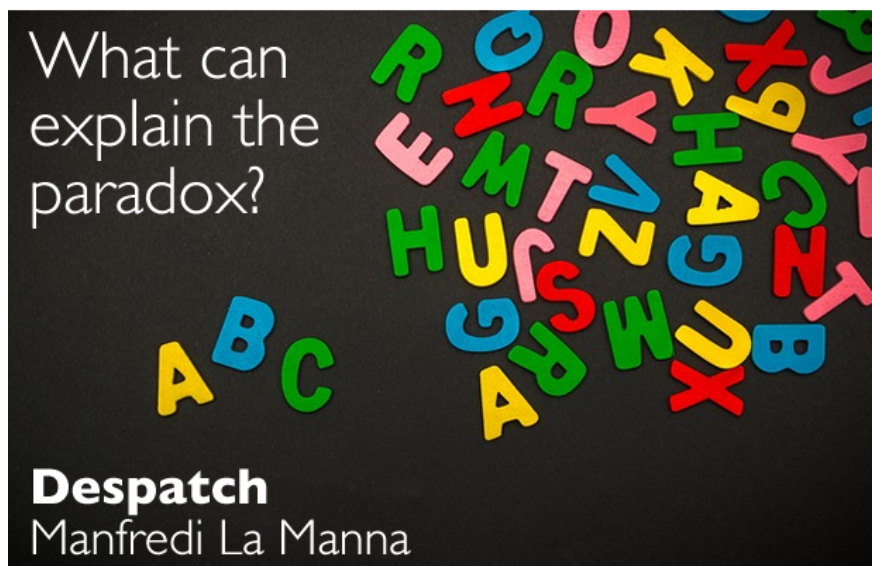


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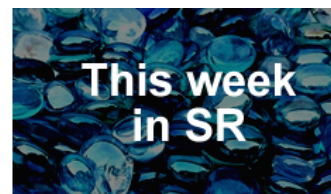
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Take a stroll in any Italian city and apart from the ubiquitous café society you may be struck by the number and variety of bookstores you will encounter. Why are Italians such avid book readers? The answer is that they are most definitely not: year after year, the percentage of Italians who do not read a single book is stubbornly fixed at over 50% and the percentage of 'strong' readers (at least one book a month) is a miserly 15%. What can explain the paradox?

Part of the answer may be found in some peculiar features of Italian culture and society, such as the requirements to buy 'prescribed' textbooks from primary school to university courses, or the existence of a large religious market (yes, there are bookstores specialising in such literature). But perhaps the most surprising, and from a Scottish perspective, interesting reason for the popularity of booksellers is the insatiable appetite for reading to be found among 4- to 14-year olds, 96% of whom have read at least one book in 2022. The percentage among 0- to 3-year olds is an astounding 70%. Obviously, the latter is made up of books read to infants by parents, teachers, etc.

I have not been able to find equivalent figures for Scotland (perhaps a telling fact in itself?) but I venture to suggest that the figures are likely to be substantially lower (I would happily stand corrected if any SR reader has evidence to the contrary).

I think that two main factors may be responsible for the (assumed) discrepancy between Italian and Scottish reading habits among young and very young children. One is intrinsic, the other definitely policy-induced. Italian (and especially Italian grammar) is a much more difficult subject to learn than English and therefore early and sustained exposure to the written word is an absolute necessity to reach even a basic knowledge of the language.



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But there is another and potentially more relevant reason why Scottish children read less: they are not taught properly. By this, I do not mean that Scottish teachers are less capable than their Italian counterparts, but rather that the expectations of reading competence as enshrined in the pernicious Curriculum for Excellence are far too low.

Evidence? Just compare the average attainment levels of literacy at the end of primary one in Scotland and Italy. You will be surprised (and not in a good way). If you have a taste for jargon-laden, unmonitorable aims and word salads, you will enjoy reading the **Curriculum for Excellence** (<https://scotlandscurriculum.scot/3/>). On the other hand, if you are looking for measurable metrics of achievement, you will be sorely disappointed.

This is not a matter of academic debate on education. It is a fundamental aspect of the social contract that is supposed to be fulfilled by the government. Apart from the aberrations of private education and home schooling, a key clause of the social contract is that citizens delegate to the state the power to educate all children, so that each child can attain their full potential and that a given minimum standard of knowledge is achieved by all pupils.

The setting of such a minimum standard is a fundamental tool for any policy aimed at achieving a meaningful definition of equality: the lower the standard, the more acute is the level of inequality considered to be acceptable. Far from being elitist, the demand for higher minimum standards of literacy (and numeracy) should be loudest among progressive parents and policy-makers.

Perhaps a good use for the infamous SNP campervan would be to provide transport and accommodation for a fact-finding trip to Italian schools.

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