

Interviewing policy makers, experts and civil society organisations on children's rights in Italy: educational insights¹

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ABSTRACT

The article presents a qualitative analysis of key educational issues emerged from 16 semi-structured interviews conducted in Italy between November and December 2019 with policy makers, experts and civil society organisations. This endeavour was part of a wider research entitled “CRIMG – Mainstreaming of children’s rights: multilevel governance perspective” and aimed at investigating children’s rights in educational, health and social policies of Italy and the Veneto Region, as well as of Spain and the Catalonia Region. For the purpose of this contribution, findings and results are drawn exclusively from Italian interviews and selected among those more relevant to educational policy analysis, evaluation, and decision making. They specifically point towards the need for further action to strengthen the recognition of children as rights holders and learners, their right to freely express their opinion in education and meaningfully participate in the development of programmes that affect their lives, bringing children’s expectations and interests at the core of decisions.

KEY WORDS:

Children’s rights, educational policies, Italy, interview analysis

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1. Framing the Italian context of children's rights

The following analysis aims at framing the specific Italian context of children's rights relying on two main sources. The first one consists of the last concluding observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (The Committee) adopted at its eightieth session (14 January-1 February 2019). In this document (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2019), the Committee considers the periodic report presented by the State party and develops several observations. Indeed, all States parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (the CRC) are obliged to submit regular reports on how children's rights are being implemented. More precisely, they are obliged to submit an initial report two years after acceding to the CRC and then periodic reports every five years. The Committee then examines each report and addresses its concerns and recommendations to the State party in the form of "concluding observations"². The second source used for this analysis is the report compiled by the Italian NGO Group for the CRC (*Gruppo di Lavoro per la Convenzione sui diritti dell'infanzia e dell'adolescenza – Gruppo CRC*). This report is based on the last concluding observations of the Committee and it aims at promoting the recommendations, making sure these are received and widely disseminated at national level, as well as checking them against the actions of the Italian government. The following analysis of both sources, considering the focus of the present contribution, will specifically look at child participation and the right to education.

In the last concluding observations to Italy, the Committee expresses appreciation for the legal and regulatory framework of the country, welcoming various ratifications made at the international level as well as several progresses in the legislative, institutional and policy measures taken to implement the CRC at national level. Italy, therefore, seems to have a very rich and advanced legal framework concerning children's rights and also many different bodies devoted to this matter. However, all these laws and actors do not always efficiently coordinate and there are still challenges in the effective implementation of children's rights. Another crucial issue raised by the Committee is the disparities between Italian regions in access to health-care services, the minimum standard of living and education for all children throughout the country. This aspect, together with the prevalence of negative attitudes towards children based on their status, origin, sexual orientation or gender identity, is connected to one of the general principle of the CRC, i.e. non-discrimination, and thus the Committee recommends to take urgent measures to address disparities between the regions and to prevent and combat all forms of discrimination. In this regard, if necessary, Italy should take affirmative action for the benefit of children and in particular children in marginalized and disadvantaged situations. The fragmented and patchy implementation of children's rights, leading to huge differences among regions and local contexts, is clearly a problematic feature that seems to characterise the Italian scenario and education is unfortunately no exception to this inequality. Concerning another core principle of the CRC, i.e. respect for the views of the child, the Committee welcomes several efforts taken by Italy to integrate this principle into its legislation but also underlines several recommendations. For example, the Committee recommends that Italy introduce a comprehensive legal provision establishing the right of the child to be heard, both in the family environment and in any administrative, judicial or mediation procedure in which the child is affected, and ensure that the child's opinion is taken into account in accordance with the child's age and maturity. Several points are further elaborated in order to ensure meaningful and empowered participation of all children within the family, communities and schools, e.g. institu-

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² See for more information: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/crc/pages/crcintro.aspx>

tionalize Communal Children's Councils. The Committee also urges more broadly the State to ensure the meaningful participation of children in the design and implementation of policies and programmes aimed at achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations General Assembly, 2015) as far as they concern children. Education is another crucial area about which the Committee expresses concern. In particular, Italy is recommended, among other things, to take measures to address the high rates of school dropout, including from compulsory schooling, of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti children, and provide them with quality vocational training; implement a more inclusive human rights-based approach to the entire educational system towards children belonging to minority groups and migrant children; improve the current dilapidated state of numerous school buildings and the lack of basic provisions in schools so that these environments become welcoming and safe; strengthen measures to prevent and combat bullying and cyberbullying, mainly in the school environment; create a coordinating body at the Ministry of Education for collaboration with the regions and local governments, and introduce a comprehensive and holistic policy of early childhood care and development to ensure uniform structural, organizational and qualitative standards for early childhood care and education services in all regions (e.g. low rate of early childhood care and education in the south of Italy).

The second source taken for this analysis is the report compiled by the Italian NGO Group for the CRC (Gruppo CRC, 2019). This report builds on the recommendations made by the Committee and further expands them thanks to the contribution of more than hundred third sector organisations actively involved in the promotion and protection of children's rights in Italy. The report is obviously very much aligned with the Committee's recommendations but it adds data and research findings, first-hand experiences and evidence-based practices "from the field". Along the lines of the Committee's recommendations, also the Gruppo CRC highlights the lack of coordination among various levels (national, regional and local) as well as actors and institutions dealing with children's rights. Indeed, there is often an unclear definition of roles and competences. This aspect, together with the lack and/or inadequacy of the so called "performance essential levels" (*Livelli Essenziali delle Prestazioni – LEP*) aimed at guaranteeing a certain minimum standard of services throughout the whole national territory, leads to a very fragmented system and huge territorial differences and inequalities in the field of social, health and educational policies for children. Concerning child participation, the Gruppo CRC stresses a lack of attention to this principle in the context of school life, extracurricular activities, educational and social projects. It also states that the principle is generally considered "occasional", or at best "accessory". This finding cannot be generalised to the whole national context and in fact several good practices in terms of children's best interests and participation are mentioned, such as the Care Leavers Network³ led by the association Agevolando, the National Youth Council⁴ started in 2018 by the national Authority for Children and Adolescents, the Programme of Intervention for the Prevention of Institutionalisation (P.I.P.I.)⁵ supported by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies and the Get Up project⁶ for adolescents and schools. There are also good practices on children's participation through student and youth councils at regional and local level, as well as excellent projects in schools concerning children with disabilities and foreign minors, or UNICEF's child-friendly cities⁷ and schools⁸. However, due to a patchy and unsystematic implementation, these good practices and projects remain limited to certain regions, municipalities, territories or specific schools. As stated by the Gruppo CRC, these experiences show a high potential that is then unfortunately not turned into an overall system for the whole national territory, nor into a common and holistic approach. Another warning made by

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³ See for more information: <https://www.careleavernetwork.eu/it/>

⁴ See for more information: <https://www.garanteinfanzia.org/news/al-i-lavori-della-consulta-dei-ragazzi-dell%E2%80%9999agia>

⁵ See for more information: <https://www.labrief-unipd.it/home-italiano/p-i-p-p-i/>

⁶ See for more information: <https://www.minori.gov.it/it/minori/progetto-get>

⁷ See for more information: <https://www.unicef.it/doc/154/citta-amiche-dei-bambini.htm>

⁸ See for more information: <https://www.unicef.it/doc/5038/progetto-scuola-amica-unicef-ministero-istruzione.htm>

the Gruppo CRC is the increase of early school leavers in 2017 and 2018 and school dropout, particularly harsh for children without Italian citizenship. This is a dramatic signal of the likely effects of educational poverty and the lack of reforms and investments in education for children and adolescents over the last decade in Italy. The situation of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti children is also of particular concern. In line with the Committee's recommendations, the Gruppo CRC stresses the need to implement a more inclusive human rights-based approach to the entire educational system towards children belonging to minority groups and migrant children. It also points out bullying and cyberbullying in schools as a critical issue, suggesting a better coordination among already existing actions as well as ad hoc interventions to prevent and combat these phenomena. In this regard, several recommendations are addressed to the Ministry of Education. The huge regional and territorial differences already discussed above are also emphasised by the Gruppo CRC with regard to the education of children under 6 years old (early childhood care and education services). Indeed, while efforts have already been made in terms of both legislation and resource allocation, crucial challenges remain to ensure access to and quality of educational services for all children throughout the country.

2. Purpose, methodology and findings

Data and findings of this article are taken from a wider research entitled "CRIMG – Mainstreaming of children's rights: multilevel governance perspective". The project involved researchers in Italy and in Spain to show existing strengths, weaknesses and challenges in embodying children's rights in the multilevel context of governance of both countries. The researchers engaged with policy makers, experts and third sector organisations, as well as with families of children in vulnerable situations. Interviews have been conducted at national and regional level, respectively in Veneto Region for Italy and in Catalonia Region for Spain. This was crucial to capture the multilevel, cross-sectoral and multi-agency perspective at the basis of the research project and to investigate children's rights in educational, health and social policies.

For the purpose of this article, we will draw from the voices collected at national and regional level in Italy using 16 semi-structured interviews with policy makers, experts and civil society organisations (see Table 1 for details on role and institution/organisation of each interviewee). All interviews were conducted in Italian, either in person or via telephone/Skype, between November and December 2019. They lasted about one hour each and were all audio recorded to then be transcribed, thematically analysed and translated in English by the researcher. In this article, we decided to focus on findings and results concerning the implementation of the CRC in Italy at both national and regional level. More specifically, we aim to present and discuss key issues emerged from Italian interviews that can be relevant to educational policy analysis, evaluation, and decision making. We also hope that the analysis carried out in the previous section can serve to frame and better understand these findings and issues within the specific Italian context.

2.1. European and Italian policy framework on children's rights: good on paper but...

Both at national and regional level, as well as from policy makers and third sector organisations, it generally seems that the role of the EU is considered crucial for setting a common framework and for providing funds. However, several interviews, particularly regional ones, have pointed out the complexity of ensuring an effective multi-level governance from the EU to the territory and vice versa. One of the more prominent strengths arising from the analysis of Italian interviews is the very advanced and comprehen-

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sive legislative/policy framework on children's rights at national level. Italy seems to have a remarkable system of excellent norms and institutions for the protection and promotion of children's rights. However, almost all interviewees have also highlighted several criticisms stressing that having such a system is not enough to ensure that these rights are effectively realised in practice. Among the criticisms raised, there is the overlap of norms over the years without an organic systematisation, the multitude of actors and institutions involved without a clear definition of roles and competences, the general lack of implementation of this legislative/policy framework that might even look good on paper but not in practice. This remark has clearly emerged also in connection with the educational sector.

“The Italian legislation is very advanced in terms of the recognition of rights, but then policies through which this is translated do not always go in the same direction. For example, as far as the school environment is concerned, we probably have the most advanced legislation in the world on the integration and inclusion of people with disabilities but also on children with special educational needs, including for example measures specifically dedicated to foreign minors. This advanced legislation, however, does not actually correspond to the policies, resources and organization put in place to ensure compliance with these regulations.”

Head teacher and collaborator

Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR)

2.2. Limited short-term political vision

Another interesting finding is that almost all interviews seem to converge on identifying that often politics is driven by short-term objectives while children's rights need a longer-term perspective for their full realisation. This applies at both national and regional level and is mainly due to the rapid political turnover, an ever increasing trend in Italy over the last several years. If on the one hand politics is mostly dominated by short-term objectives, on the other education needs long-term approaches (Corradini, 2016). Thus, governments and ministers should not be tempted by the introduction of new proposals, reforms and buzzwords in the field of education just because they want to distance themselves from the predecessor and gain quick support and consensus, but they should rather consider to build up on the positive aspects that already exist, also in terms of projects and programmes, and embrace systematic investments and a more forward-looking vision.

“Realising children's rights requires medium- and long-term policies so there should be governments with such a vision. Unfortunately, in Italy we have a very quick political turnover, governments last short and are not very stable.”

Head of Unit, Policies for children and adolescents

Department for family policies, Presidency of the Council of Ministers

“There has to be an underlying political will and commitment to invest on children, new generations and the future: unfortunately our political leaders are often more interested in the short-term period in order to be re-elected after one or a couple of years, while policies for children and youth need medium and long-term investments. (...) when you talk about childhood and children's rights you always need to keep two fundamental sides together, one is to have a vision of the future, to make systematic investments in education, health, etc. the other is to consider the individual case, the very concrete and specific case of that child and organise a tailored intervention to address his/her needs, vulnerabilities, etc.”

Head of Unit, Policies for migrants' integration, protection of foreign minors

DG Immigration and Integration Policies, Ministry of Labour and Social Policies

Italy seems to have a remarkable system of excellent norms and institutions for the protection and promotion of children's rights. However, almost all interviewees have also highlighted several criticisms stressing that having such a system is not enough to ensure that these rights are effectively realised in practice

“Regional policies are not forward-looking, they act as we are always in an emergency and with a view to electoral consent (nothing or very little is invested on prevention to avoid emergency situations).”

Local manager (North-East) and national expert in educational poverty

Save the Children Italy

2.3. Fragmented system and lack of coordination leading to huge territorial differences

An important note to better understand the Italian system is that Title V of the Constitution, as reformed in 2001, regulates the relations and the distribution of powers between the State and the Regions. This, in a nutshell, implies that while Regions have a strong say in health and social policies, educational policies remain more centrally managed by the Ministry of Education. The fact of moving competences and resources to Regions, also with an eye towards getting closer to citizens and their needs, seems generally considered as positive in the interview analysis. However, since the reform of Title V of the Italian Constitution remains still nowadays incomplete as the State has never exhaustively defined the so called “performance essential levels” (*Livelli Essenziali delle Prestazioni – LEP*), the only mean to guarantee a certain minimum standard of services throughout the whole national territory, many interviewees have underlined that there are several grey areas regarding regional competences on health and social policies. The lack and/or inadequacy of LEP is therefore problematic.

“We lack certain minimum standards and a minimum set of services throughout the country (...) The Reform of Title V of the Italian Constitution was never finalised with the definition of performance essential levels (LEP) and a monitoring system. Thus, it has remained incomplete producing differentiated social, health and educational policies and services.”

Head of Research and Monitoring Department

Istituto degli Innocenti, Florence

“The socio-health part is the responsibility of the regions so the big gap is the lack of LEP leading to huge regional differences in all areas (social, health and educational): so when you talk about child and adolescent policies it depends not only on the region where you live, but also on the city and much more often it depends on the neighbourhood within a city.”

Advocacy manager

Save the Children Italy

Regional and territorial differences seem a pressing issue that needs to be addressed. The Italian context is characterised by a very fragmented system in the field of social, health and educational policies leading to diverse practices and huge territorial inequalities. This is probably the strongest finding emerging from the interview analysis and it is generally connected to the lack of a control room at national level and the lack of coordination among various levels (national, regional, municipal) but also within the same level of governance between different sectors (social, health and educational). This recalls what previously highlighted about the multitude of actors and institutions dealing with children’s rights in Italy (Department for Family Policies, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Education, etc.) without a clear definition of roles and competences and a general lack of implementation.

“A multi-level, cross-sectoral and interagency system that functions as a whole is missing. Coordination between national, regional and local is difficult (...) there is a complexity that derives from the

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fragmentation of competences.”

Expert in international law and children’s rights

Independent Authority for Children and Adolescents

“Unfortunately this unsystematic, fragmented and patchy implementation is an Italian feature that does not only affect children’s rights but it applies to all sectors.”

Head of Unit, Policies for migrants’ integration, protection of foreign minors

DG Immigration and Integration Policies, Ministry of Labour and Social Policies

Regional interviews confirmed also in Veneto a fragmented and unclear system of roles and responsibilities, as well as the lack of coordination between various levels and sectors (social, health and educational).

“The problem is that in Italy there are huge regional and territorial differences. This uneven and disorganised implementation impacts on children as well (ex. social services are very efficiently organised in certain territories and almost non-existent in others). It also depends on local administrators and policy makers, it is a question of priorities. (...) Need for better coordination and more clarity in the definition of roles and responsibilities (starting between regional and municipal levels).”

President

UNICEF Regional Committee (Veneto)

From the interview analysis it emerged quite clearly that over the last couple of years there has been increasing attention on certain topics related to children’s rights

2.4. Education among the focal issues and best practices on children’s rights

From the interview analysis it emerged quite clearly that over the last couple of years there has been increasing attention on certain topics related to children’s rights. This public attention, from national to local level, has been translated into the allocation of more funds and the development of specific projects targeting these issues. Several interviewees have particularly identified the following as focal issues: children with disabilities, children in alternative care when they turn 18 (so called “care leavers”) and the broad topic of educational poverty. For example, more than half of the interviewees mentioned as a good practice the Care Leavers Network led by the association Agevolando and its national project supported by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies to accompany care leavers towards autonomy and adulthood when they turn 18 and have to leave the protection system. Three other projects/programmes have also been mentioned several times during the interviews, and these are: P.I.P.P.I. aimed at improving parenting skills, promoting full involvement in children’s school life and strengthening social networks (environmental and family-related factors) to prevent children from being separated from their families; Get up national project aimed at developing the active participation of children and youth, the promotion of their autonomy and the social and civic value of their social action identifying schools as the fulcrum of the project; and the National Programme for the Inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti Children.

“In general, looking at children’s rights and compared to other countries in the world, Italy has a quite advanced system and is a privileged country.”

Head of Unit, Policies for children and adolescents

Department for family policies, Presidency of the Council of Ministers

“Italy has succeeded in making school attendance possible for all students with disabilities, this is a success. This is undeniably a result, not only for children with disabilities but it is a great result for the Italian society at large. It also means that all Italian children are exposed to the relationship with diversity at an early age”.

Head teacher and collaborator

Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR)

2.5. Lack and/or inadequacy of human resources, working conditions and professional training

A further point of weakness resulting from the interview analysis concerns the topic of human resources. Indeed, several interviewees both at national and regional level, as well as from policy makers and third sector organisations, highlighted the lack and/or inadequacy of human resources, working conditions and professional training for people employed in social, health and educational sectors and services dealing with children's rights. Furthermore, some have stressed the importance of intervening at the university level to strengthen the academic preparation of these professionals.

“I think it is crucial to strengthen the academic preparation of educators, social workers, psychologists, etc. so that they can be equipped to grasp the gaze of the child, as well as guarantee his/her right to be heard and participate.”

National executive member

CNCA, National coordination of host communities

Some regional interviews boldly stated that the quality, quantity and status of human resources have a direct impact on the capacity of professionals and services to respond to citizens' needs on the ground, including those of children. Therefore, this becomes a key aspect to ensure the realisation of children's rights.

“In order to implement and effectively realise children's rights on the ground, it is necessary to give resources to local municipalities, and when I say resources, more than economic ones, I mean human resources. Staff of local authorities is less and less (...) Just to give you an example: at the end of 2018 we had 57 people working in the childhood and adolescence area of the Municipality of Venice, today we have 42 people. This is not irrelevant, especially because people are the driving force behind these complex projects that also require a very high emotional involvement (we are dealing with families, children and their lives).”

Responsible for childhood and adolescence service

Municipality of Venice

“As part of the socio-health reorganisation, we have been experiencing a deficit not only of tools but also of staff/professionals who have not been replaced so... less staff also means less capacity of the territories to deliver services and support children and youth. (...) There has been a strong weakening in training for professionals (educators, social workers, etc.). There are training courses but in a very fragmented way, very compartmentalised (without putting various actors together but working in silos). There is the risk of speaking different languages between professionals, private and public sector, families, citizens, and finally with children for whom there is no room for listening and participation.”

Contact person and expert in host communities

A welfare for minors

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Therefore, in terms of educational policy analysis, evaluation, and decision making, increased attention is needed on human resources in both formal and non-formal education settings. This includes, for example, strengthening initial and in-service training on children's rights, ensuring adequate working conditions and improving collaboration among all professionals employed in social, health and educational sectors and services working with and for children.

2.6. Children's rights, best interest and participation through a familistic approach

Several interviews showed reference to a sort of cultural legacy that might negatively impact on children's rights. For example, while talking about the role of the family or children's right to participate, it was mentioned that in Italy there is still a tendency to look at children only through the lens of family and this necessarily poses challenges. There is consensus coming from the interview analysis that it is crucial to keep the focus on the child, his/her needs and rights. However, children are often not considered as protagonists, active citizens and crucial stakeholders to be involved in decision-making, and this unfortunately happens in education as well (Nthontho, 2017).

"I have had many experiences in European schools and I did not see what I see in Italy. In other countries children are left freer to live experiences under the guidance of adults but independently. This is not the case in Italy probably due to a cultural legacy, a sort of familism. The legislation pushes on the one hand towards children's autonomy and freedom of expression, on the other it places very strong constraints in terms of security and control."

Head teacher and collaborator

Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR)

"In our system, and I always refer to education, we give high importance to the family, it is considered the priority point of reference, it is the family that ultimately decides where to enrol the child, what type of services, recognizing or not a certain vulnerability or difficulty of the child (...) We cannot force the family but only offering suggestions, therefore the role of the family in our school legislation is an important one."

Executive manager

Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) – Regional School Office (Veneto)

These findings are also connected to two core principles of the CRC (Lundy et al., 2013), namely the "best interest of a child" and "participation". Concerning the first one, it emerged from the interview analysis a clear pattern to recognise that this principle is quite well known and frequently used in the children's rights discourse. It seems generally understood as a complex synthesis among various perspectives aimed at making the most appropriate decision for a child in a given situation and time. As such, the best interest is not set once and for all but it is a process and might change over time looking at the very specific conditions of each individual case. Unfortunately, while this principle is often proclaimed, there are still challenges for its uniform, appropriate and consistent integration and application across the country. Concerning the second principle, the CRC does not explicitly state a right to participate but article 12 underlines the right of children to express their views and to be heard in all matters affecting them, with due weight given in light of their age and level of maturity. The content of this article, also in connection with article 3 on child's best interests, has then evolved over time and finally been translated into the wider core principle of child participation (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). The CRC, in fact, asks for more than just for listening to the child and it requires to take child's views into serious consideration. This means

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also that children's expectations and interests have to be included in the decisions affecting them, as well as in the daily life. As a result, participation becomes a good term that includes in a single word the concepts of expressing views, listening and giving due weight to the views, interests and goals of the child (Krappmann, 2010). While article 12 of the CRC stresses the clauses "capable of forming his or her own views" and "in accordance with the age and maturity of the child", children are nonetheless recognised by the CRC as human beings with a human right to participate. Unfortunately, as various researchers have demonstrated (Lansdown, 2005), even when children are given a space to express their views and to be heard, this listening might often not be of good quality.

According to the interview analysis, and similarly to the principle of the best interest previously discussed, participation seems more integrated in theory than in practice. In particular, there is agreement on the importance of child participation but it is difficult to make it real and ensure a meaningful and empowered participation of all children. Several interviewees highlighted that, even when children are given a space to express their views and to be heard, this listening is often not of good quality due to the lack of professional training of people in charge of this task. Furthermore, there seems also to be a risk of turning child participation into mere tokenism where children and young people may be consulted but their views are not taken into serious consideration (no meaningful involvement), they never receive feedback and they never know if their views have produced any change in policy or practice, most of the times because their views have no discernible impact on decisions (Tisdall & Davis, 2004; Tisdall, 2013).

"There are very diverse experiences of participation but it is definitely not institutionalised. It is left to the free initiative of teachers or schools that have a little sensitivity in this regard. (...) In Italy it is very hard to leave spaces to children, give them autonomy and independence, we often prefer a more top-down approach where we (adults) plan for children and we offer them a service, a product."

Head teacher and collaborator

Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR)

"Children and young people are not systematically heard in the decisional areas of their life. Rather than be subjected to decisions, they should be able to participate and make their own decisions (e.g. concerning school, informal education, protection systems, legal framework). (...) there is still a lot to do in terms of child participation."

Responsible for national programs and advocacy

SOS Children's Villages

3. Conclusion

While Italy can surely praise a good children's rights record, and further advancements keep being achieved by the country, challenges remain concerning the implementation of the CRC. In this article, drawing from 16 semi-structured interviews conducted with policy makers, experts and civil society organisations at national and regional level, we have presented and discussed key issues relevant to educational policy analysis, evaluation, and decision making. Several interesting entanglements between education, politics and culture emerged. These include, for example, the challenging application in practice of a good, and even advanced, European and Italian policy framework on children's rights; a limited short-term political vision that often does not allow for forward looking plans and programmes; a fragmented and patchy implementation leading to diverse practices and huge territorial inequalities; the lack and/or inadequacy of human resources, working conditions and professional training for people employed in social, health and

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educational sectors and services; an embedded cultural legacy that may even today push children's rights be subsumed under family policies. All the findings presented in this article point towards the need for further action both at national and regional level to strengthen the recognition of children as rights holders and learners, their right to freely express their opinion in education and meaningfully participate in the development of programmes that affect their lives, bringing children's expectations and interests at the core of decisions.

Table 1. Italian interviewees – role and institution/organisation

	ROLE	INSTITUTION / ORGANISATION
NATIONAL LEVEL (ITALY)	Expert in international law and children's rights	Independent Authority for Children and Adolescents
	Head of Unit – Policies for children and adolescents	Department for family policies – Presidency of the Council of Ministers
	Head teacher and collaborator	Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR)
	Head of Unit – Policies for children and adolescents	DG Poverty and Social Programming, Ministry of Labour and Social Policies
	Head of Unit – Policies for migrants' integration, protection of foreign minors	DG Immigration and Integration Policies, Ministry of Labour and Social Policies
	Head of Research and Monitoring Department	Istituto degli Innocenti, Florence
	Responsible for national programs and advocacy	SOS Children's Villages
	Advocacy manager	Save the Children Italy
	National executive member	CNCA – National coordination of host communities
REGIONAL LEVEL (VENETO REGION)	Executive manager	Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) – Regional School Office (Veneto)
	Head of Unit – Family, minors, youth and civil service	Veneto Region
	Responsible for childhood and adolescence service	Municipality of Venice
	Contact person and expert in host communities	A welfare for minors
	Local manager (North-East) and national expert in educational poverty	Save the Children Italy
	President	UNICEF Regional Committee (Veneto)
	Organisational coordinator and former spokesperson	Third Sector Forum (Veneto)

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