



# Teaching and learning Geography in Italian First Cycle of Education: knowledge elements and proposals for a renewed curriculum

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## Abstract

Nowadays Italy is experiencing a lack of policy in defence of the teaching of Geography, and this has caused the marginalization of this disciplinary field over time, especially in the secondary school. The primary and the lower secondary school (First Cycle of Education) represent a positive exception. However, for these school grades it has long been evident that solutions need to be proposed and implemented with regards to complex issues, i.e. the contents to be taught, the potential and role of geographical education in a multidisciplinary perspective (e.g. Civic Education), and finally teacher training. Above all, an updating of the curriculum proposals seems necessary, especially in the light of the environmental challenges and sensitive social issues of the contemporary world. Starting from the existing conceptual framework and the results of a survey provided to a sample of teachers, this paper offers some knowledge elements and proposals about the actions to be taken to contributing to renew the Geography curriculum in the Italian First Cycle of Education.

**Keywords:** Geography Education, Environmental and Social Issues, First Cycle of Education, Italian Curriculum for Geography

## 1. Introduction

In many countries of the world Geography education is experiencing a problematic situation (van der Schee, 2014), but the issue is particularly relevant in Italian schools. In this regard, there has been a long debate (De Vecchis, 2016; De Vecchis et al., 2020; Lavagna et al., 2018), denouncing a progressive marginalization of the discipline, especially in

secondary school. Pre-primary school and the First Cycle of Education (five years of primary school and three years of lower secondary school) represent a positive exception (Giorda, 2014): in primary school, in particular, Geography has never been questioned. On the other hand, in secondary school, heavy penalizations within the school time amount dedicated to the subject have been alternated

with attempts to remove the discipline from the curriculum. Among the latter, the one implemented in the 2010-2011 school year should be mentioned: the so-called “Gelmini Reform”, introduced in 2008, in fact excluded the teaching of Geography from almost all secondary schools (with the exception of two technical courses) and decided to merge Geography and History in high schools, creating an ambiguous disciplinary field called Geohistory assigned to teachers of humanities<sup>1</sup> (De Vecchis and Pasquinelli d’Allegra, 2024, p. 22).

In Italy we are therefore witnessing a paradox. On the one hand, a renewed interest in geography education is evident in the academic sphere and beyond: at the 4th EUGEO Congress (5-7 September 2013), in Rome, the Declaration on Geography Education in Europe was signed by representatives of the Italian Association of Geography Teachers (AIIG), the Association of Geographical Societies in Europe (EUGEO), the European Association of Geographers (EUROGEO) and the International Geographical Union (IGU). On this occasion it was emphasized that “the teaching of Geography in schools is crucial for the future of Europe” (Pesaresi and Morri, 2021). On the other hand, however, the teaching of Geography in schools loses importance: Italy lacks a policy *of* and *for* Geography (Morri, 2020).

Inevitably linked to these issues there are other ones, more complex, related in particular to the content to be taught, the potential and role of geography education also in relation to other disciplines, and finally teacher training. Recent

contributions (Charpentier and Fatichenti, 2023; Fatichenti, 2023) pointed out that in Italy the teaching of Geography needs to be renewed. Changes seem necessary especially in the face of the great challenges of the contemporary world: since the beginning of the 1980s, in fact, the emergence of new economic, political and social issues has required a progressive updating of curricular contents. In France, for example, the debate on “sensitive issues”, in relation to current global challenges of an environmental (sustainable development, climate emergency, energy transition, etc.) and socio-political nature (Legardez et al., 2008; Jeziorski and Legardez, 2013; Lange, 2014; Chauvigné and Fabre, 2021), has been ongoing for some time. Such issues, which have become “socially relevant” due to the impact they have on learning (Beitone, 2004), are gradually introducing a destabilization of knowledge, to the point of generating potential conflicts over the transmission of knowledge and values in the School (Chauvigné and Fabre, 2021; Beitone and Hemdane, 2018). These “a-disciplinary” issues force researchers to question the educational paradigms of the past and, consequently, there is a need to develop support for the reflections of teachers and trainers (Barthes and Alpe, 2018; Barthes, 2018).

In Italy, such a debate is essentially absent; indeed, it is not even clear to teachers of which discipline to assign responsibility for educating on the environmental challenges and sensitive social issues of the contemporary world. In this regard, a step forward is undoubtedly represented by Ministerial Decree 35 of 22 June 2020, which defined the teaching of Civic Education in schools of all levels. Civic Education has undoubtedly inaugurated a new challenge for schools, represented above all by the transversality of this teaching, the introduction of which implies that all disciplines can contribute to the construction and consolidation of social and civic competences (Fatichenti, 2023). But what fruitful relationship can be built between Geography and Civic Education? For example, it has been observed that there are weaknesses and ambiguities in the legislation, particularly in the section on education for sustainability (Piastra, 2021).

<sup>1</sup> A 2013 decree of the Ministry of Education corrected the situation by introducing a weekly hour of Geography in technical-technological institutes, but in only one year out of a total of five. Since 2017, Geography has then returned in the two-year period of professional institutes, but there is no clarity in the first two years on the hours to be shared with History. Only in technical institutes with a ‘Tourism’ course Geography is included from the first to the fifth year. Another problem lies in the fact that the law allows schools to assign Geography hours also to science teachers, therefore not trained in Geography, if they are “losers” (teachers who lose their professorships in cases of staff reductions due to fewer pupils). On the ambiguity of “Geohistory”: Giorda, 2012.

Therefore, in Italy we must take into consideration two closely connected problems: not only the marginalization of Geography education, but also the need to renew the curricular contents in order to update the discipline and thus enable it to make a significant contribution to the great challenges of our time. Therefore, in this paper some considerations are developed – based both on the literature review and on the results deriving from the administration of a questionnaire to teachers of the first cycle of education – aimed at suggesting proposals and actions for a renewal of the Geography curriculum and for a reassessment of the role of this discipline in the Italian school.

## 2. Conceptual framework

The adoption of competence-based teaching requires serious reflection on the aims and objectives of Geography education. The 2012 *Indicazioni nazionali* (National Indications) define the following nuclei of learning objectives: orientation; geo-graphic language; landscape; region and territorial system (MIUR, 2012). Programmes and indications are subject to continuous updates, however to answer the question “What to teach in Geography?” the four cores defined in 2012 remain essential concepts for the organization of geographical knowledge (De Vecchis and Pasquinelli d’Allegra, 2024, p. 39).

In recent years, however, it has become clear that the aims of Geography teaching need to be revised and this rethinking has been motivated by a constantly evolving context characterized by environmental changes, increasingly evident cultural diversity and, above all, the rapid spread of new technologies.

Therefore, Geography in the first cycle of education, particularly in primary school, where it can have the greatest impact, must now focus above all on the development of cognitive, analytical and critical skills, and students should be prepared to understand and deal with contemporary challenges, including those related to the environment, multicultural society and new technologies, using geographical tools as keys. For example, it is crucial to make it clear that for Geography education, knowing “where

the seas are, and the rivers, the cities, the mountains and the deserts” (as famously stated in Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*, 1943) cannot be considered an aim, but rather a means. In short, educational action needs to be recalibrated to raise pupils’ awareness of the role of human activity in the planet.

For contemporary Geography, a fundamental challenge emerges: to review and redefine educational content in the light of the major emergencies that characterize today’s world. As Giorda (2016) points out, Geography education could very well absorb the entire experience of the challenges of the Anthropocene, also related to the issues addressed in Agenda 2030; this concept represents a crucial educational perspective, as it requires a revision of priorities in the teaching of Geography.

Also, according to Giorda (2019), Geography education could even become the “core organizer” of the core issues and skills for citizens in relation to current issues in the Anthropocene; this implies the need for a geographical worldview that promotes understanding of spatial dynamics, global connections and sustainable management of resources and the environment.

However – and this constitutes a serious contradiction – at the very time when the challenges introduced by the Anthropocene require, above all, an in-depth understanding at the spatial level, the teaching of Geography has been downsized and even fragmented. This situation raises inevitable questions about the preparedness of future generations to face contemporary global challenges since, as a discipline that deals with the relationships between society and the environment, Geography plays a crucial role in helping students to understand and address the crucial issues of our time.

For example, the 2012 *Indicazioni nazionali* – the main reference document for designing the curriculum in the First Cycle of Education – seem to lack a clear emphasis on contemporary issues and global challenges, while containing a strong reference to more traditional themes, such as orientation, landscape and region (Fatichenti, 2023). This document represents the definitive shift from a teaching-learning based mainly on content to a didactics aimed instead at the

acquisition of competences, a didactics therefore capable of affecting the culture, attitudes and behavior of the individual. However, with regard to the crucial environmental and social issues, the document contains rather general considerations: the term “sustainable development” never appears... On the other hand, with regard to the great current challenges, even the EU has shown increasing attention over the last decade. Indeed, the European Parliament’s 2018 Recommendation emphasizes the importance of acquiring eight so-called “key competences”, i.e. “those which everyone needs for personal fulfilment and development, employability, social inclusion, a sustainable lifestyle, a fruitful life in peaceful societies, health-conscious living and active citizenship. They are developed in a lifelong learning perspective, from early childhood to all adult life, through formal, non-formal and informal learning in all contexts, including family, school, workplace, neighborhood and other communities”<sup>2</sup>.

The same Recommendation, in describing these competences, does not mention Geography, but it has been appropriately pointed out that the discipline is in fact present in each of them (De Vecchis et al., 2020, pp. 182-187).

Moreover, we have to consider that in 2018 a further document was published by the MIUR, entitled *Indicazioni nazionali e nuovi scenari* (National Indications and new scenarios), in which it is emphasized that the theme of citizenship is – or should be – the “true integrating background and reference point of all the disciplines that contribute to defining the curriculum. Citizenship concerns all the major areas of knowledge (...). It is not a question of ‘adding’ new teachings, but rather of recalibrating existing ones” (MIUR, 2018, p. 18).

But in Italy, have the crucial issues of the globalized world actually begun to assert themselves in teaching practice? If the answer is affirmative, how can they find space in the few

hours reserved for Geography without undermining its traditional thematic nuclei? A partial answer to these questions came, again from the institutional front, with Ministerial Decree 35 of 22 June 2020, which in fact defined the teaching of Civic Education in schools of all levels. This has undoubtedly inaugurated a new challenge for schools, represented above all by the transversality of this teaching, the introduction of which implies that all disciplines can contribute to the achievement of the objectives set out in the legislation, as well as to the construction and consolidation of social and civic competences. However, as has already been discussed, the guidelines need some conceptual remodelling (Piastra, 2021) and the relationship between Geography and Civic Education also requires specific reflection and definition (Fatichenti, 2023).

A further reflection concerns the fact that in Italy a certain gap still persists between academic Geography and the Geography actually taught in schools; this has become even more evident considering that many of the themes addressed in the university course aimed at teaching Primary School are nowadays closely linked to Agenda 2030 or the Anthropocene. The programmes of academic Geography courses, within the pathways for becoming a pre-school or primary school teacher, do indeed cover a broad spectrum of current environmental and social issues; however, this often clashes with the reality of school curriculum design, in which these issues are almost always addressed in a marginal and dispersed way, since they are also partly entrusted to disciplines such as Science or Civic Education.

Finally, one question is in-service teacher training, which Law No. 107 of 13 July 2015 defined as “compulsory, permanent and structural”, after a long period in which it had instead been abandoned and entrusted to the voluntary initiative of teachers. As reported in the XV Report of the Italian Geographical Society, dedicated to the Italian school (Morri, 2022a), the issue of training appears strategic for Geography: on the one hand, Italy has a teaching staff with an average age among the highest in Europe, with a consequent period of training that is now very distant in time; on the other hand,

<sup>2</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning (2018/C 189/01), *Official Journal of the European Union*, 4.6.2018, Annex, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01)).

precisely Geography, more than other subjects, “changes” quickly and ever more rapidly: this is the case, for example, of economic or geopolitical issues. The example of China is enough to understand the matter: about the most populous state and which must be considered among the world’s major economic powers, anachronisms and misunderstandings are frequent, in school teaching or in textbooks (Piastra, 2020). Therefore, training should be considered an absolute priority, and this is a front on which the Italian Association of Geography Teachers (AIIG) has been working in Italy since 1954.

### 3. The teacher survey

#### 3.1. Methodological framework and survey purpose

This research adopts a descriptive approach aimed at collecting data, perceptions, and reflections on some issues related to the teaching of Geography in Italian primary and lower secondary schools. A mixed-method design was employed (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), combining quantitative and qualitative elements through the administration of an original questionnaire composed of both closed-ended (multiple choice and Likert-type scales) and open-ended questions (Zammuner, 1998; Corbetta, 2015). This allowed to collect both structured data and personal insights from participants.

The questionnaire was developed using the function “Forms” available in the Google Workspace<sup>3</sup>, ensuring ease of distribution, accessibility and data interpretation. It included 12 main questions (some with sub-questions), grouped into the following thematic areas: instructional time allocated to Geography, integration of the 2030 Agenda themes into this subject, relationship between Geography and Civic Education, any shortcomings in teacher training, and finally the perceived status of Geography in the school curriculum.

The questionnaire was initially administered to a group of already known primary and lower

secondary school teachers, operating in Umbria (central Italy). These first participants were encouraged to further share the questionnaire with other colleagues of their professional networks, resulting in a “snowball sampling” technique (Goodman, 1961). The only inclusion criterion was that participants were (or had been) teachers of Geography at one of the school levels mentioned (however, some pre-primary teachers also took part in the study).

A total of 54 teachers answered the survey, representing various age groups and years of teaching experience. Due to its convenience and intentional nature, the sample should be considered non-probabilistic (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), based on voluntary participation and membership of a professional network. Hence, no statistical representativeness is claimed; moreover, the presumed geographical concentration of the sample in Umbria provides contextual coherence but also constitutes a limitation in terms of the generalizability of the findings.

The main purpose of the investigation was to conduct an initial observation of teaching practices and perceptions related to Geography, rather than to produce generalizable or inferential results. As such, the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive, offering directions for future, broader-scale investigations.

The questionnaire underwent a qualitative validation process, in line with the exploratory nature of the study. In particular, content validity was assessed to ensure that the questions were aligned with the research objectives and adequately covered the topics of Geography teaching, education for sustainability, and integration with Civic Education. This validation was conducted through preliminary consultation with several teachers and subject experts, whose suggestions led to terminological improvements and clearer question formulations. Validity was also ensured by submitting the questionnaire to a selected pilot group of teachers, who evaluated its clarity, accessibility, and perceived coherence with real school practices. Their feedback helped refine the wording and structure of the questions.

The teacher questionnaire was organized according to the following.

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to the University of Perugia student Sebastiano Maiotti for the support in the administration of the questionnaire.

1) Which age group do you belong to?

- ☐ 20-34
- ☐ 35-50
- ☐ 51 and over

2) How long have you been teaching?

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3) In which grade do you teach?

- ☐ Kindergarten
- ☐ Primary school
- ☐ Lower Secondary School

4) According to you, the number of hours dedicated to Geography in your school grade:

- ☐ Insufficient
- ☐ Sufficient
- ☐ More than sufficient

4.1) In your opinion, how many more hours might Geography need?

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5) Have you ever joined/will you join projects related to the Agenda 2030 action programme for sustainable development?

- ☐ Yes, I have joined/intend to join
- ☐ No, I have never joined/do not intend to join

5.1) If so, do you remember the title of any project?

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6) In your opinion, to what extent the topics of “Agenda 2030” and/or other major challenges facing the contemporary world are explored in your school grade?

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ A little
- ☐ Enough
- ☐ Very much

7) In your opinion, which environmental challenges and crucial social issues of the contemporary world should necessarily be explored in school?

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8) According to you, in your school grade, in order to integrate the treatment of traditional themes (orientation, landscape, region, ...) and the issues related to the great challenges of the

contemporary world, the hours of the Geography curriculum are:

- ☐ Insufficient
- ☐ Sufficient
- ☐ More than sufficient

8.1) In the case of “insufficient”, which traditional theme would you be willing to give up?

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8.2) Which theme that you feel is missing or underestimated would you like to include or enhance?

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9) We often see, even from authoritative figures in politics, science or journalism, the formulation of “appeals in defence of Geography” in schools. Are you aware of the role that the Italian Association of Geography Teachers (AIIG) has played in this respect for decades?

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ A little
- ☐ Enough
- ☐ Very much

10) How do you rate your training to deal in the classroom with issues related to sustainability and, more generally, to the major current challenges (climate emergency, energy transition, migratory movements, development gaps...)?

- ☐ Inadequate
- ☐ Little adequate
- ☐ Sufficiently adequate
- ☐ More than adequate

11) In 2019, with effect from the following year, Civic Education was reintroduced in all school grades for one hour per week. To what extent do you think this “discipline beyond disciplines” can effectively contribute to raising awareness/preparing pupils for the crucial issues of our time?

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Not very much
- ☐ Fairly
- ☐ Very much

12) For many topics, Geography and Civic Education can converge: would you agree to give the Geography teacher a coordinating role in Civic Education?

- ☐ Not at all
- ☐ Not very much
- ☐ Fairly
- ☐ Very much

12.1) In this regard, you are free to express further considerations.

### 3.2 Main results

1-2) 54 teachers responded to the survey: 48.1% aged over 50, 40.7% aged between 35 and 50, 11% aged under 35. Approximately 90% of the teachers are therefore over 35 years of age and claim to have been teaching for at least 20 years.

3) More than half (55.6%) are primary school teachers; 33.3% are secondary school teachers and 11.1% pre-school teachers.

4) 55.6% of teachers believe that an insufficient number of hours are allocated to Geography; 40.7% believe instead that the hours are sufficient; only 3.7% believe that the hours devoted to the subject are more than sufficient (Figure 1).

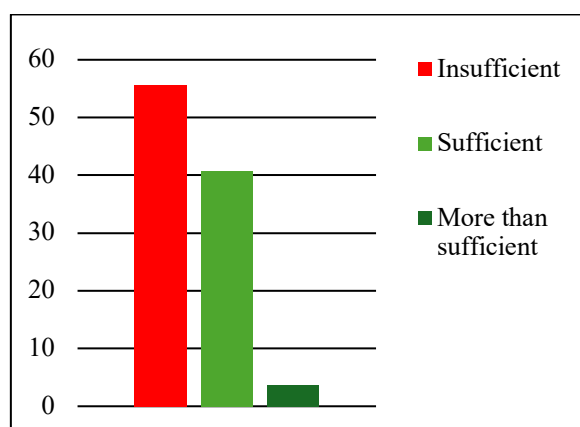


Figure 1. School time allocated to Geography (First Cycle of Education) as perceived by teachers (%). Source: Author's elaboration.

4.1) This question was answered mainly by primary and lower secondary school teachers, who believe that at least one or two extra hours are needed to teach Geography; some even

suggest three extra hours; only two teachers considered the time devoted to the discipline at school more than sufficient.

5-5.1) The answers reveal a certain balance between those who have joined Agenda 2030 projects (53.7%) and those who have never joined<sup>4</sup> (46.3%). Education for sustainability requires an unavoidable cultural transformation, even at school. This means that there is a need to work on Geography teacher training (Figure 2).

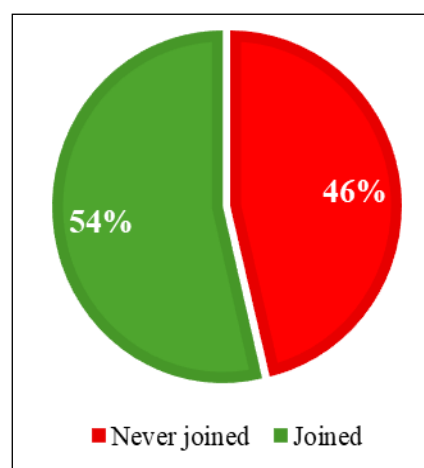


Figure 2. Teachers involvement in Agenda 2030 projects. Source: Author's elaboration.

6) Here too, the answers confirm the impression given by the answers to the previous question: while for 52% these topics are addressed little or not at all, for the rest of the teachers they are addressed fairly (42.6%) or very much (5.4%). This seems an unclear perception of the actual situation, partly due to the fact that Science and the transversal discipline of Civic Education are involved in this educational objective, which requires interdisciplinary coordination<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Those who answered in the affirmative then stated the type of project they had taken part in: e.g. recycling, but also energy and water saving and fair trade. Some teachers then stated that they had taken part in projects on sustainability, but without remembering the specific topic.

<sup>5</sup> The teaching of Civic Education (33 hours) is based on three thematic nuclei: 1) Constitution, law (national and international), legality and solidarity; 2) Sustainable development, environmental education, knowledge and protection of heritage and territory; 3) Digital Citizenship. In the first cycle of education, the

7) Thirty teachers felt it was important to focus on environmental and social issues in a globalized world at school: of these, half suggested focusing on the climate emergency; others mentioned topics such as “alternative energy, fair trade, poverty and economic imbalances in the world”, “globalization and migration movements”, “peace and justice, gender equality”, “clean water and responsible consumption”, “global citizenship, use of technology, human rights”.

8-8.1) Is Geography given sufficient time to deal with the traditional thematic nuclei (orientation, landscape, region...) and, in addition, the themes relating to the great challenges of the contemporary world? About half of the teachers considered the time available to be sufficient (35.2%) and more than sufficient (13%); 51.9%, on the other hand, felt that the hours were insufficient to deal with the traditional themes of the discipline added to the crucial issues in a globalized world. In the case of an “insufficient” answer to the previous question, one was then asked to indicate which topic one would be prepared to give up. The answers varied: one stated that he would be willing to give up “some parts of physical geography”, another “the study of regions in depth”, yet another “the study of Italian regions or landscapes, which are extremely repetitive...”, another “orientation and cartography”; finally, another, because of the difficulty of giving up traditional themes, suggested “modifying the degree of depth”.

8.2) The following answers were given to this question:

- “Conflicts between countries, conflicts of an ethnic nature, geopolitical dynamics in general, geo-economic issues”.
- “The climate emergency and related issues”.
- “One or more of the many challenges within the 2030 Agenda”.

cross-curricular teaching of Civic Education is co-taught by class teachers and a coordinator is identified from among them. In the second cycle, coordination generally falls to the legal-economic subjects teacher (if this type of teacher is not present, the class council will assign this role to another teacher).

- “Man’s relationship with the environment in which he lives”.

9) On the role played by the Italian Association of Geography Teachers (AIIG), which has been defending the presence of this discipline in schools since 1954, the answers were quite surprising: 42.6% said they did not know AIIG’s activities and 38.9% said they knew little about it; only 14.8% said they knew enough about it, just 3.7% said they knew a lot about it.

10) Teachers answered this question mostly positively: 46.3% considered their preparation adequate and 40.7% considered it more than adequate; only 13% considered their preparation not very adequate.

11) A certain scepticism regarding Civic Education emerges from the answers: 40.7% of the teachers think that Civic Education can contribute enough to this educational purpose and 16.7% think that it can contribute a lot; on the other hand, 37% think that the contribution will be modest, while 5.6% even think no contribution will come from it.

12) The majority of teachers then agree with the hypothesis of giving the Geography teacher a coordinating role in Civic Education (these are the percentages: 33.3% very much agree, 33.3% fairly agree, 24.1% not very much agree, 9.3% not at all agree) (Figure 3).

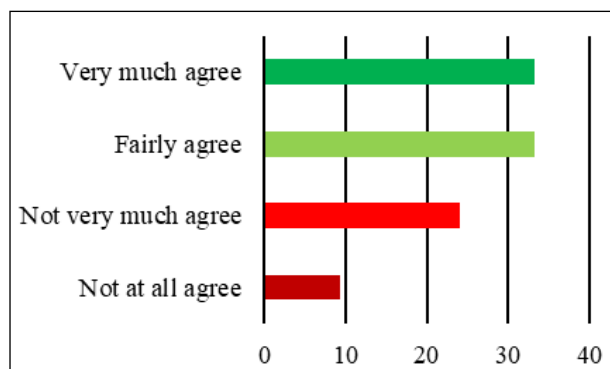


Figure 3. Teachers’ opinion about the hypothesis of giving to Geography a coordinating role in Civic Education (%). Source: Author’s elaboration.

12.1) In order to better understand the opinion of the interviewees, it is also useful to report the considerations that some of them freely expressed on the subject:



- “The geography teacher, in my opinion, has the full capabilities to be able to coordinate Civic Education”.
- “I am quite in agreement with entrusting the coordination of Civic Education to the Geography teacher, but I believe that these themes can also be explored with equal success in the hours of other disciplines”.
- “The coordination of the hours set aside for Civic Education should be entrusted to the Geography teacher, or to the History/Geography teacher in the case of Primary School; this would be extremely useful for partially restoring the now lost role of Geography and for dealing in the best possible way with issues that are too fragmented today”.
- “I have had experience in the past of combining Geography/Civics Education in Secondary School and even though the syllabus had been completed effectively, dealing with such cross-cutting and interdisciplinary aspects I believe should involve all the teachers in the class”.

#### 4. Discussion

The survey provides an overview of teachers' perceptions regarding the role of Geography in the First cycle of education, particularly in relation to sustainability and Civic Education. Several key trends arise from the analysis, warranting further consideration.

First, the demographic profile of the participants indicates a sample predominantly composed of experienced educators: nearly 90% are over the age of 35 and have been teaching for at least 20 years. This lends significant weight to the responses, as they reflect perspectives shaped by an extensive experience and a deep familiarity with the evolution of teaching practices.

One of the most significant data concerns the perceived inadequacy of the time allocated to Geography, with 55.6% of respondents indicating that the curricular hours are insufficient. Open-ended responses confirm this impression, with many teachers suggesting the addition of one to three hours per week. This

highlights a widespread concern that the current allocation of time for Geography does not align with the educational needs of the discipline.

Another relevant issue is the involvement of teachers in projects related to Agenda 2030 (53.7 percent of teachers have participated in such activities, 46.3 percent have never joined). This figure reflects a growing attention to sustainability issues, but also the need to strengthen the training of Geography teachers. It emerges a fragmented understanding of the current situation, perhaps due to the interdisciplinary nature of these themes, which are also covered in Science and Civic Education. Although these are cross-curricular themes, the teaching of Geography is particularly involved. For example, many of the goals of Agenda 2030 are “expressions of values, attitudes and knowledge that the teaching of Geography can offer to the new generations: a project of education for sustainable development, precisely because of its broad potential, can make use of several key concepts (diversity, eco-sustainability, permanence, quality of life...) that, appropriately interconnected and ordered, are able to reorganize the discipline” (De Vecchis and Pasquinelli d'Allegria, 2024, p. 86).

Thus, the survey reveals a strong interest among teachers in global environmental and social issues, such as climate emergency, alternative energy sources, poverty and economic imbalances in the world, migration movements, etc. However, more than half of the respondents (51.9%) feel that there is insufficient time to address both traditional subject areas (such as spatial orientation, landscape, and region) and contemporary challenges. As a result, some teachers are willing to reduce portions of traditional content to make room for new themes, while others suggest a more flexible approach to deepening these topics.

An unexpected finding concerns the lack of awareness regarding the activities of the AIIG (Italian Association of Geography Teachers). There is a need to strengthen the connection between educators and this professional

network, not only to foster the status of Geography but also the cooperation among universities, schools and organizations and associations working in local communities. This connection is essential for promoting new forms of citizenship, coexistence, and the preservation of human values (Gavinelli and Rossi, 2008; Giorda and Puttilli, 2011).

On the level of perceived competence, most teachers consider themselves adequately trained to meet the current educational challenges. However, teachers show a rather surprising perception in this regard, especially if one takes into account the fact that primary school teachers' training in Geography involves the acquisition of a very modest number of CFU (University Credits): just 9, as opposed to 16 for History and 26 for Science; this is in fact an unbalanced distribution, from which teachers' limited training inevitably derives (De Vecchis and Pasquinelli d'Allegra, 2024, pp. 24-25).

With respect to Civic Education, opinions among teachers are divided, with a notable degree of skepticism surrounding this discipline. Education is an evolving process, shaped by the imperative to prepare future generations to be informed and responsible citizens. In this context, Geography and Civic Education are indispensable, each providing unique knowledge and skills. In fact, "the teaching of Geography is constitutive of citizenship, as the life of populations is closely connected to the space in which they live" (Santerini, 2010, p. 31). Although Geography and Civic Education are closely interconnected, they should not be conflated, as their respective natures and objectives differ. Together, however, they provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the world and how it "works": Geography aims to provide a fundamental understanding of its physical and human aspects, while Civic Education focuses on the values, principles, and practices essential to democratic societies (Fatichenti, 2023).

The proposal to entrust the coordination of Civic Education to Geography teachers has garnered broad support. Respondents highlight

Geography's potential to connect local and global perspectives and its ability to adopt a systemic approach to interdisciplinary topics. Furthermore, it is also necessary to be aware that "the eye of the geographer today is no longer sufficient on its own to grasp the complexity and articulation of the world's forms. The speed and even the urgency with which relations between individuals, local and global geographies and between knowledge are being redrawn today require interaction with other competences and imply the contribution of other disciplines: the human, social and earth sciences" (Pioletti, 2020, p. 9).

To summarize, the results reveal a tension between the perceived importance of Geography education in addressing contemporary global challenges and the limited curricular space it is currently granted. Indeed, they reveal significant structural and cultural hurdles that continue to limit the full potential of the discipline. The key needs that emerge include: enhanced initial and ongoing professional development, a revision of curricula in terms of both content and time allocated, and formal recognition of Geography as a core discipline for citizenship and sustainability education.

## 5. Concluding proposals

In Italy, while waiting for a reform of higher education capable of restoring to Geography the dignity it once had, it is necessary to think about the renewal of the curriculum in the context in which this discipline is still vital, namely the First Cycle of Education. Also not to be neglected is the pre-primary school, where the fields of experience can contribute to a pre-geographical education capable of enhancing the spatial experiences of children from three to six years old: even the youngest are not passive subjects to be taught, but socio-spatial actors (Malatesta, 2015). In this way, it will also be possible for children to grow by anchoring more in-depth and structured learning paths to their personal geographies. Such pathways, rich in opportunities, experiences and evaluations, will be indispensable for maturing functional competences for citizenship, and for knowing how to practice it with respect for others, thus

expressing the most significant values of the idea of sustainability (Guaran, 2021).

It seems therefore necessary to open a debate on the Geography curriculum to build a path as unitary as possible and able to connect all levels of education (Pasquinelli d'Allegra, 2017). It seems essential to think of a renewed “vertical curriculum” that, starting from the competence goals and learning objectives contained in the *Indicazioni nazionali* (2012 and 2018), can provide students with a holistic and cohesive vision of the world in which they live and in which active citizenship and environmental awareness are crucial aspects. Well-known recent research confirmed that Italian students' awareness of global issues is low (OECD, 2020).

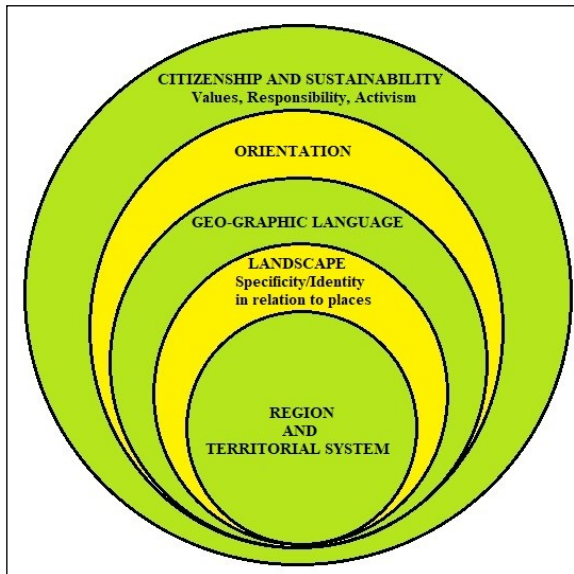


Figure 4. Proposal for integration of our time crucial issues into the Geography curriculum (First Cycle of Education). Source: Author's elaboration.

In this sense, although the vertical curriculum for pre-school and primary schools proposed by De Vecchis and Pasquinelli d'Allegra (2024, pp. 118-122) goes in the right direction, in our opinion there is still space for more attention to the environmental challenges and sensitive social issues of the contemporary world. There is no single, predefined curriculum model to refer to, but a vertical curriculum relating to the First Cycle of Education should integrate the foundational Geography cores formulated in the 2012 *Indicazioni nazionali* within the framework

proposed by the 2018 *Indicazioni nazionali e nuovi scenari* (Figure 4).

While in the Second Cycle of Education the reduction of Geography hours manifests extremely critical perspectives on the future of this discipline and its role in education, in the First Cycle it is now necessary to lay the bases for a renewal of the curriculum. There can be many solutions.

Further efforts are needed in the area of *interdisciplinary integration*, as geographical topics could be explored in transversal educational paths. It has been stressed that Geography, by its nature, is suitable for interweaving with history, science, art, literature, philosophy, technology... Geography studies space in time, the landscape as a cultural and natural product, the relationship between man and the environment as a central hub of the great issues of our time (biodiversity, sustainable development, migration, globalisation). The space-time dimension of Geography makes it a powerful tool for linking knowledge and stimulating a deep understanding of reality (De Vecchis, Pasquinelli d'Allegra and Pesaresi, 2011). However, these linkages are often missing, making the teaching of Geography isolated and uninspiring for students.

The use of *geo-technologies* should also be enhanced: new opportunities for teaching Geography have long been coming from tools such as GIS (Geographic Information Systems), Google Earth, or interactive applications and virtual reality; these are tools that can make the study of Geography interactive and engaging, whereas students often still perceive Geography as a notionistic discipline, rather than a dynamic study of human interactions with the environment) (Pesaresi, 2017; Lucidi and Pesaresi, 2023). Furthermore, the role that geo-technologies, e.g. augmented reality, can play in bringing inclusive theories into teaching practice should not be forgotten (Betti, Borghi, Virgini, 2023).

But this is not enough. For example, we are convinced that efforts must be made to foster in learners the concept of *identity in relation to places*. It has been observed that the “real-life place” allows one to move away from reductive didactic paths and approach a geographical knowledge in permanent dialogue with everyday life, in which the spatial dimension contributes

to the rooting of each person in a critical, participatory, sustainable, multicultural and trans-scale citizenship perspective (Molinari, 2017, p. 43). In addition, in the time of *non-places* (Augé, 1992), that is, of exogenous forms of territorialization, characterized by transit rather than habitation, it's important to understand how individuals identify with places and how places influence perceptions of self and others: a sense of belonging produces territory! (Frémont, 2008).

The construction of this complex pathway also requires reflection and carving out time for classroom work, possibly to develop a new approach to the traditional themes of landscape and region. All disciplines enable pupils to observe, question, investigate, understand, to propose discourses about the world with the aim of acting on it (Thémines, 2006), then geography must enable pupils to question, ask, learn and use its own languages, methods, questioning and approaches (Mérenne-Schoumaker, 2017). Encouraging a critical approach to learning geography will help students to develop deep understanding, stimulate curiosity, promote critical thinking, appreciate the complexity of the world: in short, to become adults (Charpentier, 2023). These aspects in turn involve the issue of *teacher training*: we need to think about a preparation that includes not only subject-specific skills, but also the ability to integrate them meaningfully into other disciplines and to exploit innovative teaching methods and technologies.

Geography in Italian schools is in crisis, yet political institutions have recently turned their attention to this problem. On 30 March 2022, the “Commission for the knowledge and study of Geography in schools” was established at the Ministry of Education; this act for its institutional relevance boasts few precedents in the history of relations between Geography (understood as a community of scholars and teachers) and the institutions called upon to promote and guarantee its teaching (Morri, 2022b). Unfortunately, due to the fall of the government that initiative came to a premature halt.

However, a further opportunity for intervention may be represented by the “Study Commission for the elaboration and formulation of proposals for the revision of the *Indicazioni nazionali* and the Guidelines for the First and

Second Cycle of Education”, set up on 9 July 2024 by the current Minister of Education and Merit. This body is made up of 17 disciplinary sub-commissions<sup>6</sup>. On AIIG’s initiative, the geographical associations united in SoGeI (Coordination of Italian Geographical Associations) worked on the preparation of a document that was then presented to the Ministerial Commission in two hearings (19 and 21 June 2024). In this document, it was reiterated that Geography is useful not as a notional discipline, but because it helps to understand how human beings are spatially organized – in economic, political and cultural terms – and why they move from one part of the Earth to another; Geography then helps to read regional inequalities and attempts to propose solutions to mitigate them; it helps to build virtuous relationships with the landscape and the environment, also in view of the climate changes underway. In this sense, the document also recommends the clear definition of a “vertical Geography curriculum”, which would benefit didactic continuity, lifelong learning and the development of specific skills that can be applied in multiple subject contexts. Furthermore, the document urges to provide students with IT skills, to educate them in digitalization, to equip laboratories with opensource GIS software (thus free of charge for schools and/or the State), not only to initiate the use and creation of digital cartography, but also to experiment with a conscious use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the definition of relational databases. Finally, it is recommended to enhance the role of Geography teaching (and therefore of teachers) within the teaching of Civic Education, in order to create an active relationship between territorial education (see Art. 9 of the Italian Constitution and the European Landscape Convention) and education for sustainability (Agenda 2030): in particular, it is proposed to revise the structure of Civic Education, bringing the thematic core “Sustainable Development and Agenda 2030” back among the themes of

<sup>6</sup> Coordination of the work of the Geography Teaching Commission has been entrusted to the AIIG National President (Riccardo Morri), who will work in collaboration with experts in the teaching of Geography and teacher training in both universities and schools.

Geography<sup>7</sup>. This is a clear educational proposal, also at the political level: for example, we must consider that sustainability is a concept that is explicitly referenced within both Finnish and Swedish curricula text but is not found within the national curriculum in England (Hammond et al. 2024).

While waiting for the indispensable revision of the *Indicazioni nazionali*, the current scenario of Geography education in Italy knows threats and opportunities (Table 1). Among the threats one must consider the marginalization of Geography, also as a result of the fragmentation of geographical knowledge: this risks increasing the deficiencies in students' preparation in Geography, limiting their ability to understand the contemporary world and its global challenges; furthermore, there is the risk of the loss of spatial competences, because Geography provides the tools to orient oneself in the territory and to use the geo-graphic language, that is, to acquire key competences for everyday life and for active citizenship; finally, the marginalization of the discipline may disincentivize Geography teachers from the search for updated methodologies and educational paths, with negative repercussions on the quality of teaching.

Threats	Opportunities
Reduction in geographical knowledge	Renewing didactics
Loss of spatial skills	Enhancing interdisciplinarity
Demotivation of teachers	Focusing on key and crucial contemporary issues

Table 1. The current scenario of Geography education in Italy. Source: Author's elaboration.

However, there are undoubtedly also opportunities: e.g. the reduction of hours can be an opportunity to rethink the teaching of the discipline, adopting innovative and engaging methodologies (such as the use of digital technologies and the enhancement of outdoor learning experiences); furthermore, Geography,

by its very nature, has the advantage of being able to be integrated with other disciplines to create more complex learning paths in which the same themes are considered from different perspectives; finally, the opportunity seems to arise to focus teaching on highly topical issues, such as globalization, migration, climate change and environmental sustainability: crucial issues, to prepare students for the challenges of the future.

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<sup>7</sup> The document can be consulted at the following link: <https://www.aiig.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Associazioni-di-Geografia-documento-audizioni-19-21-giugno-2024.pdf>.

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