

Introduction

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This issue of the *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* deals with one of the most classical topic in our discipline, namely that of *educational choices*. Educational choices are here explored both as the set of macro-dynamics concerning the distribution of educational opportunities in terms of social stratification, and as micro events that affect everyday life of all (or almost all) young people and their families in industrialized societies. In all cases the term ‘educational choice’ refers not only the school choice to but all kinds of decisions social actors are required to make at different stages of their educational development, either for themselves or for their relatives, in order to achieve higher degrees of literacy, cultural integration and professional opportunities; in other words, to increase their chances of social mobility. Thus, the specific object of the choice we will refer to is not only the offer of formal education but also of all those aspects that are included in the wider definition of informal and non-formal education (CEC, 2000, p. 8).

A reflexive (not deterministic) approach to educational choice

Within the public debate, the issue of choice (and, more specifically, the value of freedom in school choice) has gained a prominent role because of

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a great number of economic and social implications that derive from education policies, connected to the implementation of effective programs, which aim at giving families more opportunities to choose what school their children will attend. The crux of this debate is no doubt how to balance the need to respecting individuals' right to choose the best educational provisions, in an open and transparent demand-supply dialectic, whilst – at the same time – ensuring that basic common principles embedded in a modern public system of education (such as commonality of values, universalism in treatment, protection of minorities, the right to access high quality education independently from social and economic status, and so on) are preserved. Different regulatory regimes, both among EU countries and in other OCSE nations, ranging from the more state-dependent to the more open to private and independent education, have paid attention to measuring the degree of freedom in parental choice, as an indicator of successful changes in the provision of social welfare oriented to a *quasi*-market management.

I do agree with J. Le Grand (1997), however, when he argues that focusing on a predominantly consumerist discourse may conceal how, often, public service users are treated as “pawns”, essentially passive and unresponsive subjects, with little ability to express an informed, mature, or powerful choice over service provision. This occurs when the sociological gaze is still riddled with determinism, looking almost exclusively to the strongest determinants on choice, be they internal or external to the chooser. In light of the challenges of post-modernity and of increasing social differentiation, on the other hand, the analysis of several educational processes must be subjected to a revision that takes into consideration individuals' growing difficulty in making educational choices as a result of the challenges people face in envisioning and constructing satisfying life projects, overwhelmed by the multiplicity of opportunities and the ever-growing nature of aspirations.

On the one hand, the opening of a set of new opportunities increases aspirations and investments; on the other hand, the dwindling legitimation of formal education (schools, vocational training services, private training services, cultural institutions) and the increase of uncertainty and precariousness in the labour market are factors that make social mobility even more pluralistic and unpredictable. This, in turn, leads young people and their parents to under-evaluate the importance of long-term goal and objectives in making educational choices (which tend to be more fatalistic or extremely pragmatic). Conversely, they pay tend to engage with flexible and variable systems of preference, trying to choose continuously and

trying to make decisions that are potentially reversible. This profile of the 'expressive' chooser seems to fit perfectly with the surplus of chances in contemporary society.

Thus it is of great interest for the sociology of education, as well as for the area of social policy connected with the provision of educational opportunities and distributive norms, to explore the motivations, cultural beliefs, and the structured and informal interactions that occur between social agents and educational institutions, and more specifically, between various types of agents involved in making decisions for young people's education and creating other chances in the transition to adulthood. By adopting a paradigm focused on individualization the subject can be seen as the social actor at the centre of situated decisional problems, dominated by a will to choose at all costs, under pressure by the new social imperative of building a "choice biography" (Beck, 1992), although he/she is not always able to forecast events and to make a cost-benefit balance.

Among the new generations, who are the focus of this whole issue, what we observe is a strong dynamic between *autonomy* and *heteronomy* during the decision-making process. At an interpretive level, this emerges, on the one hand, from the strength of traditional determinants (above all the influence of family background, and the inequality of educational supply in different territories) but, on the other hand, it is connected to a considerable individual reflective potential linked, for example, to personal biography and identities (gender, age, life history), which are characterized by considerable discontinuity if compared with the past. As a result, the outcomes, but also the processes, that characterize educational choice appear unpredictable and partially obscure: innovation and creativity can be interpreted as fractures of the ordinary dynamics of choice (risky or winning choices?); fragility and social immobility can be seen as the traits of unsuccessful choices (loosing choice?). What changes in each situation (that is, what is worth studying) is the peculiar connection – which varies in each case – between individuals' life path,, the structure of chances, the conditions under which the decision-making process is taking place (and the amount of awareness agents possess) and the structure of social and cultural constraints that influence the present and future positions of choosers.

The papers presented in this issue are all developed entirely within the framework of the reflexive approach to social identity (Dewey, 1933;

Mead, 1934²), which stresses the individuals' capacity of making sense of his or her action and decisions, in solitude or through exchanges with other significant members of their life context. Choice – or, even better, decision making as the “making of choice” – is no doubt a reflexive act, if we understand it to be a “creative, transformational activity, designed to open up further discussion and debate, where there is no final, summative flourish but rather an ongoing dilemma summed up by a statement such as *Now that is the question*» (Chambers, Bhosekar, Clarke, Fowler, 2005, p. 179). In such an approach, what is interesting for our perspective is to explore in-depth not so much the decision-making process *per se* (although more details about it would be useful both for sociologists and for policy makers in the educational field), but rather of the profile of the agent that emerges from the exercise of reflexive thinking about choices for the future. That means, as the following articles will demonstrate, taking into account in the analysis a series of subjective variables (such as anticipatory thinking, planning skills, capacity to become independent, temporality of vision, sense of future, past and present school experience, etc.) which, according to Archer's view of the social actor as naturally able to use reflexivity (whatever the type and level of intensity) to develop one's lifestyle in order to reach personal interests and achieve one's goals (Archer, 2003), interplay with structural variables referred both to individual (gender, age, race) and social dimensions (social capital, values underpinning offer and demand for educational opportunities, territorial constraints), .

One of the aims of the present issue, among others, is to develop an analysis of the reflexive agents (the family, young people; school management and teaching staff) coping with educational choices, using both quantitative and qualitative data (local and/or national). It would be interesting to compare the individual's ability to formulate projects or develop personal agreements with the system of opportunities offered and to overcome the structural constraints concerning not only the single educational supply, but also that which stands behind it, that is, the possibility of taking advantage of education, directly or indirectly, transforming ‘choice ability’ in ‘choice capability’³. The other aim is to

² For a recent debate in Italy on the reflexivity approach to social actor, see Gattamorta, 2009 (with essays by M. Archer, P. Donati, H. Joas, L. Gattamorta).

³ According to Sen's scholars, “capability does not denote an ability referring exclusively to the individual subject and his/her skills, because the opportunities or the means that society gives or denies the individual become part of its connotation. The adoption of this concept in the sociological context requires analytical instruments which are able to seize the

highlight all possible non-linear processes present in educational decision-making, such as discontinuities among actors involved in a given choice (i.e., parents-children, parents-teachers, students-teachers) or evidence of individual data contrasting normal and widespread trends.

The Italian framework of school choice

Before turning to a review of the contents of the different essays presented, a general overview of the Italian school choice framework within the secondary and post-secondary education system must be provided both for Italian and for international readers. In summary, Italy is characterized by the following (almost problematic) sociological peculiarities, which derive from either the recent school reform processes or from consolidated cultural and social heritage. The first is the high *influence of family background* and *regional discrepancy* both on school choice and school selection. As reported by Banca Italia, the screening on students' skills provided by the PISA study shows how "Italian students are among the lowest achiever in Europe; their results are largely affected by the family background and strong territorial differences arise" (Mocetti, 2008, p. 16). Thus, "social" selection starts early and school fails to offer equality in educational and occupational chances, discriminating Northern and Central residents from those living in Southern Italy, those coming from higher cultural and social status families from the less privileged. Family background and regional differentials in development are also factors affecting the elaboration of one's own life project in terms of "future perspectives" (i.e., job aspirations, career orientations, willingness to geographical mobility, etc.; Giancola, 2009, p. 110).

Secondly, a recent trend observed in school choice in Italy is the increase of students attending Lyceums (with a preference for the Scientific Lyceum as opposed to the Classical Lyceum), with a consequent decrease in preferences for Technical Institutes⁴. This phenomenon, named

interrelationship between the individual subjective dimension and the social institutional level, within a framework which is not static, but dynamic and procedural» (Leonardi, quoted in Catarsi, 2009, p. 4).

⁴ As to compare empirical data in a period of two decades, at the end of Nineties (1990/91) Italian Liceo students were the 25,7% out of total enrolled in upper secondary schools, and those attending Technical institutes were 40%. In 2008/09 Liceo students are the 34,1% of total and technical institutes students represent the 33,6%.

“lycealisation” of upper secondary school choice, appears to affect boys more than girls (De Luigi, 2010). It has to be interpreted as a sign that families are trying to push their children towards higher professional positions than past generation did, but also of the preoccupation that “traditional” and not intellectual jobs might be unavailable or not competitive enough in the era of the global market. As a matter of fact, young Italians are the oblivious victims of a tacit campaign of underestimation of technical jobs and manual labour, which leads young people to aspire for higher (and maybe “illusory”) positions while the *Sistema Italia* still has a demand for thousands of medium-low skilled workers that will span for the next 20 years. This represents a non-redeemable mismatch caused by unsuccessful and detrimental educational choices, which requires a much more adequate guidance counselling system (Isfol, 2010).

The third characteristic of the Italian educational system, which is related to the issue of inequality of choices, is *gender segregation*. The increase of female enrolment rates in secondary and higher education (as occurred in all EU countries since 1980) notwithstanding, certain educational sectors or school types are still characterised by a gender divide, not due to legislation but rather because of the gendered nature of educational choices. Females are oriented by family and cultural stereotypes, as well as by the labour market, towards so-called “caring professions” (health and education) and tend to pursue technical and scientific careers in smaller numbers. Conversely, males are inclined to pursue careers in engineering and other scientific professions much more than females and to avoid jobs in the care sector (Schizzerotto & Barone, 2006: 104ss; Triventi, 2010). This generates the reproduction of inequalities from education to professional sectors: those sectors with higher female participation offers less economical advantages than those with higher rates of males (wage and career differentials by gender still persist in Italy, as reported by Addabbo & Favaro, 2009).

With regards *gender differentiation* in educational motivations and choices, it must be noted that since 1990 in Italy all sociological and psychological research highlighted the different and unequal investment in boys and girls, in terms of human capital. Gender differences are present both in quality and in quantity: females are oriented to longer educational routes and have greater aspirations for success, not only in terms of high expected outcomes from education but also in terms of high occupational and status achievements (Colombo, 2003). Girls study for more hours a day compared to boys, they choose courses that last longer, and give education a double meaning: it represents both an instrumental tool (extrinsic

motivation to study) and an expressive tool (intrinsic motivation) for development. On the other hand, boys are mostly inclined to think of education as a mean to an end, as a necessary step to achieve high economic returns, or as a mere obligation (Barone, 2007).

Thus educational choices among Italians are affected by gender much more than people often realize. Also, the scarcity of guidance counselling services set up in Italy (to support the transition to upper secondary and tertiary education) rarely take gender differentiation in account. Not only is gender is poorly recognised as a determinant of school choice, and rarely is it exploited by teachers and guidance operators in supporting student choices, but also the risk of a *gendered trend in school failure and early school leaving* is also insufficiently acknowledged. As in other EU countries, dropout rates in Italy are much higher among males than females, but this fact is rarely associated to a problem of ‘unsuccessful choice’ or lack of guidance/tutoring services tailored specifically to boys (more than girls) and to supporting them in make the best decisions for their future (Colombo, 2010).

Finally, the Italian system of educational choice is characterized by *low rates of attendance in Maths, Science & Technology (MT&S) courses/degrees*, which is to be interpreted as a lack of investment in scientific knowledge (in favour, as has traditionally been the case, of the Humanities). As the OECD (2010a) reports, only 3% of all 19-year-old students enrolled in higher education in 2008 in Italy choose Mathematics and Computer Science, a figure which is well under the EU19 average (5%) and OECD average (6%). Notwithstanding that since the year 2000 the rate of MS&T graduates has increased (the average annual growth for Italy is +11%), the PISA scores collected in 2009 registered low performances in Math and Science (with the gender imbalance in MS&T faculties that still persists with only 32% of females enrolled vs. 68% of males) (OECD, 2010b).

Contents of the Special Issue

Taking into account the national framework, the six essays presented in this Special Issue explore educational choices from different points of view. Four of these refer to a common empirical basis, gathered from a

nationwide PRIN study⁵, that focused on the role of significant adults in adolescents' educational and professional choices. The first four essays are based on this large dataset (the survey was conducted on a proportional sample of about 2,000 students in upper secondary schools comparing the responses in the North and in the South of Italy) explore specific aspects of the topic. These papers share a general understanding of educational choices as crucial event in individuals' biography, which, in turn determines different destinies and set of 'life skills' in line both with social stratification and individualization. The empirical data is analysed by the authors on the basis of the hypothesis that contextual/exogenous variables have relatively little weight in the case of positive results, whereas their influence is more decisive for unsuccessful choices.

Maddalena Colombo's article, *Educational choice in action: young Italians as reflexive agents and the role of significant adults*, aims to review rational paradigms in the analysis of the decision-making process, in light of the quantitative and qualitative research outcomes. What emerges is that both parents and teachers are dealing with a sort of 'opacity' in school choice, provoked by adolescents' claim for autonomy and power of choice (although they are, *de facto*, still influenced by family expectations and educational supply) and by their tendency to neglect the help provided by parents/teachers/siblings/friends. Then a vision of young choosing subjects as reflective agents can better explain the apparent contradiction between autonomy and heteronomy; individuals who are pushed to reflection, can show causal power for mediating between the subject's internal life (especially his/her ideals) and the external structural and cultural properties of society (personal agency, that is, to act 'in this way rather than otherwise' in a given situation). For doing so, the help of significant adults is even more crucial, but – at least according to what emerges from the data - teachers are actually more prepared to face this challenge than parents are: while teachers can use meta-reflexivity and ideal thinking in talking about school choice, parents seem to base their accounts on ambiguity and superficiality.

Also drawing from the PRIN national study, Mariagrazia Santagati writes on *The transmission of cultural resources as a basis for young people's school choices*, analysing the role of the family in the construction of adolescents' choices and life projects, with a focus on cultural background (parents' degree of education) and cultural consumption within

⁵ PRIN is annual research program founded by Ministry of Education, University and research (Miur) for the development of studies of national interest all fields of knowledge.

the family (reading books and newspapers, using new media, entertainment, etc.). Rejecting a strict adherence to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, which implies a deterministic transmission of culture and life chances from parents to children, the author makes a distinction between family education/culture as *capital*, a patrimony that gives access to rewards and can be accumulated or lost, and family education/culture as an *entitlement*, that is, a real opportunity to develop one's abilities and a space to learn how to navigate complex decision-making processes. The distinction is useful to explain, for instance, the 'discontinuity' (emerging both from the quantitative data and from an analysis of a set of case studies) between parent's set of resources set and their children's ability to use it in order to make effective choices. A fruitful classification of intergenerational transmission of cultural capital emerges from Santagati's analysis of the data, composed by two opposite ideal types: a) the loss of family cultural capital, when children's choices are made as a result of instrumental motivation, in line with a directive educational style (heteronomy, passivity and continuity in choosing), b) the increase of family cultural capital, when educational choices are informed by expressive, intrinsic motivations and educational style emphasizes the primacy of children over the necessity of cultural reproduction. The first type of family environment can be marked as "dyscrasic", the second one as "promoting responsibility and risk-taking".

Also Maurizio Merico's *Chances and choices: patterns of life planning and future orientations among Italian young people* is based on the PRIN data set, and it specifically focuses on how adolescents perceive and construct their own future, through school choice and career planning. The main transformation the research highlights concerns the temporal dimension: young Italians take a short-term approach to the construction of their biographies and frequently portray their transition to adulthood in a very uncertain fashion, yet are not very apprehensive about the future. This influences their decision-making about educational chances more than other social determinants (income, territory, type of school, sex, etc.). Four ways of imagining the future are extracted from analysis (future as projected; future as possibility; future as necessity and future as fatality) and the relationship between planning skills and socio-cultural variables is explored in-depth, with the general finding that boys and girls (with significant quantitative differences) plan their future with an awareness of the constraints they have to face, without this being translated into a generalized neutralization of their aspiration to make projects: on the

whole, the “pragmatic” attitude prevails over the “fatalistic” one, even in those who are facing economic and socio-cultural deprivation.

Fausta Scardigno’s paper *Adolescents living in the North and South of Italy: territory, social capital and life choices* deals with the role of the territorial context in the decision-making process of adolescents, particularly with reference to informal education choices (friendships, leisure activities, extracurricular activities, use in the Internet, etc.). The essays questions the results of classical studies on the South of Italy’s “deficit of civiness”, and offers an alternative perspective – focused on personal resources and social capital – drawing upon the crucial dimension of reflexivity among adolescents. On the basis of the PRIN data, “social capital” is operationalized in terms of: intensity with which adolescents can count on (and trust) family, school, peer groups; measures of associative participation in formal/informal group activities; propensity to transgression. Results indicate no relevant differences between Northerners and Southerners in terms of the types of groups or associations respondents belong to; the degree and intensity of trust towards social and institutional authorities is also not substantially different among the two territorial areas considered. Instead, what distinguishes the North from the South is normative social behaviour (there is a greater propensity towards transgression in the South) and relational social capital, that is the level of opportunities to access new resources that social relations enable (more relational chance are available to Northern residents). Adolescents living in the South show attachment to one’s territory, which underscores a fundamental need to accept geographical mobility as instrumental to job-seeking, and which is not presented in the North. What emerges from the discussion of results is that contextual factors condition the choices young people make when they are confronted directly with different opportunities, but they not have a deterministic effect on individual choices. Many determinants can be other cultural and individual factors, such as the degree of “self-management” in spare time, extracurricular activities, peer socialisation, which lead – for instance – Southern adolescents to be more autonomous and able to look for places and occasions to nurture their potential independently of adult mediation, albeit with an awareness of the scarcity of resources present in their local territory.

After the PRIN-based studies, we have a section dedicated to educational choice policies, which deals with two fundamental issues: freedom and pluralism of choice, or the right to be guided in the transition process. The first issue, Valeria Fabretti’s *The public vs. private school choice debate: pluralism and recognition in education*, focuses on the

alternative between public and private school choice. The essay describes how both European policies and the academic debate have tried to account for the implications of school pluralism, which can be facilitated or constrained by the effectiveness (and the equity) of state and non-state schools. Pluralism is a core value in multi-cultural and individualised societies but, whereas public education emphasises pluralism “in” institutions, private schools incorporate pluralism “between” institutions. Looking at school choice in a number of EU countries (Italy, French, the UK, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, German, Spain, Greece, Portugal, Ireland, Luxembourg, Austria, Finland and Sweden), the paper presents the issue of political regulation and public debate surrounding the public vs. private school controversy. This is described as “fraught with complexity and procedures”, pressed by family’s individual, socio-cultural, ethnic and religious differences that claim for identity, autonomy and citizenship in the public sphere of education. As a result, what emerges is an increasing difficulty of public education in understanding and translating a pluralized educational demand into an effective supply. To overcome the current weakness in the Italian public management of school choice, the author suggests that besides including and recognizing diversities on an egalitarian level, the state school system should create clearer “criteria” through which the diversity can be “accounted for”, and achieve the fulfilment of the needs and qualities considered essential for active citizenship in public life.

The essay by Stefania Capogna, *University guidance services and support in the transition from education to work*, closes the issue with a useful commentary on the state of guidance services in Italian Universities. In times of increasing uncertainty of the workforce and of workforce profiles, as required by the job market, young people become more vulnerable and need to be continuously supported in every stage of the transition. The essay aims to understand whether and how university services are able to support students by providing a range of guidance practices in order to ensure successful career development and effective choices. Data from an empirical pilot study among student suggests that support offered only through information desk services produces disorientation and inefficiency of guidance, with a widespread difficulty in building realistic life projects. What is seen as problematic is the lack of long-time goals to personal projects and the scarce ability to determine what the subject can (and wants) to do. As suggested by the author, different kinds of attitudes towards transition (transition as destiny; as arena, as performance, as discontinuity), need to be supplemented with a new, proactive approach to guidance that accompanies the subject in the

achievement of self awareness of him/herself as a *reflexive agent*, with his/her personal resources at engaged in the decision-making: self-evaluation skills; interactive dialogue; experience; curiosity; imagination.

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