed collaboratively by the class teaching team, with the involvement of the family and moderated by school leaders (Chiappetta Cajola, 2007; Ianes & Demo, 2021, p. 47). Although inclusion-specific resources are allocated to school classes, their approval is

based on the individual right to education and depends on the labelling of the respective child. There are three distinct classifications for so-called 'Special Educational Needs' (*bisogni educativi speciali*): 'disability' (Law 104/1992), 'specific learning disorder' (Law 170/2010) and 'socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural disadvantage' (Ministerial Directive, 27 December 2012). The first two categories are overseen by the health system. Regarding the third type of category which is decided on at the level of school, while this categorisation allows for differentiated pedagogical strategies and the right of the child to (reduced) individual learning goals, it does not come with additional resources. The right-based but essentialist approach underlying these categorical distinctions leads to ambivalence as over time, this increasing differentiation has led to a growing proportion of students receiving individualised education plans in relation to the overall student population, this way reinforcing restrictive notions of normality (Ianes et al., 2020, p. 252). In particular, the third category – 'cultural, linguistic and socio-economic disadvantages' – has been criticised for its compensatory approach, reflecting hegemonic ideas of normality, which risk perpetuating and exacerbating educational inequities (Seitz et al., 2024). By framing structural inequities as individual problems, this classification shifts the burden onto the child. Consequently, while inclusive education aims to focus on all students, this framework simultaneously positions some children outside conventional learning norms. As a further result, the full potential of inclusive pedagogy for enhancing teaching quality may remain underutilized, as non-differentiated teaching is implicitly upheld as the standard. This, in turn, raises important questions about teacher professionalism in inclusive education.

3 Primary School Teacher Education in Italy

The first non-academic form of teacher education for the primary level, known as the 'normal school' (*Scuola Caponormale*) was established in Milan in 1788 under the influence of the Habsburg Empire (Polenghi, 2021, p. 20). These early institutes trained teachers and introduced standardised teaching methods (such as the tabular method) to new entrants into the profession. They were accessible to 14-year-olds (either after lower secondary school, or, in some cases, after primary school alone) and lasted only two or three years, focusing on education and related disciplines. Later, a specific type of upper secondary school (*istituto magistrale*) combined a secondary school leaving certificate (without access to higher education) with a teaching qualification for primary schools. For a long time, this type of qualification provided a crucial opportunity for girls from poor families to receive further education and enter the workforce. It is therefore not surprising that at the beginning of the

20th century, over 90 % of students in these teacher training programs were female (Polenghi, 2012, p. 141), though women were paid up to one-third less than their male colleagues well into the 20th century.

Teacher qualifications for gymnasiums (*licei*) were completely separate from this system and were obtained through a specialised course of study for graduates of subject-related university degree programmes. This system operated under the assumption that subject-specific knowledge inherently included the competence to teach the subject. Consequently, the restricted access to higher education for large sections of the population which reinforced elitism has been mirrored in the form of differently recognised qualifications of teaching staff. Conversely, pedagogical knowledge was primarily associated with the primary school teaching profession and considered less valuable than subject-related knowledge. The idea that secondary school teachers did not require pedagogical knowledge remained a persistent prejudice for long (Polenghi, 2012, p. 145).

During the Fascist era, following Gentile's philosophy, all practical aspects of primary school teacher qualification were abolished, and the study of child developmental psychology and its implications for teaching was abandoned. This was based on the conviction that humanistic education would professionalize teachers and that pedagogy was merely a technical skill (Alleman-Ghionda, 2000).

In post-war Italy teacher qualification structures were reorganized. An internship was reintroduced in 1952 in the *istituto magistrale*, which was subsequently converted into a four-year upper secondary school. Additionally, aspects of progressive education and child development theory were incorporated into the curriculum (Alleman-Ghionda, 2000, p. 59).

With the nationwide introduction of an inclusive education system in 1977 across all levels of education and the closure of all special education institutions, the question of specific qualifications for inclusive classrooms became pressing. Many teachers felt inadequately qualified for inclusive practices. Initially, specialised qualifications were introduced for 'support teachers', who were expected to share whole-class duties with general class teachers, co-design curricula and co-teach (Borgonovi & Ciletti, 2018). However, these teachers have been only assigned if one or more students in the class has been identified as having 'special educational needs' (see above).

Since 1984, teachers at primary school level have been supposed to own a university degree (Schneider, 1999, p. 54). In 1995, faculties of education were transformed into faculties of educational sciences at universities. However, it was not until the late 20th century that the Ministry of Education introduced a university degree programme to certify pre-primary and primary teachers (for kindergartens with children aged three to six and primary schools) (*Ministero*

dell'Università e della Ricerca Scientifica e Tecnologica, 1998). Initially, this was a four-year degree course. Until 2000, graduates of the *istituto magistrale* (roughly 18 years old) were legally permitted to teach in pre-primary and primary school without any additional qualification. Consequently, a significant portion of non-academic personnel have remained in schools. However, since 2001 all pre-primary and primary teachers have been required to complete a university degree programme (Rosati, 2021).

The current Italian university education system is regulated under the Ministry of Education, University and Research (*Ministerio dell'Università e della Ricerca*), which means that teacher-qualifying degree programmes follow standardised curricula approved at the national level. Between 2000 and 2010, the first four-year university degree course was introduced for both prospective pre-primary and primary teachers, with a shared curriculum for the first two years. By the fourth year, students specialized in either pre-primary or primary education and graduated with the corresponding degree. Since 1999, courses on inclusive education have been standardised into a university course requiring an additional year of study for primary school teaching graduates (and secondary school diploma graduates).

In 2010, university degree programmes for pre-primary and primary teachers extended to a 300-credit programme nationwide (Ministry of Education, University and Research [*Ministero dell'istruzione, dell'università e della ricerca*], 2010). Since then, students pursuing pre-primary or primary teaching follow the same curriculum and obtain a degree certifying them to teach at both levels under a nationally regulated university framework (Rosati, 2021). Admission to the current Primary Education university study programme, which takes five years to complete, requires a high school diploma and passing an entry exam. Graduation requirements include a final thesis and an internship report, which are necessary for certification. The Master's degree programmes are aimed at the progressive acquisition of skills both specific to pre-school and primary school teachers. However, qualification pathways for secondary school teachers remain entirely separate and fragmented (Mincu, 2018). Since 2010, qualification for inclusive education has become a mandatory component of the qualification for primary school teachers which will be explained in detail in section 4.2, accounting for 31 credit points (Ministry of Education, University and Research, 2010).

Table 1: Italian School System and Related Teacher Qualifications

Age	School system			Grade	Related teacher qualification		
18	Upper secondary school (<i>liceo</i>)	Technical secondary school (<i>istituto tecnico</i>)	Vocational secondary school (<i>istituto professionale</i>)	13	Secondary school teacher: 300-credit subject-related Bachelor & Master's + 60-credit education / pedagogy programme		
17				12			
16				11			
15				10			
14				9			
13	Lower secondary school (<i>scuola media</i>)			8			
12				7			
11				6			
10	Primary school (<i>scuola primaria</i>)					5	Primary and pre-primary teacher: 300-credit Master's degree programme
9						4	
8						3	
7					2		
6					1		
5	Pre-primary education (<i>scuola dell'infanzia</i>)						
4							
3							

The university curriculum for pre-primary and primary school teachers (in Italian: *Corso di laurea magistrale in Scienze della formazione primaria*) is nationally regulated and standardised with some scope for modification (Ministry of Education, University and Research, 2010). The 300-credit workload is structured as follows:

- Core Studies: pedagogy, general didactics and inclusive education (28 credits), psychology, sociology and anthropology (total of 78 credits),
- Subject-Specific Studies: mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, Italian language and literature, English language, history, geography, physical education, arts, music, children's literature (135 credits),
- Inclusive Didactics and Education (31 credits),
- Laboratories, English language, educational technology, final exam (32 credits),
- Compulsory Internship (24 credits, approximately 600 hours starting from the second year).

A distinctive feature of Italian primary education degree programmes is the *laboratori pedagogico-didattici* (pedagogical-didactic workshops) which are typically conducted in smaller groups and will be explained closer in section 4.1 (Ministry of Education, University and Research, 2010, p. 18; Rosati, 2021). After graduation, teachers must complete an induction phase lasting one to two years after being recruited by a school and are supported by a mentor. Teachers can also attend an additional course worth 60 credits in inclusive education based on national standards (Ministry of Education, University and Research, 2010). These specialised ‘support teachers’ (*insegnanti di sostegno*), a term which has been the object of criticism, are expected to develop specific competencies in inclusive teaching, psychology, social learning and collaboration with families (Devecchi et al., 2012). They are part of the class team but only assigned to classrooms if at least one child is considered to have individual ‘Special Educational Needs’ (Law 104/1992; Law 170/2010). The complexities of primary school teachers’ professional roles in inclusive education will be further explored in the next section.

4 Features of Primary School Teacher Education in Italy

From an international perspective, Italy accredited an academic qualification for pre-primary and primary school teachers relatively late (2001). As a result, ongoing issues regarding the professionalism and professionalisation of primary school teachers continue to shape their qualifications, as outlined below. Two key characteristics define current teacher education for the elementary and primary levels at Italian universities:

- a) The single-phase qualification integrates substantial practical components within the university curriculum. Students must complete internships in both kindergarten and primary school during the five years which are interlinked with the university courses. Within this structure students are required to cover competencies, skills, and topics relevant to both primary and early childhood education, thus offering graduates the opportunity to work in both primary schools and kindergartens.
- b) The mandatory qualification in inclusive education and pedagogy for all prospective pre-primary and primary school teachers strongly reflects Italy’s inclusive education system. Unlike in other systems, where they are considered very specific skills, in Italy, inclusion-related knowledge and competencies form a standard part of every primary school teacher’s profile.

Both of these aspects are explored further from an international perspective below.

4.1 Single-Phase Qualification

In the Italian system, practical components are spread across the five-year programme, with student teachers coming into contact with educational institutions from their second year. This structure of the single-phase programme presents both opportunities and challenges (Hascher & Winkler, 2017). It offers a way to integrate and relate different types of professional knowledge, which could be fruitful for further research (Neuweg, 2011; Rothland, 2020). On one hand it indicates types of research-oriented learning at university to be established in collaboration with local schools, raising the question of the extent to which this potential is utilised for professionalisation in terms of a scientifically reflective habitus (Helsper, 2018).

Following on from this, professionalisation can be promoted when knowledge acquired at university is applied to specific case situations – such as experiences gained in internships – and critically reflected upon to shape pedagogical orientations (Weyland, 2019; Schüssler et al., 2016; Seitz & Hamacher, 2024). In this respect, a clear theoretical model for the professionalisation of primary school teachers within the Italian single-phase structure remains a desideratum (Mincu & Romiti, 2022).

A distinctive feature of Italian teacher education is the inclusion of pedagogical-didactical laboratories (*laboratori pedagogico-didattici*), which are an important part of university curricula. These laboratories are designed to provide students with hands-on experience in applying theoretical knowledge (Ministry of Education, University and Research 2010, p. 18). Therefore, they play a key role for the mentioned relating of different types of professional knowledge. Laboratories function similarly to seminars but emphasise exploratory learning (Rosati, 2021), which is why they can be seen as open meaningful opportunities for research-oriented learning. The concept of laboratories is influenced by Dewey's concept of learning as an experience situated in social contexts as outlined above (Dewey, 1938) and associated with exploration and discovery. In the referenced literature, the laboratories are seen as a model for learning environments in primary school, offering opportunities to be conceptualised as places where project-oriented learning activities are (co-) designed by student teachers and realised and researched during internships at schools and kindergartens (Rosati, 2021).

Since teacher professionalisation requires the ability to reconstruct pedagogical and didactic experiences through theory-driven reflection, these laboratories play a crucial role. This means that students reflect on their knowledge acquisition through practical experience in semester-long placements or substitute teaching positions at primary schools (Seitz & Hamacher, 2024). They encounter requirements for professional socialisation that are shaped by the respective school cultures and must be placed in a critical relationship to the

knowledge acquired at university. Hence, a specific challenge for university teaching lies in balancing the students' ability to connect knowledge to – critically reflected – experiences at primary schools and kindergartens in a productive way. Due to the relatively late academisation of primary school teacher education on the one hand and the current shortage of qualified teachers on the other (Magni, 2024), prospective primary school teachers may encounter colleagues in practical phases with little or no formal university education. In individual cases, this can override the students' approach to the practical field and requires specific reflection at the university as well as communication with schools.

4.2 Mandatory Qualification for Inclusive Education

Internationally developed programmes for the professionalisation of teachers in inclusive education (Forlin, 2010) are reflected in various forms within national discourses on teacher education (Eruydice, 2023, p. 75-82). In Italy, as indicated by the inclusive education system, it is an educational goal for every primary school teacher to think and act inclusively (Lazzari & Balduzzi, 2014). Consequently, inclusive education is supposed to be integrated across all study subjects within university courses. Inclusion-related curricular components must be taken by all students as a compulsory part of the study programme worth 28 credits, to be studied in the field of general pedagogy and inclusive education, and 31 credits on specific aspects of inclusive pedagogy, inclusive education and disability (Ministero dell'istruzione, dell'università e della ricerca, 2010, p. 22-23). Additionally, there is a specialisation for 'support teachers' (*insegnanti di sostegno*), a one-year, university-run further education programme which is primarily requested by teachers already in employment (Devecchi et al., 2012). This qualification focuses on social learning, group building and inclusive pedagogy as well as professional collaboration and consulting, supplemented by modules addressing specific special education issues such as dealing with autism spectrum disorder.

From an international perspective, Italy's strong focus on inclusive education for primary school teachers is undoubtedly a strength of the degree programme (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2011). Unlike in many other countries, crucial aspects relevant to inclusive education, such as the design of inclusive pedagogy and the embedding of individualisation in the overall pedagogical-didactic concept of primary education, are cornerstones of the qualification of all primary school teachers and are not outsourced to related specialised professions (European Agency of Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2019; Eurydice, 2021) which is why it is not a surprise that inclusive education is firmly established and various studies have showed teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusion (Ianes et al., 2020).

However, this clear structure of primary school teacher qualifications for inclusive education is accompanied by challenges regarding the concrete aspects of teachers' inclusion-related professionalism. In particular, the structurally unclear role of support teachers, who are responsible for the whole class yet assigned based on individual cases, challenges the necessary, continuous development of inclusion-related quality in schools (Ciletti, 2014). It leads to confusion over the teachers' roles which can result in uncertainty of action for those involved and may hinder complex types of collaboration in class-teams. Combined with a partly insufficient recognition of support teachers it is therefore not surprising that the quality requirements for collaboration and co-teaching are often unmet (Demo et al., 2021; Ciletti, 2024, p. 741). However, collaboration of teachers seems to be an overarching issue in professionalised teaching in Italy (Bronzini & Spina, 2018, p. 91-92; Mincu & Romiti, 2022, p. 292). As inclusive education is a key issue in teacher education for primary schools in the Italian inclusive education system, these challenges need to be addressed in future considerations on primary school teachers' professionalization.

5 Perspectives

The reflections on the features of primary school teacher education in Italy highlight both the potential for high-quality inclusive education as outlined in Agenda 2030 (United Nations, 2015) but also make clear that the late academisation of teachers in Italy is still a meaningful issue. The profession of teacher, which is mainly taken up by women (Argentin, 2018, p. 97), especially at the primary school level, is perceived by many teachers as having little recognition and primary school teachers continue to earn less than their colleagues in secondary education (Bronzini & Spida, 2018, p. 90). Additionally, like many other European countries, Italy faces a shortage of qualified teachers, resulting in many teachers without formal qualifications working on yearly fixed-term contracts (Bronzini & Spida, 2018, p. 89).

However, in principle, the Italian discourse does not fundamentally question the academisation of pre-primary and primary school teacher qualifications or the single-phase approach (Magni, 2019). The structure of a five-year Master's degree programme, in place since the 2010/11 academic year, is generally seen in the national context as a progressive step toward enhancing the qualification of educational specialists for both kindergarten and primary school (Lazzari & Balduzzi, 2014). Nevertheless, the national standards for curricula seem to contribute to the formation of a school-like structure in the degree programme. Students typically enter university with a clear career path in

mind, attending courses specifically designed for student teachers, which may hinder the development of broader, interest-driven university studies. The standardised national curriculum reinforces this way students' expectations of a study course that is directly related to the professional field. This can make it more challenging to implement research-related components in the degree programme, for example, because research methodology is not explicitly included in the ministerially prescribed curriculum. As a result, graduates rarely transition (directly) into the academic world at the level of a doctoral thesis. There is also a lack of specific research on the professionalisation and professionalism of primary school teachers in Italy (Capperucci & Piccioli, 2015).

Summarizing and tracing the international perspective, it can be said that the task of professionalisation of primary school teachers in relation to the global challenges of high-quality education geared towards sustainability, in the case of Italy, is met with a qualification structure that is equipped with specific potential with regard to inclusion-related professionalisation, the development of a professional image that integrates aspects of primary school pedagogy and early education and the interweaving of theory- and practice-related professionalisation components into a leading one.

At the same time, the work of teachers in Italy seems to be increasingly dominated by administrative demands, bureaucracy, and accountability which may detract them partly from the core of the professional tasks and motivations and is accompanied by specific performance-related subjectivization demands not only on students but also on teachers (Gerwitz et al., 2021; Skerritt, 2021, p. 10).

On the one hand, this could weaken the profession-related requirement for teachers to act pedagogically in uncertainty and adopt a scientifically reflective habitus (Helsper, 2018). On the other hand, this clear focus on output and accountability could go hand in hand with a marginalisation of democratic education based on values like social justice and educational justice in schools, as Wilkins et al. (2021, p. 41) recently noted. Given the features of the Italian primary school teacher education system, this is a relevant area for further research and in view of the current global challenges, this would be a critical point that should be monitored more closely.

Overall, this indicates the specific potential of further, internationally comparative, primary level-related professionalisation research which has so far left a desideratum and which the present volume could possibly inspire us to fill.

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