

# Coronavirus: Italian teachers and students struggle to adapt to learning from home as outbreak shuts schools

Internet has helped keep lessons going but concerns remain over how younger children can carry on with distance learning, writes **Alessio Perrone**

Like 8.4 million other Italian students, Stefania did not go to class today. Instead, she stayed home in her hometown of Oristano, a city in west Sardinia, studying Spanish literature – and worrying about how the school year will end.

“I am one of the high school students that will have to take the maturità [the Italian A-levels] this year,” she explains, worrying that exams might be postponed.

“Ultimately, I’d say the concern that we students all share is about our future, which is a bit uncertain lately,” she says. Sardinia has seen only two coronavirus contagions after the epidemic began in the Italian north on 21 February.

But here too, schools will be closed until 15 March after the Italian government decided yesterday to suspend teaching activities in schools and universities in the whole country. Lessons were already suspended in most of northern Italy since late February.

The decision is a historical first, according to Italian state broadcaster Rai, who reported that Italy had refrained from suspending schools even during World War Two, when much of the country was torn by violence.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte explained that the government was doing all it could to contain the coronavirus as the nation’s health service risked being overwhelmed due to the high number of infected people in need of intensive care.

Italy is suffering from the worst outbreak of the disease on the continent, with over 3,200 contagions, plus 414 recoveries and 148 dead.

“I hope pupils can return to school as soon as possible,” said minister for education Lucia Azzolina. “My commitment is to ensure that the essential public service, albeit from a distance, is provided to all our students”.

The decision left millions of working parents facing the prospect of leaving their children at home as they go to work.

“The effects of the coronavirus epidemic affect Italian families particularly,” Gianluigi De Palo, president of the Forum of Family Associations, a catholic organisation, said in a statement. “If schools close, they will have to bear the extra burden of organising and managing their work and their children’s time.”

De Palo called the government to release funds to help families pay babysitters and advocated for schools to provide online lessons and for companies to introduce flexible working policies and “smart working” – that is, working from home. Schools in central and southern Italy rushed to adapt to the change and carry on with online lessons.

“It hasn’t been an easy transition,” says Antonella Daccò, who teaches mathematics at the Falcone-Righi high school, in Corsico, near Milan, where schools have been closed since 24 February.

But no matter how difficult, Daccò says her school has been able to carry on with classes without changing their timetable too much.

Turning off her webcam for privacy reasons – she teaches from home – Daccò says she uses group video-calls to run students through exercises and new material, but also resorts to the school portal or platforms like Google Classroom and Google Meet to assign homework.

“What helped us was the co-operation among colleagues,” she says. “Some of the teachers had more difficulties with the technology and the tools, but we are helping one another, sometimes testing the tools among ourselves at night, from 10pm to 1am.”

The difficulty, she says, is running tests. So far, she has postponed tests until further notice is given on when schools will be able to reopen.

Salvatore Giuliano, principal of the Ettore Majorana high school in Brindisi, in the southern Puglia region, insists that teaching from home has gone well.

Giuliano served as undersecretary of state for education in the previous Italian government, and explains that there is a divide among schools and teachers – with some like, his, using technology for over 10 years and others less familiar or trained to do so. He says that his school has been assisting and advising others.

“We were not unprepared,” he says, but acknowledges that “there are some very different and some very desperate cases. Some teachers struggle even to send emails.”

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But for younger children, carrying on with distance learning is more difficult, explains Alfonso D’Ambrosio, the principal of a group of kindergartens, elementary and middle schools in Lozzo Atestino, in the northern Veneto region, that are pioneering distance learning activities for their pupils.

D’Ambrosio is also principal of a kindergarten, an elementary school and a middle school in Vo’ Euganeo, a small town in Veneto that has seen an outbreak of coronavirus and is now under lockdown.

“We immediately started organising materials and activities that children could do online,” says D’Ambrosio. They organised workshops on emotions, robotics, creative writing and English.

He says technology has provided relief and helped both teachers and pupils to feel each other’s presence in an emergency situation. But in the long run, he says it can’t replace face-to-face teaching.

“Can you imagine a 6 or 7-year-old child holding a mouse and learning in front of a screen for six hours a day?” he says. “After a while, you miss the ‘analogic’ aspects – hugs, contact, proximity.”

“If you want to know how to solve an equation, you can go on YouTube and watch a tutorial,” he says. “But school is much more than that.”