

Public and private components in the Italian educational system¹

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1. General features

The Italian educational system can be featured as a rather underdeveloped one, in relation to the other major EU countries and most OECD countries, from a number of viewpoints.

1. Level of expenditure: The expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP has remained lower than that of the major EU countries and the OECD average (table 1).
2. Educational expenditure per student: the fact that it is higher than the OECD average and major EU countries for the pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education (table 2) is not an index of a better situation²; the expenditure per student is lower than in France, Germany and the US in higher secondary education. Data for tertiary education are misleading, because Italian private institutions are not included and ratios change when full-time equivalent students are considered (Perotti, 2002).
3. Educational attainment of adult population: only 48% of the age group 25-64 has attained at least upper secondary education (table 3). Italy is catching up, but it will take 80 years to reach the OECD average (Checchi, 2003: 3-4).
4. Quality of education: the 2003 PISA enquiry has shown that the performance of Italian students is well below the OECD average and superior only to Greece, Turkey and Mexico (figure 1). More worryingly, 32% of students do not reach the minimum level of mathematics proficiency.
5. Geographical concentration of bad performance: most Italian educational problems are geographically concentrated in the South, for two reasons: the lower efficiency of the schools and the negative influence of the average educational and cultural background of families in this part of the country (Cipollone-Visco, 2007). As a matter of fact, Northern regions rank at the top of the PISA scores worldwide (Bratti-Checchi-Filippin, 2007: 4-6).
6. Equity problems are relevant: young people with less than upper-secondary education are less like-

ly to be in employment and the decrease of unemployment rates has been slower for them; moreover, they bear a high earnings penalty, and expect to spend a few hours in non-formal job-related training: "Failing to meet baseline qualifications comes at increasingly high costs" (OECD, 2006b, p. 2).

These issues reflect structural problems of the Italian educational system (lagged industrialisation and then reduced level of mass education; low participation ratios and high drop-out rates) rather than contingent ones. They are hardly the product of the numerous reforms that have been undertaken in the last 3 or 4 decades, according to some experts (Checchi, 2003: 16-17). However, one could say that reforms: 1) have not been able to reverse the trend, 2) in some cases at least (as for the reform of the primary school with the substitution of the single teacher with multiple teachers and the reforms of the higher secondary school which have simply reduced the requirements needed) reforms have created problems of efficiency and aggravated those of equity.

2. The relative importance of public and private components

The private share of the Italian educational system is apparently rather limited, more narrow than for other large EU countries and the OECD average – with only 3% of private sources, included subsidies, in primary and secondary education (table 4) – and has remained constant in the last few years.

This assertion however needs some qualifications in relation to the following issues.

1. The limited importance of the private component is measured in terms of the source of funds, not their use (or provision of education). Some private schools and Universities are really funded by the Italian government.

The relevance of direct public expenditure on private institutions and indirect public transfers and payments to the private sector is rather limited for all levels of non tertiary education (less than 5% in 2003 in Italy as to other major EU countries and the

Table 1: Expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of Gdp, for all levels of education (% 1998, 2003)

	Private (excl. subsidies to households)		Public (incl. subsidies to households)		Total	
	1998	2003	1998	2003	1998	2003
France	0,4	0,5	5,9	5,8	6,2	6,3
Germany	1,2	0,9	4,4	4,4	5,6	5,3
Italy	0,2	0,4	4,8	4,6	5	5,1
Spain	0,9	0,5	4,4	4,2	5,3	4,7
United Kingdom	0,3	1	4,7	5,1	4,9	6,1
United States	1,6	2,1	4,8	5,4	6,4	7,5
EU19 average	n.a.	0,4	n.a.	5,2	n.a.	5,6
OECD average	0,7	0,7	5	5,2	5,7	5,9
OECD total	1,1	1,3	4,6	4,9	5,8	6,3

Source: OECD, 2006a: table B2.1a.

Table 2: Annual expenditure on educational institutions per student for all services, by level of education (US \$ PPP, 2003)

	Pre-primary (3 years and older)	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary	Tertiary-type B	Tertiary-type A and advanced
	France		4,744	4,939	7,603	9,992
Germany	4,865	4,624	5,627	10,232	6,299	12,457
Italy (a)	6,116	7,366	7,688	8,108	7,443	8,777
Spain	4,151	4,829		6,418	7,997	9,131
United Kingdom	7,153	5,851		7,29		11,866
United States	7,755	8,305	9,156	10,105		24,074
EU19 average	4,589	5,399	6,831	7,419		9,872
OECD average	4,508	5,45	6,56	7,582		11,254
OECD total	4,959	5,055		6,936		14,598

(a): for Italy, public institutions only

Source: OECD, 2006a: table B1.1a.

Table 3: Population that has attained at least upper secondary education (% 2004)

	Age group				
	25-64	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64
France	65	80	70	59	49
Germany	84	85	86	84	79
Italy	48	64	52	44	28
Spain	45	61	50	36	21
United Kingdom	65	70	65	64	59
United States	88	87	88	90	86
UE19 average	67	78	71	63	52
OECD average	67	77	71	64	53

Source: OECD, 2006a: table A1.2.

Table 4: Share of private expenditure on educational institutions, by level of education (% 2003)

	Primary and		
	Pre-primary	secondary	Tertiary
France	4,4	7,6	18,7
Germany	27,9	17,9	12,9
Italy	9,4	2,9	27,9
Spain	12,8	6,6	23,1
United Kingdom	5,4	13,5	29,8
United States	23,4	8,1	57,2
EU19 average	10,3	5,5	15,7
OECD average	18,5	7,4	23,6

Source: OECD, 2006a: table B3.2

OECD average), but it is much more significant (as high as 19%, i.e. at a level comparable to that of France and Germany, but still less than the OECD average) for tertiary education (table 5). The case of private funding of educational services provided by public institutions takes place only to a limited extent, in so far as households are asked to pay fees for the provision of education by public institutions. As fees are a very small percentage of the cost of educational services, and donations play a very limited role, we can conclude that the reported statistics overestimate the role of public bodies in the provision of educational services in Italy. In fact, data show a higher proportion of the private tertiary education in terms of number of students enrolled, even if the percentage is again lower than in other EU countries and for OECD average (table 6 and 7).

2. The relatively small percentage of private sources has no uniform distribution across the different educational levels. Private funds and schools are, in fact, more important at the pre-primary, primary and tertiary levels, thus taking the crucial segments of the educational system: primary 7% of students, lower secondary 3,5%, upper secondary 5%, tertiary-type B 15%, tertiary-type A 6% (table 7).

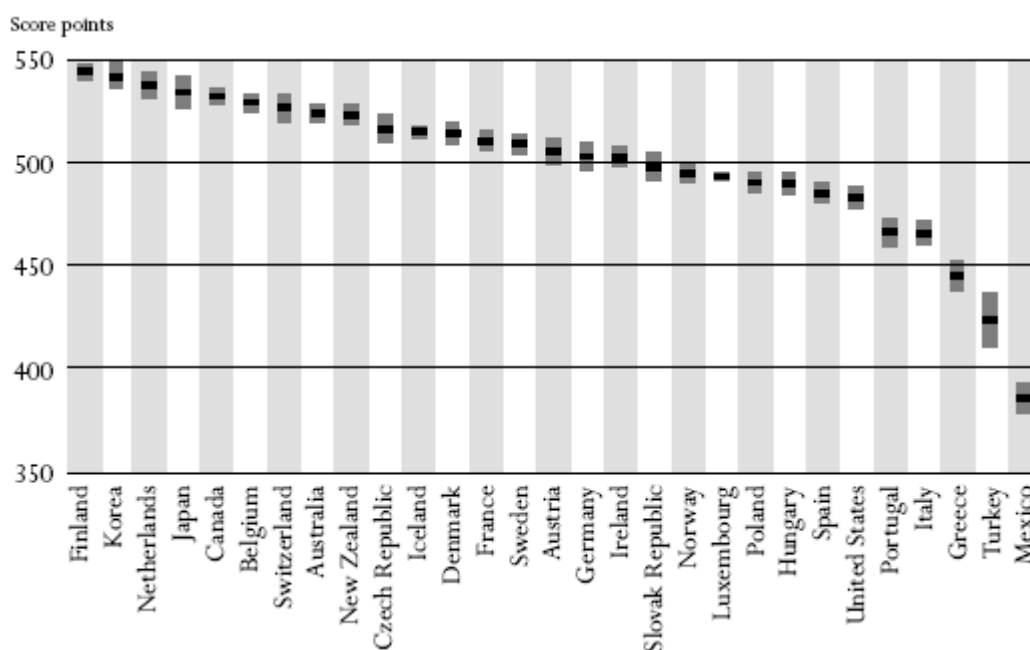
3. In terms of the quality standards of educational services, the role of public bodies is, at least formally, still predominant in Italy. At least for education from the primary to the tertiary level, ex ante standards quality of educational programs are chosen by the central government (Checchi-Jappelli, 2007). The terms of this choice have deteriorated in the last years, but are still in the hands of the central government, as the principle of public recognition of educational titles is still in force. A debate is currently taking place as to the possibility of abandoning the principle of public recognition of titles (while maintaining uniformity of ex ante standards) in order to enhance competition between different schools and universities and let the families and students choose among them.

3. The private provision of educational services

As we have already said, there are indications that the private provision is mostly important for the first and the top levels of education.

In fact, there are a multitude of private pre-primary and primary schools, and private tertiary universities, since a long time. Most private education is provided by Catholic schools, but also for-profit organi-

Figure 1: Distribution of student performance on the OECD PISA mathematics scale (2003)



Source: OECD, 2006a: chart A4.1.

Table 5: Distribution of total public expenditure on education (% 2003) Primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education Tertiary education

	Direct public expenditure on private institutions		Indirect public transfers and payments to the private sector		Direct public expenditure on private institutions		Indirect public transfers and payments to the private sector	
	1999	2003	1999	2003	1999	2003	1999	2003
France	13,3	12,6	3,7	3,1	3,3	5,2	8	8,2
Germany	7,9	12	6,7	4,8	2,4	1,2	12,3	17,2
Italy	5,4	2,8	0,9	2	1,6	1,8	17,1	17
Spain	13,5	14,1	1	1,3	0,7	2	9,3	7,9
United Kingdom	21,1	23,2	0,2	0,2	73,3	75,3	26,7	24,7
United States	0,3	0,2	n.a.	n.a.	13,2	11,8	19,2	17,8
EU19 average	n.a.	13,5	n.a.	3,7	n.a.	14,2	n.a.	15,6
OECD average	9,9	10,7	3,5	3,4	9,9	11,2	16,4	17,4

Source: OECD, 2006a: table B4.2

Table 6: Students enrolled and number of schools in Italy, by management (scholastic year 2005/06)

		Total	State public		Non-state		Private sector		Private sector	
Students	Pre-primary	1,674,095	979,301	58,5	196,721	11,8	462,964	27,7	35,109	2,1
	Primary	2,796,447	2,545,491	91	60,629	2,2	181,77	6,5	8,557	0,3
	Lower secondary	1,767,506	1,668,184	94,4	33,506	1,9	65,45	3,7	366	0
	Upper secondary	2,703,309	2,521,581	93,3	51,633	1,9	126,268	4,7	3,827	0,1
	Total	8,941,357	7,714,557	86,3	342,489	3,8	836,452	9,4	47,859	0,5
Schools	Pre-primary	24,878	13,614	54,7	2,87	11,5	7,216	29	1,178	4,7
	Primary	18,444	16,199	87,8	674	3,7	1,422	7,7	149	0,8
	Lower secondary	7,954	7,102	89,3	177	2,2	667	8,4	8	0,1
	Upper secondary	6,833	5,039	73,7	189	2,8	1,512	22,1	93	1,4
	Total	58,109	41,954	72,2	3,91	6,7	10,817	18,6	1,428	2,5

(a): schools owned by Regions, Provinces or Municipalities.

Source: Ministero dell'Economia e delle finanze, Ministero della Pubblica istruzione [2007: table 1.4, p. 34.

Table 7: Students enrolled in private institution, by level (% 2004)

	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary	Tertiary-type B & advanced	Tertiary-type A
France	14,7	21,4	30,6	28	12,7
Germany	2,9	7,3	7,9	36,1	0
Italy	6,9	3,5	5,4	14,8	6,3
Spain	32	32,4	22,9	22,5	12,2
United Kingdom	5	6,4	74,3	100	100
United States	10,3	8,8	8,8	14,6	26,4
UE19 average	13,2	15,9	21,9	28,9	22,2
OECD average	11,1	14,3	20,9	32,5	23,7

Note: both Government-dependent and independent private institutions.

Source: OECD, 2006a: table C2.3 and C2.4

sations are present, and proprietary structure and role matter for efficiency and quality (Barbetta-Turati, 2003) . Differently from the US confessional schools, mainly aimed to increase opportunities for disadvantaged students, most Italian private schools – Catholic or for-profit – have a remedial role for lazy but rich or medium-class students, with a few notable exceptions of top-level institutions traditionally aimed to select future elites (Bertola-Checchi, 2004; Di Pietro-Cutillo, 2006).

The motivations of Catholic institutions for the diffusion of their religion among the children, on the one hand, and the future ruling class, on the other, clearly explain their diffusion in the first and the top levels of education. Similar motivations – in addition to profit-seeking – explain the presence of a University, Luiss, instituted by Confindustria, the Association of Italian manufactures.

At all levels the private provision of education has been given an incentive in the last decades through the voucher system.

4. The voucher system

There are two sources of finance for vouchers in Italy: the central government and regional governments, since the year 2000, when a law was passed with the aim to ensure equality of opportunities and freedom to choose among different schools. The amount of government vouchers, 30 million €, is divided among all the students attending a certified

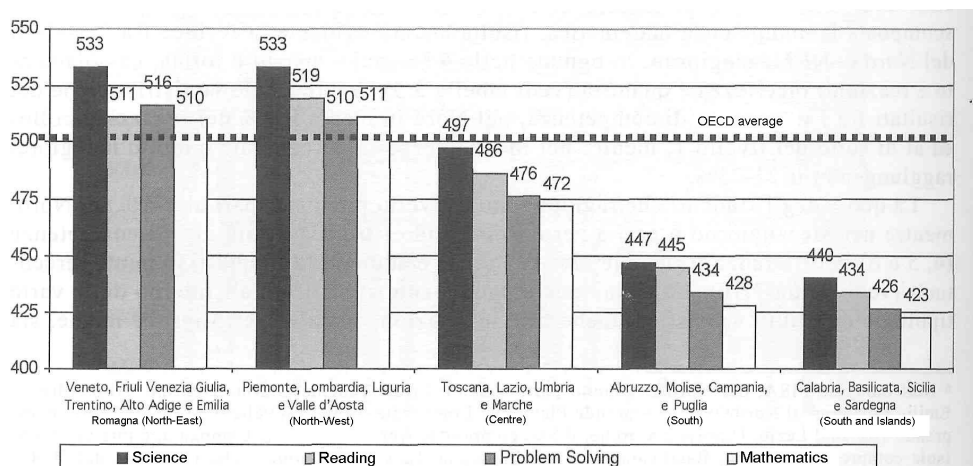
private school, with an average amount of some 200€ per student. The low per capita amount of this source of vouchers makes its impact on families' choices a little more than symbolic (Checchi-Jappelli, 2003).

The amount of regional vouchers is instead significant. Not all regions have introduced such vouchers (only 8 out of a total of 20 have done so), and there is a profound difference between two different targets pursued by the regions and the implementation systems they have adopted (Brunello-Checchi, 2005).

A majority of regions (usually led by right-wing governments) grants vouchers tied to the income of families and not to the students' performance. In theory this type of vouchers is designed in such a way as to favour students coming from low or middle-class families, but in practice they tend to favour tax evaders and students who have already decided to attend private schools³. Their amount, while covering only a percentage of the total costs, is rather high as compared to the amount of the central government's vouchers. They could have a non-negligible impact on students' choices, were not for some inefficiency in their implementation . In one region at least, some research shows the ineffectiveness of vouchers in increasing private schools enrolment (Conti-Sette, 2005).

Two regions, Toscana and Emilia-Romagna, led by left-wing governments, have introduced vouchers based on a fixed payment, aimed only to support

Figure 2: Territorial differences in Italian students - 2003 PISA scores



Source: elaborations on data PISA 2003

low-income families (ceilings are below 20,000 €) and good performer students, and designed in such a way as to finance both private and public school attendance, covering not only tuition fees. However, the amount of these vouchers is fairly low and they have neither influence on the students' choices nor significant economic effects.

The economic effects of the first kind of regional vouchers may be different according to a number of features of demand and supply (Belfield-Levin, 2002: 66-70). In Italy there has been a shift in the (private) supply that has reduced the net price paid for school services, thus attributing most of the voucher benefits (83%) to the households (Brunello-Checchi, 2005: 32). Demand has increased only for marginal families, since vouchers cover less than half of the tuition fees (Brunello-Checchi, 2005: 11-13). Had demand significantly increased, the vouchers might have been appropriated by private education providers, which is contrary to the Italian Constitution, which forbids public funding of private schools, a regulation which, however, has not been consistently applied in other circumstances.

To the extent to which there is no efficiency gain for the educational system, vouchers not designed to increase the choice set available to households "could only produce redistribution of income away from the taxpayer to the wealthy households who enrol their offspring in private schools" (Brunello-Checchi, 2005: 33). At the same time, low-income students could remain in a low-opportunities and low-quality school trap (Checchi, 1999: 217-222).

It is indeed difficult to assess whether the Italian-style voucher systems increase efficiency, because these have been active since a few years only.

Empirical evidence is not conclusive in the US too. In the US the efficiency seems to be limited in any case, as there has been a greater differentiation among schools not implying better average quality (Ladd, 2002; Mitch, 2004: 272-276). Moreover, constraints to join the voucher programs (such as the existence of a ceiling to fees, compliance with public standards set by the state, no discrimination among students) let almost only confessional schools to be included in the programs.

These uncertain and limited efficiency benefits in the US have suggested to design voucher programs to increasing the opportunities and welfare of a subset of students, worthy but not wealthy (Ladd, 2002: 18-21; Epple-Romano, 2002: 30-31). Also in Italy, means-tested tight-scale redistributive programs, limited to low-income families – as in the spirit of

the 2000 Italian law on the school system – could comply with the Constitution⁴, and increase the choice set available to households (Pomini-Rangone, 2004: 177).

5. The features of the Italian private system of education.

Italian private schools are characterised by three main features. First, the likelihood of enrolment is positively correlated with the father's education level, family's income and expectations, and (in primary and lower secondary schools) the absence of a housewife mother (Checchi-Jappelli, 2007).

Second, the quality of teaching is not better than in the public sector, as shown by a higher participation to remedial activities, a lower quantity of homework (i.e. lower effort required), the students' age (i.e. more students who have been held back by repetitions), PISA scores controlled by parental education and socio-economic status (Brunello-Checchi, 2005: 6-8). Also university outcomes are better for the public sector students, while private schools allow to improve the performance only for a subset of students, coming from best family backgrounds (Bertola-Checchi, 2004).

Third, tuition fees represent the price for the lower effort to get the diploma, the access to informal networks (which is very important in the Italian labour market), the homogeneous cultural or confessional culture, the additional facilities and services provided (Checchi-Jappelli, 2007).

As Brunello and Rocco (2004: 24) point out, "...private schools can offer alternatives to quality in exchange for a positive price. The empirical evidence from Italy suggests that they offer leisure". Besides leisure, they also offer services not provided by public schools: early start of compulsory education, full-day school, integrative activities, labs, etc. Notably, full-day school could represent a substitute for welfare state services and/or family care of children when there is no presence of a housewife mother.

These features of the private sector are framed into the Italian society, characterised by the generational persistence of inequalities, and the wide role of familial and informal networks in the labour market. To a large extent, education levels and opportunities depend not on primary (innate capabilities, personal effort), but on secondary factors (social context, family economic and cultural resources of the family, school quality) (Checchi, 1999: 109-161; Ballarino-Checchi, 2006; Checchi, 2006).

Intergenerational mobility is low, notwithstanding a very low cost of public education and the equal opportunities that are guaranteed by low access costs to it. Indeed, there is empirical evidence of self-selection in education tracks and the path to the university, due to the segmentation of upper secondary schools, according not only to the capabilities of the students, but also to their parents' income and cultural level (Checchi-Zollino, 2001; Brunello-Checchi, 2006; Checchi-Flabbi, 2006).

Social stratification occurs through the schooling process and the family behaviour: "Educated parents provide a more stimulating cultural environment for their children, and help them in their homework. At the end of compulsory education (at the age of 13) their children obtain positive evaluations and are advised to proceed further in academic oriented secondary schools. At the opposite side, children from uneducated parents are more likely repeating some year, ending compulsory school with low evaluations and following their teachers' advice to enrol vocational or technical schools. Early tracking determines future destinies of children: high schools are characterised by less repetitions, almost total absence of track changes and high transition rates to university; at the opposite extreme, vocational schools are populated by students unconvinced of their curricula, with repeated failed years, and they exit with low intention to go on with tertiary education" (Checchi, 2003: 24-25).

6. Can increased competition between private and public schools lead to a better system?

Privatisation policies – most notably the system of vouchers – should be evaluated according to criteria relating to productive efficiency, equality and social cohesion, freedom of choice (Belfield-Levin, 2002: 35-52).

From the point of view of efficiency, in Italy there are a number of reasons why greater competition between public and private sectors could not enhance the school performance (Beltrametti, 2004: 87-113). First, the conditions for the good performance of the few private schools and universities of prestige existing in Italy are difficult to replicate, at least in the medium run. In addition, the "exit" mechanism underlying the competition has its shortcomings, as it reduces the interest and participation of politicians and families in the life and performance of educational institutions ("voice"). Thirdly, the

exit of some students from public schools can contribute to the reduction of an enriching variety of experiences, capacities and positions. Fourthly, abandonment of the common standards set by the government could also increase asymmetric information, thus reducing efficiency. Finally, because of the existence of fixed costs, the efficiency of the public school system might not improve and could indeed deteriorate.

Actually, a significant correlation appears between high outcomes and some financial and economic factors: endowment and maintenance of school structures, availability of labs and integrative activities, motivation of the actors in the education system, higher level of education of the parents, probability of unemployment of the family location as an incentive to spend effort (Bratti-Checchi-Filippin, 2007: 8-16).

From the point of view of equity and social cohesion, the possible polarisation of students could lead to the formation of ghettos, a deeper social stratification, a reduction in tolerance and integration as well as intergenerational mobility, a rise in ideological fundamentalism.

From the point of view of freedom of choice, there is no empirical evidence that families modify their educational choices when vouchers of a limited amount, i.e. not entirely covering tuition fees and general maintenance of students, are offered.

7. Concluding remarks

Bad-designed vouchers and low-quality private sector fail to increase either efficiency or opportunities, if factors causing self-selection of scholastic tracks and intergenerational persistence of inequalities are not removed. On the contrary, inequalities rise, as low-income students enrol in public schools endowed with low resources (Checchi-Zollino, 2001: 19-21; Checchi, 1999: 217-222).

General-purposes voucher systems, as in the Italian experimentations, are poorly effective. They fail to remove constraints to family choices, because they are not aimed at specific targets or subset of students whose educational tracks should be supported for efficiency or equity reasons.

The current debate on vouchers could shift political focus from structural and resource problems to the freedom of choice. The latter is an important element of social wellbeing and equal opportunities, but it results only as an ideological objective if structural issues are not tackled. Notably, it appears rather

paradoxical that in the Northern regions, where incomes are higher and there are no efficiency issues of public schools, the support for vouchers is wider; while in the South, whose PISA scores are at the bottom of the OECD ranking (with very critical peaks), vouchers are not implemented, except in the right-wing led Sicily.

All this conceals financial and economic factors influencing students' outcomes and territorial disparities indeed. Notably, a suitable socio-cultural environment appears to be an important issue, to the extent that, especially in the South, high unemployment rates make the study effort not worthy to undertake, in order to find a better job and to earn higher incomes. In such a situation, the youth choose alternative paths, e.g. working in the irregular (even crime) sector, perceived as more rewarding than investing in their human capital: "A policy simultaneously targeting schools, families and the local socio-economic environment might be much more effective in reducing territorial disparities" (Bratti-Checchi-Filippin, 2007: 16-17). The same can be said for the reduction of generational disparities.

- 1) Paper presented at the PRESOM workshop on education privatization, 29 June 2007, Ljubljana, Slovenia
- 2) A possible explanation has to do with an efficient organisation of education at these levels: in particular, at the primary level there are multiple teachers for each class of students. Multiplicity of teachers is only partially related to the need of special care for disabled students.
- 3) Income ceilings are not very low (between 30,000 and 53,800 €), and refund is possible only for enrolment and tuition fees, not for general maintenance of students and support of the families
- 4) Which, as we have said, forbids the public funding of private schools.

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