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Investing in the Future: Young People Are the Greatest Resource We Have

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Public education systems are vast institutions that work to a time horizon far longer than the average political cycle. With public funds scarce and political attention limited, education's key role in bringing about wellbeing, social justice, and sustainability is often neglected. We spoke to Lorenzo Fioramonti, former Italian minister of education, universities, and research, about the challenges of reforming education systems and why ecology should be at the heart of learning in the 21st century.

Green European Journal: In 2019, Italy made the headlines for being the first country to introduce sustainability education as a subject into the school curriculum. You were minister of education at the time. Can you tell us more? What has happened since?

Lorenzo Fioramonti: When I became a cabinet minister, I was asked to reintroduce civic education into schools; this had been discontinued for 15 years. I proposed that it be changed to education on sustainability. I have always been convinced of the need to teach sustainable development, but I also believe in the practical rather than passive teaching of the subject. In 2019, one hour a week of education on sustainable development was introduced, during which students work on sustainable citizenship projects, take part in activities in their local area, and learn about the circular economy, from the school's energy balance to understanding the interaction between social dynamics and pollution.

Changing the curriculum is always a complex operation, so I was happy with an hour a week to start with. However, after I resigned as minister, the initiative floundered. Although schools have introduced this hour, there is a lack of leadership from the ministry and no detailed guidelines or specific teacher training course, so many schools just do what they can. To some extent, this is emblematic of the dilemma our country faces: the government changes every year and there is this very Italian culture of office holders feeling they should undo the work of those who came before. Change is seldom brought about without continuity and leadership.

You resigned after the government failed to provide the level of public funding for research and education that you deemed necessary. Can you tell us about your decision?

In our election manifesto, we had promised a very serious and innovative programme for schools and universities that started from the idea of reversing two decades of cuts. But almost immediately, promises began to be broken. As a university professor lent out to politics out of a sense of public duty, I found myself a minister of the schools I love and

absolutely without the means to achieve what I had promised.

Both privately and in public, I pointed out that our election promises were not getting the attention they needed. I hoped that the then-head of government would reassess the situation. However, this did not happen and so I resigned, also to be at peace with myself.

Education and research in today's politics are considered second-tier issues, so much so that politicians who want to progress in their careers are careful not to be ministers of education, universities, and research. Human capital is the true energy resource of a country, and it is developed in schools. The minister of research and education is the minister responsible for building the future of the country.

The pandemic shook education systems around the world. What was the impact in Italy? Can any positive legacy be found from the experience?

Overall, I think it went pretty badly. Some schools may have managed quite well, but too many children fell out of the system. The pandemic hit a generation hard and caused significant psychological damage. However, we can learn from our mistakes.

First, we discovered that we only knew how to teach lessons in the traditional way, and that we used technology as if it were a substitute for face-to-face lessons. To be effective, technologies need to be adapted to the teaching model, which is not the case at the moment.

Second, we understood how difficult it is to manage a school system composed of large institutions full of students, what I call the "shopping malls of education". The trend during recent decades has been precisely that: of closing small schools and concentrating masses of students in huge comprehensive institutions that do not work, especially from the teaching point of view.

I hope that the pandemic has shown how important it is to go back to neighbourhood, town, and village schools: a network of small schools that are interconnected and more easily manageable, employ innovative teaching methods, and could even offer some community education programmes.

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As minister, you expressed a desire to put the climate and the environment at the centre of education and public research. Can ecology provide this direction for our education systems?

There is no alternative to making ecology and sustainable development the compass of our education and research systems. The great challenges in the history of humanity have always had an influence on what, and how, we teach. We need only think of the diffusion of the liberal arts, as they are known in English- speaking countries, and how they emerged from the great challenges of the Enlightenment period: human rights, individual freedom, and the abolition of the ancien régimes. The liberal arts became the basis for modernity

and cultural growth.

Today, the existential challenge of our times is ensuring sustainable development that can safeguard human life on this planet. It is above all a challenge that new generations will face. How should schools and teachers respond? Education needs to take sustainable development as its starting point and re-examine the world of school and our educational model, piece by piece.

What would that mean in practice?

I have always said that sustainable development should become a thread running through all subjects, and this is dependent on the introduction of a transdisciplinary approach in schools.

For example, today we still teach history as a succession of dates. However, this approach does not teach an understanding of the underlying phenomena that have given rise to societies over time. Otherwise, how can you understand why France developed in a different way to Germany, or why some civilisations have disappeared, while others have not? We stop studying the ancient Egyptians as if their civilisation simply disappeared. What is missing is the historical importance of the interaction between society and territory. Students need to understand that societies develop in a certain way because of their environmental contexts.

This is history as the great innovative historians have studied it, but it is very different from the notional approach found in schools. Even subjects such as literature can be understood better if we are aware of the interactions between territorial and environmental cultures. If you study the Romantic poetry of Giacomo Leopardi divorced from its geographical context, can you really understand it?

Your background is in wellbeing economics. What is education’s role in human wellbeing and quality of life?

More than oil, gold, or money in the bank, the true wealth of a country is its human capital. The vision of a country becoming wealthy and prosperous with an under-educated population is outdated. It is no coincidence that the economies that fare better are not the ones with raw materials but rather those with grey matter.

For an economy based on wellbeing, investment in schools, education, and research is investment in excellence. Following this logic, wealth would be better calculated by measuring how cultured a population is and how capable it is of innovation. This human capital should form the basis of a new GDP unrelated to how many cars are produced. Measuring prosperity in those terms is an approach that would be best left to the past. Today’s economies are economies of knowledge and innovation, even if Italy is going in the opposite direction.

The Italian education system sends pupils along different streams – with an emphasis on science, classical education, or vocational subjects – at quite an early stage. Some argue that this differentiation creates inequality. The separation between “hard sciences” and “human sciences” could also be seen as unhelpful in the era of ecological crisis. What is your opinion?

I am in favour of educational streams, and I do not think we need a comprehensive school that takes us all the way through our school careers. What is important is quality. All streams of education must foster professional skills, social and scientific in nature, that allow students to understand how the world works and deal with new technologies. And a transversal approach is essential. Our society doesn't need pure intellectuals or pure technicians; we need intellectuals who know how to use their hands and technicians who know how to use their brains.

In Milan and Rome, children from better- off families are sent to classical high schools (licei classici). I think it's a big mistake to make a fourteen-year-old attend a classical school on the basis that this is the best choice. Classical education does not give you the skills increasingly needed nowadays. Even for a career in the humanities or linguistics, some of the biggest growth areas rely on technology, such as computational linguistics. Today, studying classics without developing technological skills means training for a job that no one needs. The same is true for technical schools. Unless the social, human, and scientific dynamics that lie behind the use of technology are understood, we will create an army of mere operators.

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Is there a stigma attached to pursuing a more vocational route as opposed to one based on the humanities?

The problem is that better-off parents often choose to send their children to schools frequented by other better-off families. This has little to do with the school itself and far more to do with the fact that families know that the social relationships their children will build – with the children of notaries, pharmacists, and lawyers – will be key to their futures. Once upon a time there were arranged marriages within the ruling elite; today they are among the middle classes.

Hypothetically speaking, if the rich all decided to send their children to the worst schools, the effect could be the same. If we had to choose blindly – as John Rawls would say, behind a veil of ignorance, for instance by some sort of lottery – perhaps we would have the chance to get the best out of all of the various streams of education.

Italy has been suffering from one of the highest general and youth unemployment rates in Europe for decades. What needs to change in education to meet this challenge?

To solve youth unemployment, we need to ensure that young people become the new entrepreneurs. In Italy, there are still relatively few people ready to throw themselves into innovation and the world of business. Being an employee is still considered a successful career. An entrepreneurial culture needs to be cultivated. We need to nurture start-ups of all kinds and provide funding and training opportunities for people who want to create the companies of the future.

These opportunities are the only way to generate the level of innovation in the economy

that then produces jobs, especially among young people. A country where the dominant entrepreneurial fabric is the small and medium- sized enterprise, largely family-run and mainly managed by men in their sixties, is unlikely to develop in a meritocratic way. Companies guided by young people are companies that employ other young people. That is why we need to cultivate an entrepreneurial mindset, starting from schools and universities.

In recent years, vocational pathways have brought in German-style apprenticeship schemes to introduce students into the workplace, known as "school-work exchange" schemes. But there have been abuses by firms that have even led to the deaths of apprentices in the worst cases. How can this system be fixed?

I do not believe that "school-work exchanges" should be eliminated as a concept but rather that a better, more reciprocal relationship between these two worlds should be developed. However, as long as our country has such great regional disparities this will be difficult. There are so many regions in Italy where there are either no businesses, or where these are located great distances from schools. Here students are often forced into long commutes or to settle for inappropriate jobs nearer to home that fail to meet their needs. Then there are regions with a greater presence of internationally recognised, innovative centres, allowing students to undertake real training courses. Unless we make sure everyone has the same opportunities, they will be obliged to depend on the opportunities in their local area. We have students who go to work for Google, and others who train as manual labourers and perhaps even lose their lives in the process.

As in many European countries, access to a quality education in Italy varies geographically, across the country as well as within cities and regions. What can be done?

Our country's socio-economic problems arise out of the fact that there is a stigma associated with certain regions and areas, which is reflected in the educational system and institutions in those places. As long as we continue to have dormitory neighbourhoods in our cities – places in which people sleep but don't live – this problem will remain. The children of these neighbourhoods are often sent to schools that are some distance away because the ones in the neighbourhood, if there are any, are of poor quality. This is also why villages without schools have become depopulated. The only way to fight this loss is to have schools in every neighbourhood and to make sure they are equipped with all of the tools they need to raise the quality of teaching. The local neighbourhood school in the countryside must offer the same opportunities as a school in the centre of Milan.

The aim should not be to have local peaks of excellence but rather widespread good quality. Italy will only be able to boast of success when 90 per cent of its schools are moderately good; having a handful of schools that are among the best in the world is not enough.

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Italy has received the largest tranche of the EU Recovery Fund; one of its aims is to strengthen innovation. What is your opinion on the spending plans for education and research?

The extra resources made available by Next Generation are excellent, but as often happens with European funding, training and research structures are supported rather than individuals. Italy has too few researchers and too many underpaid teachers. Even if these billions do materialise, without simultaneous investment in people we will have clean, newly repainted schools but little else.

Additionally, European funds are often used to substitute Italian funds. If your department receives EU money, your state funding goes elsewhere. It should be precisely the opposite: if European funding can cover the costs of laboratories, the Italian state should find the funds for the researchers to work in them.

Traditionally, the EU has limited competences in the field of education, which remains a largely national, if not regional or local prerogative. Would you consider greater integration of European education systems as a positive development?

Since I am in favour of more local schooling, I support the concept of school autonomy. For example, I would like schools to be managed in collaboration with parents, including through parental initiatives. Without school autonomy in the past, ground-breaking pedagogical approaches pioneered by the Reggio Emilia model, Maria Montessori, and the School of Barbiana would not have developed: we would have just been left with the fascist schools of the interwar years.[1]

Today we need schools to be integrated into a network model, not a pyramid: schools that have the greatest degree of autonomy but are in continuous collaboration. Personally, I like the idea of a teaching model that allows students in a mountain community in southern Italy to learn English with a native speaker based in England, all while ensuring essential levels of performance. In other words, international parameters, with funding and performance measured at a European level, combined with local management giving every school and region the freedom to choose its own way of achieving them. This would help to create schools that enjoy greater autonomy while maintaining a sense of a common goal – and have much more fun in the process.

Whether for the nation-state or the Church, public education has historically been a means to build a common identity and a sense of belonging. In recent years, this role has receded as societies have become more fluid and multifaceted. Can building ecological citizenship lend meaning to the mission of education in the 21st century?

Yes, absolutely. The generation currently under 20 will rewrite the rules of the game, similar to what happened during the immediate post- war period that saw the birth of the Republic. We are at a comparable turning point in history. We do not need the *contrade* or a return to medieval times to feel a sense of identity.[2] Education has an essential role to play in creating an identity based on the society we must build. Today’s schools could be the sites of creation for a sustainable citizenship, forming a new generation of founding figures who

will rewrite our constitution, our laws, our rules – and perhaps create a different Italy.

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[1] Developed in the 20th century in different parts of Italy, the Reggio Emilia and Montessori approaches emphasise early years education and student-centred learning, while the School of Barbiana stressed social justice-orientated teaching. All three were informed by the impulse to change the world through education.

[2] Historically, Italian cities were divided into districts – *contrade* – that were the source of intense local pride and rivalry.

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