



DATI ALLA MANO

I Podcast

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF EDUCATION

The journey of education in our country is fascinating. Tracing its evolution from an Italy where most people were illiterate to today is like taking a journey through history with a capital 'H'. A journey through data.

I am Cristiana Conti and this is Dati alla mano, a podcast by Istat, the Italian National Institute of Statistics, where I work in the Directorate for Communication, Information and Services to Citizens and Users. This initiative is part of a public communication project.

In this episode, we will let the data tell us a story, the story of education in Italy. We will start from 1926, when the Central Institute of Statistics was founded – that was its name then - but we will also take a step back, to the day after Italy's unification, and continue up to the present day. This is a way to celebrate the Centenary of Istat's birth.

I must make a premise: the statistical function in our country existed before the creation of Istat. It had found its place in various ministries, but in 1926, the idea that a national coordination was necessary prevailed, and a new awareness gained strength: that statistical information is essential for understanding economic and social reality. So, starting from this historical date, 1926, what was the state of education for Italians? We know that about a quarter of the population aged at least six could not read or write, and illiteracy was also widespread among the younger age group. We know this from an interesting element: the signature on the marriage certificate. Indeed, because 13.5% of spouses in 1926 could not sign the marriage certificate because they were illiterate. And naturally, women were the least educated; that is, the percentage of brides unable to sign was higher than that of grooms. Another interesting fact is that this phenomenon, which seems incredible today – not being able to write one's own name – still existed in 1960. It was certainly reduced, affecting less than 2% of spouses, but it still amounted to almost 11,000 people. So, how long did it take to eradicate illiteracy? I asked **Andrea De Panizza**, a long-standing researcher, who had the idea of creating a series of Data Stories, all of which you will find on the istat.it website on the pages dedicated to the Centenary. I reached him by phone a couple of days ago.

Cristiana. Hi Andrea, last time you came to the studio – I remember – and we talked about productivity; now let's make a big thematic leap. Tell me: how long did it take us to defeat illiteracy?

Andrea. More than a century. Today it finally affects less than 0.5% of the population

C. But, at the time of the Unification of Italy, how did we compare to other European countries?

A. Quite badly. But considering that in the first post-unification Census, in 1861, 3 out of 4 people aged at least 6 could not read or write, they were illiterate. Spain was in a similar situation to ours, but France was much better off with 40% illiteracy, as did the United Kingdom with 25%, and especially the countries of the Germanic Confederation, including Austria, where public education had been introduced almost a century earlier, in 1770, and illiteracy was 15-20% of the population.

C. Speaking of public education, we - if I remember correctly - had to wait for it until 1859, right?

A. Exactly. In 1859, the Casati Law was introduced in the Kingdom of Sardegnna - then after unification it was extended to the entire Kingdom of Italy. But even at the beginning of the 20th century, the provision of primary education remained the responsibility of the municipalities, and not all of them had the necessary funds to guarantee the service.

C. I imagine the inequalities between the North and the South...

A. And also between cities and small rural municipalities. To talk about state-funded education, we have to wait until 1911.

C. But returning to the year Istat was founded, it is incredible to think that in 1926 almost 80,000 young people – that is, 13.5% of spouses – were not even able to write their own name.

A. Indeed. What's more, the signature on the marriage certificate was an indicator used to estimate the minimum proportion of illiterates, because one can know how to write one's name without being able to read and write fully.

C. Certainly, the overall percentage of illiterates was higher.

A. About a quarter of the adult population. To put it in perspective with the 13.5% in 1926, in France in the same year the proportion of spouses who were unable to sign was 1%.

C. Quite a difference. We can say that in the marathon for education, we started quite late.

A. Yes, a delay that efforts were made to bridge after the Second World War, with evening schools – which still exist – and also with the experiment of popular schools.

C. Popular schools...I didn't know they existed.

A. They were an important institution, especially for rural areas. Consider that over 25 years, between 1947-48 and the early 1970s, they were attended by approximately 7.7 million pupils, of whom almost 3 million were illiterate adults.

C. Both men and women?

A. Not at first, but from the 1950s onwards, parity was practically achieved.

C. Speaking of the 1950s, how were we generally doing in terms of educational attainment?

A. In 1951 – the Census date - 90% of the population had at most an elementary school certificate.

C. I dread to think about the percentage of graduates...

A. 1%

C. And women?

A. In the early 1950s, women accounted for about 30% of graduates, which is more than double compared to 1926. Then in the 1970s, they exceeded 40%.

C. Can we say that for women, the marathon accelerated, given that in tertiary education they have overtaken men?

A. For over thirty years now, since 1991. Since then, the proportion of female graduates has been consistently higher than that of men. Moreover, women achieve better academic results, graduate earlier, and more.

C. ... although, looking at universities in another sense ...looking at full professors, even in 2024, female representation is below 30%. But let's change the topic, have the most popular faculties changed over time?

A. A lot. The most evident phenomenon is the decline in law degrees, which represented more than a fifth of the total and today are about 6%. Meanwhile, political-social and economic-statistical disciplines have grown significantly. The offer has expanded significantly.

C. An interesting fact to conclude our historical phase. Thank you very much, Andrea, for this overview.

A. Goodbye, and see you next time.

C. Let's move on to our present day. We have another researcher with us, **Raffaella Cascioli**, who deals specifically with data related to educational attainment levels and employment outcomes. Welcome, Raffaella.

Raffaella. Thank you, hello everyone.

C. Ready for the questions?

R. Where shall we start?

C. I'd say with European comparisons regarding educational attainment levels. We saw that a hundred years ago we were behind some of our neighbours.

R. Well, if we talk about holding an upper secondary school diploma among the population aged 25 to 64, today we are at the European average level; we surpass France and Spain... but not Germany, which is more than 5 percentage points ahead of us.

C. And what about university degrees?

R. If we talk about tertiary qualifications, we are definitely below the European average. We are second to last in the ranking, both for the population as a whole and for younger age groups.

C. However, we must also mention the scarcity – here in Italy – of post-diploma qualifications that count as tertiary qualifications.

R. Yes, this is certainly one of the causes of our position. To give you an idea of the differences, in Italy, qualifications awarded by Higher Technical Institutes account for 1% of all tertiary qualifications; in Spain, they are almost 30%, and in France, they exceed 20%.

C. Well, this complicates the comparison between countries quite a lot.

R. Yes, it is important to consider this; just as it is important to remember that in Italy, the proportion of young graduates is growing, but we still find it difficult to close the gap with Europe because in Europe too the proportions of graduates, which are already very high, continue to increase.

C. Staying within our borders, do territorial differences emerge?

R. Yes, if we consider the population aged between 25 and 64 with a tertiary qualification, we are at 18.9% in the South, while it rises to 23.2% in the North and 26% in the Centre.

C. That is quite a difference.

R. Yes, and unfortunately, this territorial difference in the proportion of graduates is even wider if we look at young people. However, I know Andrea told you about the female advantage in tertiary education. I wanted to say that it's not unique to us, it's a common characteristic at a European level, even if it's more pronounced here.

C. Interesting... and are there differences regarding the disciplines in which men and women graduate?

R. Yes, women are a minority among graduates in technical-scientific disciplines. And particularly in engineering, where the ratio is three to one, and in computer science, where the ratio almost reaches 5 to 1.

C. So we are talking about STEM degrees and we remind our listeners that the acronym STEM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

R. Exactly, and these are the most performing degrees in terms of employment.

C. How much more successful?

R. To give you an idea, let's take 30-34-year-olds: the employment rate for graduates in the Humanities Area – where women are more represented – is 78% while in STEM disciplines it reaches 89%.

C. Yes, there is a difference. But returning to educational attainment levels, is the phenomenon of early school leaving, that is, before obtaining a diploma or qualification, still present in our country?

R. It is still present but significantly decreasing. In 2024, young people aged between 18 and 24 who have at most completed lower secondary school – middle school, to be clear – and are not enrolled in an education or training pathway account for 9.8% compared to a European average of 9.4%.

C. So we are very close to the European Union average.

R. Yes, and we are also approaching the targets that the European Union has set for 2030, which is to be below 9%.

C. I understand, so can we stop worrying?

R. Actually, no, because significant inequalities persist, which highlight that there is still work to be done to ensure equitable and truly inclusive education for all young people.

Q. Are you talking about gender and/or territorial inequalities?

A. Both. The South has higher rates of young people dropping out of school, and in terms of gender, dropping out is more frequent among boys than girls. However, there are other inequalities that deserve attention.

Q. What are they?

A. Firstly, the difference between young Italians and young foreigners; the proportion of young people with foreign citizenship who drop out of school is three times higher than that of Italians. And then there is evidence to monitor: dropping out of school is strongly associated with parents'

educational attainment: about a quarter of young people between 18 and 24 years old whose parents have at most a middle school diploma have dropped out of school before obtaining a qualification or diploma.

Q. And I imagine this affects their job opportunities.

A. Unfortunately yes, with less qualified, lower-paid jobs, higher unemployment; and this perpetuates an intergenerational transmission of both educational and employment disadvantages.

C. Thank you very much Raffaella for the truly interesting chat.

R. Thank you.

So, we have followed Italy's journey from illiteracy to the spread of upper secondary education, which places us alongside those same countries from which we started at a disadvantage. On tertiary education, we still need to make progress, but we are slowly closing the gap.

I am Cristiana Conti and this was Dati alla mano, a podcast from the Italian National Institute of Statistics.

This episode was produced with the support of Storielibere.fm

Continue to follow us on the Dati alla mano (Data at Hand) section of Istat.it and on your favourite listening app.

Are there any topics you would like to explore further? Write to me at datiallamano@istat.it

Andrea De Panizza and Raffaella Cascioli collaborated on this episode