



Fondazione  
*per la*  
Scuola

# RESEARCH FRAMEWORK



This document was first written in 2023 on the basis of interviews with more than 30 internal and external stakeholders of Fondazione per la Scuola and the Compagnia di San Paolo Group. Their contributions were invaluable to the development of this work. The document was updated in December 2025.

## WHO WE ARE

Fondazione per la Scuola is an **instrumental body of [Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation](#)** and acts as a connector between public and private players within the educational community.

Fondazione per la Scuola promotes **inclusive and high-quality education at primary and secondary levels** through the development of research initiatives and projects aimed at supporting the school and out-of-school education systems in addressing major societal challenges, including ecological, digital, and intercultural transitions.

The mission of Fondazione per la Scuola is twofold:

- INCLUSION** It places the individual at the centre, promoting well-being and educational success for all, while acknowledging the complexity of transitions from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to adulthood, within a lifelong learning perspective.
- INNOVATION** It supports innovation, understood both as the promotion of innovative teaching methods for the development of disciplinary and socio-emotional skills, and as the renewal of processes related to school autonomy and governance.

Fondazione per la Scuola is a **training\* and research institution†** recognised by the Italian Ministry of Education. It works in collaboration with universities and research centres at national and international levels to foster innovation in the education system through research activities, evidence-informed educational design, and contributions to the development of education policies.

## WHERE WE OPERATE

A comparative international analysis of a selection of key indicators of Italy's education system in relation to other EU countries‡ highlights an educational context marked by **persistent educational inequalities**, reflected in disparities in social equity and access to learning opportunities. Although the overall picture shows gradual improvement compared to previous years, Italy still falls below the targets set at the European level for several key indicators of inclusive and high-quality education.

The table below summarises Italy's position with respect to major European targets and selected structural indicators of the education system.

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\* Pursuant to Directive 170/2016..

† Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers of 8 July 2019, Official Gazette of 14 September 2019.

‡ For example, the European Commission publishes the [Education and Training Monitor](#) every year, providing an analysis of education and training systems across Europe. Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development publishes [Education at a Glance](#), which offers comparative data on the structure, financing, and performance of education systems in different countries.

EU TARGETS (2025)*	2030 TARGET	ITALY		UE	
		2015	2024	2015	2024
Low achievement in digital skills among learners in the eighth grade of compulsory education	< 15%	63,0%	46,0%	-	43,0%
Low achievement among 15-year-olds in:					
Reading	< 15%	21,0%	21,4%	20%	26,2%
Mathematics	< 15%	23,3%	29,6%	22,2%	29,5%
Science	< 15%	23,2%	23,9%	21,1%	24,2%
Early leavers from education and training (ages 18–24)	< 9 %	14,7%	9,8%	11%	9,4%
Exposure of upper secondary VET graduates to work-based learning	≥ 60 % (2025)	31,8%	24,7%	60,3%	65,2%
Tertiary educational attainment (ages 25–34)	≥ 45 %	25,2%	31,6%	36,5%	44,1%
OTHER INDICATORS (2024)*		2013	2023	2013	2023
NEET rate (young people aged 15–29 neither in employment nor in education and training)		26,0%	16,1%	11,2%	16,1%
Equity indicator (percentage points)		-	19,2%	-	24,1%
Investment in education					
Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP		4,1%	4,1%	4,9%	4,7%
Public expenditure on education as a percentage of total public expenditure		8%	7,2%	9,9%	9,5%
Share of teachers aged 55 and over (ISCED levels 1–3)		38,6%	36,4%	23,4%	24,8%

\* The indicators in the first part of the table refer to the most recent available edition of the *Education and Training Monitor* (2025 edition, with time series updated to 2024). The “Other indicators” are drawn from the *Education and Training Monitor 2024* edition and from harmonised historical series provided by Eurostat.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from the *Education and Training Monitor* (2025 and 2024 editions).

From the perspective of **early leaving from education and training**, Italy is recording a significant improvement and a gradual convergence towards the EU average<sup>§</sup>. However, the phenomenon continues to display marked inequalities, with lower rates among young people born in Italy and higher rates among those born in other EU countries and, especially, outside the EU. These patterns are accompanied by persistent gender gaps to the disadvantage of boys<sup>\*\*</sup>. Taken together, these differences confirm the structural and multidimensional nature of early school leaving and the need for targeted policies and interventions.

Despite a high degree of equity in access, the Italian education system produces **uneven outcomes in the acquisition of basic skills**. The most recent data point to a decline in mathematics performance and stagnation in reading and science, with substantial gaps linked to migratory background, gender, and socio-economic context, which in some cases reach 20–30 percentage points<sup>††</sup>.

Within this framework, the high incidence of **NEETs** is also noteworthy. This is consistent with the picture emerging from structural indicators of the education system and can be interpreted as an outcome indicator of educational trajectories and of the difficulties young people face in transitioning from school to the labour market.

<sup>§</sup> European Commission (2025). *Education and Training Monitor*.

<sup>\*\*</sup> European Commission (2024). *Education and Training Monitor*.

<sup>††</sup> European Commission (2025). *Addressing underachievement in literacy, mathematics and science. Policy changes in European school education since 2020*.

Alongside comparisons with EU averages, **significant differences emerge across regions and types of schools**. These disparities go beyond the traditional North–South divide and outline a more articulated geography of inequalities, developing also along a horizontal dimension. Investments and programmes launched in recent years, such as *Agenda Sud* and *Agenda Nord*, respond to the urgency of reducing these gaps, while at the same time highlighting the need for interventions capable of addressing territorial complexity and the non-linear nature of educational inequalities.

Within this context, INVALSI data (2025) show, for example, that Italian language skills at Grade 2 of primary school in Northern Italy are in some cases below the national average, also in connection with the growing presence of students with a migratory background. The increase in the share of classes including refugee students—up by 22 percentage points compared to 2018—confirms an **increasingly intercultural and stratified school context**<sup>##</sup>.

Inequalities are also evident in the field of **digital skills**. Despite improvements recorded since 2018, in 2024 a significant proportion of students still display low levels of digital competence, placing Italy well above the European target threshold of 15% and revealing persistent territorial gaps<sup>§§</sup>. In this regard, the introduction of an INVALSI assessment of digital skills in the 2024/2025 school year for sample classes in the second year of upper secondary education represents an important step forward, while also underscoring the need to strengthen research, evaluation, and training pathways in this area<sup>\*\*\*</sup>.

Similarly, the Italian Law No. 22 of 19 February 2025<sup>†††</sup> has reinforced attention to the development of **non-cognitive and transversal skills** within school pathways, in line with a well-established international debate and with evidence produced, among others, by the OECD Survey on Social and Emotional Skills<sup>†††</sup>.

Overall, the Italian education system can rely on a **strong pedagogical tradition** and on **numerous experimental and innovative initiatives** which, if supported and scaled up, could generate a significant impact on improving equity and quality in education. These potentials, however, unfold in a context marked by ongoing **demographic decline** and shrinking student cohorts—dynamics that affect the organisation of educational provision and learning opportunities, particularly in more fragile territories.

Within this framework, Fondazione per la Scuola promotes actions aimed at tackling school dropout in both its explicit and implicit dimensions, and at reducing educational inequalities of a geographical, social, gender-related, and migratory-background nature. The research projects activated seek to provide empirically grounded tools to support educational policies and practices, strengthening the **role of research as a lever for guidance and of change** within the education system, in line with the European approach to quality investment in education and training<sup>§§§</sup>.

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<sup>##</sup> OECD (2025). [Results from TALIS 2024: Italy](#).

<sup>§§</sup> IEA (2024). [An international perspective on digital literacy: Results from ICILS 2023](#).

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> INVALSI (2025). [Rapporto INVALSI 2025](#).

<sup>†††</sup> Law 19 February 2025, n. 22 - *Introduzione dello sviluppo delle competenze non cognitive e trasversali nei percorsi scolastici di ogni ordine e grado, nei Centri provinciali per l'istruzione degli adulti (CPIA) e nei percorsi di istruzione e formazione professionale*.

<sup>†††</sup> OECD (2019–2024). [Survey on Social and Emotional Skills \(SSES\)](#).

<sup>§§§</sup> European Commission (2022). [Investing in our future: quality investment in education and training](#).

## WHAT WE DO

Through its Research Unit, Fondazione per la Scuola operates as a centre of expertise on schooling and, at the same time, positions itself as a learning organisation that evolves on the basis of results and available evidence. This entails:

- ▶ Conduct rigorous evaluation of projects and interventions implemented across different territorial contexts.
- ▶ Invest in applied research in the educational, pedagogical, social, and psychological fields.
- ▶ Engage in a dialogue with schools, promoting the uptake of the most recent scientific evidence.
- ▶ Enhance the contribution of research to educational practices and policymaking.

## OUR RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The Research Unit of Fondazione per la Scuola studies, analyses, and promotes experimental initiatives focused on the skills, methods, and tools of an authentic school\*\*\*\*. At the intersection of inclusion and innovation, this represents its overarching thematic framework:



### THE SCHOOL OF YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW

What is needed for schools to be authentic—able to draw on their history, engage with the world around them, and support the development of the intelligences required by today's and tomorrow's society—while ensuring that no one is left behind?

In line with the most recent European-level policies, the aim is to anticipate, understand, and support schools in their **major directions of change**, so that they become:

- EFFECTIVE** In terms of learning outcomes and skills development.
- EFFICIENT** In terms of the best possible use of human, financial, and other resources.
- EQUITABLE** In terms of ensuring the substantive right of all individuals to access educational services.

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\*\*\*\* The concept of an “authentic school” has its roots in constructivist theory and in the work of educational theorists and instructional designers such as Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. For more information see: Donovan, M. S., Bransford, J. D., & Pellegrino, J. W. (1999). *How People Learn: Bridging Research and Practice*. Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences.

The Research Unit of Fondazione per la Scuola focuses on **three main research areas**, each encompassing a range of themes that are highly relevant to schools today and in the future:



## COMPETENCES

Research on the key competences for lifelong learning, understood as the set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for personal fulfilment and development, employability, social inclusion, and active citizenship. These range from basic competences—such as functional literacy, mathematical and scientific competence—to transversal competences, including digital and entrepreneurial skills, and extend to socio-emotional and citizenship competences. They develop within a lifelong learning perspective, from early childhood through adulthood, across formal, non-formal, and informal learning processes<sup>†††</sup>.



## METHODS

Research on teaching and learning methods that foster active learner participation, make learning authentic by linking it to real-world issues, problems, and applications, value diversity, and enable the activation of multiple intelligences. Examples include learning by doing, project-based learning, peer education, and universal design for learning. Students are actively engaged, teaching is interdisciplinary, and methodologies take into account contextual characteristics and the diversity of actors involved



## TOOLS

Research on tools that, when used effectively, can support inclusive and innovative teaching practices. Digital devices, the internal and external school environment, and a range of planning, assessment, and self-assessment tools represent key resources available to teachers to enhance and enrich learning pathways. Among these, the collection, management, and intelligent use of data on the education system—at both macro and micro levels—constitute a fundamental element for understanding baseline conditions and for delivering personalised learning opportunities.

Intellectual independence, originality of approach, and scientific rigour are applied across the following **strands of activity**:

<b>DESK RESEARCH</b>	Collection, systematisation, and harmonisation of existing data and information. Production of aggregated reports and evidence syntheses to support the design of new initiatives and projects.
<b>APPLIED RESEARCH</b>	Design and implementation of applied research projects.
<b>EVALUATION RESEARCH</b>	Oversight and guidance of monitoring and evaluation processes, including impact evaluation.
<b>FORESIGHT</b>	Anticipation of emerging trends, experimental initiatives, and future research directions.

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<sup>††††</sup> European Commission (2019). [Key competences for lifelong learning](#).

The Research Unit of Fondazione per la Scuola operates within a **strongly international framework**. Europe is its main arena for learning from effective practices and for building new partnerships. National and international contexts provide spaces for comparison, strategic orientation, and collaboration. At the same time, the Foundation's local territory serves as a living laboratory where research and experimental initiatives are developed, tested, and—when successful—scaled up..

From a **methodological perspective**, the Research Unit adopts an approach that is:

### PARTICIPATORY

By prioritising the involvement of relevant stakeholders, at least in the phases of research design and validation of results.

### INTERDISCIPLINARY

By promoting the integration of knowledge and methods drawn from different disciplines.

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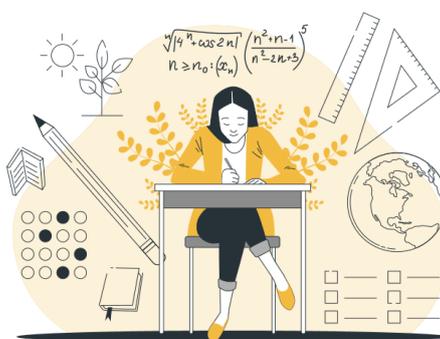
### TRANSDISCIPLINARY

When research actively involves non-academic stakeholders (participatory) and integrates knowledge and methods across disciplines (interdisciplinary), it becomes transdisciplinary. This approach seeks to bridge scientific rigour and social relevance, thereby increasing the impact of research outcomes.

Given the complexity of educational phenomena, the Research Unit of Fondazione per la Scuola adopts a **mixed-methods approach** that combines quantitative and qualitative research methods. The plurality of perspectives offered by this approach allows for a deeper understanding of the research context and the collection of diverse—and therefore inherently more comprehensive—data, and is associated with greater credibility, reliability, and integrity of findings. This research design strategy overcomes the limitations of qualitative and quantitative research when used separately as the sole means of investigating a phenomenon, and enhances the capacity to explore complex mechanisms, such as those characterising the education system in its broader sense.

### MIXED-METHODS APPROACH

Combining the two types of data means benefiting from the detailed, contextualised insights of qualitative data and the generalisable, externally valid insights of quantitative data (Bryman, 2006)<sup>###</sup>.



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<sup>###</sup> 'Bryman A. (2006). Integrating quantitative and qualitative research: how is it done? Qualitative Research, 6.



## OUR PUBLICATION SERIES

Fondazione per la Scuola and its Research Unit are committed to the regular publication of volumes that bring together the results of studies, analyses, and research in the fields of education and teaching.

 **il Mulino**

**Collana editoriale**

COLLANA DELLA FONDAZIONE PER LA SCUOLA – IL MULINO

Our publication series, published by Il Mulino, aims to highlight the most significant developments in the debate on schooling by following changes and transformations in the education sector. The series gives voice to **findings and evidence from studies and research** conducted within the Foundation, as well as from nationally and internationally recognised institutions.

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