

## **Educational choices in action: young Italians as reflexive agents and the role of significant adults**

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*Abstract:* Issues related to educational choices have recently become topical because of the growing incapacity of people to predict and construct satisfying life paths since childhood. The present paper opens with a brief review of the social representation of the topic; continues outlining a profile of the social actors facing educational choice in post-modern times, highlighting how uncertainty, reversibility, multiple-choice rationality, contradictory thinking, the autonomy-heteronomy dialectic are key elements involved. Several sociological perspectives on decision-making in the educational domain are reviewed, such as the structural, the non-intentional, the limited rationality and the reflexivity approach. A recent nationwide study, carried out on a sample of adolescents and their parents/teachers in five Italian cities, provides the basis for empirical evidence on how educational choices are changing in contemporary Italian society according to new forms of constraint and new degrees of freedom/autonomy which can either limit or expands the set of opportunities available to young people. An analysis of qualitative data is focused on the personal agency that underscores the decision-making process and the reflections on its consequences, both from the side of young people and from that of their significant adults. The essay ends with some recommendations for politics aiming to reduce heteronomy and to increase personal agency in educational choices.

*Keywords:* decision-making process; autonomy-heteronomy dialectic; personal agency; adolescence; parents; teachers; guidance recommendations.

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### **Socialisation and educational choices in the post-modern age**

In light of the challenges of postmodernity, with its increasing social differentiation, all recent analyses of educational processes are likely to review their previous paradigms. The main changes concern the reduced level of “institutionality” among modern agents of socialization (family, school, university, Church, enterprise, etc.) and the increasingly personal – as opposed to social – construction of identity and group membership. Up to the 1970s, the major elements of differentiation and criteria for educational choice were derived from class and status membership according to the dominant paradigms in the Sociology of Education – functionalism and social integration/control: individuals made choices primarily on the basis of their status and roles, and, secondly, according to what was suggested and offered by socialization agencies, which provided clearly defined and shared core values (i.e., achievement, hierarchy, universal rights, equity, merit, community, *etc.*). Also, strictly related to these values were norms and the means for achieving them. Through a lifetime of internalization, good choices (that is, mainly, useful choices) were facilitated by the adoption of mainstream values, assumed by the majority of members in every social group with little or no discrepancy between individual desires and social opportunities. Thus, in the past, individuals could afford the risks and benefits of certain life choices via the buffering effect of a form of ‘protection and guidance’ offered by institutionalized education.

With the rise of globalization and the proliferation of IT communication, as numerous scholars have commented, structural and non-intentional paradigms – the Functionalist as much as the Conflictualist – have witnessed a decline in favour of a more flexible and individualistic framework, which places the emphasis on intentionality in education. This is the so called «Communicative paradigm» (Besozzi, 1990). The Communicative paradigm is useful in that it offers a better interpretation of socialisation in contemporary society, including decision-making processes.

On the one hand, nowadays people are demanding freedom in education – i.e. independence in educational choices – in terms of a liberation from structural disadvantages and social-normative constraints, towards an autonomous and private value-based identity. People tend to assign less

importance to traditional values and meanings related to public education, schools, university and other formal educational routes. Within neo-liberal and free-market regimes this claim puts single citizens in opposition to State policy, with demands of greater independence and a critical stance towards public authority with regards to the distribution of educational access. At a micro-level, however, the same is occurring within the family where parental authority is contrasted by children and young people who deny the “anteriority-authority principle of legitimation” (Benasayag & Schmit, 2003). Young people are increasingly committed to constructing their own lives, eschewing predefined paths and structural social constrictions. It has become a new sort of “moral imperative”, linked to active citizenship and self-determination (Beck, 2008).

On the other hand, all traditional agents in education have revised their functions with regards to the task of offering guidance to future generations. Adults and their normative roles still play a crucial role in the education of young people, but no longer as ‘bridges’ between rules and social expectations nor as ‘transmitters’ of cultural heritage. They are seen as providers of life experiences (the experience of growing up, of conflict, of civicness, sensorial experiences, etc.), intermediaries of opportunities whose efficacy can be assessed only *ex-post*, when children and young people will have the opportunity to show their capability to exploit this set of opportunities.

From this general framework, the so-called ‘pluralistic landscape of education’, I derive three assumptions that have direct impact on educational choices:

- a school, family, and traditional education systems are in a process of profound transition. What were previously stable and normative structures have become environments for relations, situated organizations’ useful for meeting personal needs and generating single “remarkable” events;
- b what is at stake is the renewal of all the co-ordinates of socialization: roles, symmetric-asymmetric relationships, modes and forms of socialization, formal-informal steps and expected outcomes are all revisited in the light of an open view of contemporary meanings of “becoming an adult”, entering the job market, achieving a state of well-being, belonging to the community etc.;
- c in the light of this discontinuity, it is increasingly difficult to identify hierarchies or a scale of priorities among preferences, objectives and

social environments. For adolescents, in the process of choosing their life's course, it would seem that all experiences might have the same degree of importance: family, education, work, leisure, peer-networks, dreams. If all educational agents/experience are equivalent, and individuals cannot discriminate between the role of different factors in the definition of their future, we can expect to find large (and often unpredictable) effects of this "competitive regime" in terms of disorientation among both parents and students, adults and young people.

### **Towards a Sociology of 'Decision-Making in Education'**

In my view, it is time to broaden the traditional issue of school choice, based on the analysis of programs aiming to give families more opportunities to choose the school their children will attend<sup>2</sup>. Social constraints, enrolment regulations and political discourses that support the opposing fronts of public/private school choice by families all still have remarkable importance in understanding the global effects of educational choices, but a new sociological approach is needed to go more in depth in the topic of *educational decision-making as a social process*. The above mentioned pluralistic frame of socialisation implies that we need to explain what are the current social meanings of 'deciding to study' (in the face of other ideal study-free alternatives for life) or 'choosing a given school' (in the face of real alternatives offered by concrete systems of opportunities), which kind of social actors are practising what and how they really act during the different steps of the process. My frame of reference includes students (children and adolescents), their parents, teachers and services that support school choice, and any other significant adults who may influence young people's decision-making processes.

In general terms, analysing educational choices means developing scholarship on the basis of the *Rational Actor Model* because this type of decision-making is *de facto* a form of economic behaviour (based on maxim rationale) although it can be classified as discrete and not as

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<sup>2</sup> Several studies based on the educational policy approach have been carried out in the last 2-3 decades focussing on school choice. In the international arena see, Woods, Bagley & Glatter (1998), Peterson (2003), Butler & Van Zanten (2007). For an Italian perspective, see the recent contribution by Ribolzi & Maccarini (2003).

continuous (Gambetta, 1990), in the sense that every alternative does not assume the same meaning or value for all actors but changes in worth according to the age of choosers, the duration of courses or the costs of each year of study.

Within the Rational Actor Model, several studies – following the teachings of H. Simon (1975) - have shared the assumption of the existence of a “bounded rationality”, which pays more attention to contingent factors rather structural ones. With the development of paradigms focused on individualization and pluralistic socialisation, individual agents are often at the centre of situated problems in decision-making, problems linked to a will to “decide in any case”, on the spot, while the subject is not always able to forecast events nor to discriminate among alternatives. Frequently, young people experience a strong contradiction between autonomy and heteronomy with regards to the possibility of choosing by themselves, independently from parental aspirations and adult support. Educational choices concerning where, how, and at what level have become even more self-focused, experimental, discontinuous and reversible, displaying the existence of a personal “reflexive potential” (Archer 2000, p. 22). Reading and interpreting this potential would imply placing the focus of the analysis on unconscious processes, which are present at every stage of the decision-making process (before and beyond the supposed rationality), and on the number of unexpected outputs, whether or not they have negative consequences. It is also assumed that there is a certain given degree of innovation and creativity in the disruption of the ordinary channels and social constraints inherent in decision-making. On the contrary, weaknesses and social immobility could represent the features of incomplete or unsuccessful choices, made in conditions of exclusion and passivity.

On the basis of these premises, the purpose of the present contribution will be to outline a wide-ranging and qualitative research approach to the *sociology of decision-making in education*. This approach adopts a framework consistent with methodological individualism, which, however, does not neglect the important outcomes achieved to date by the quantitative tradition. The main structural determinants of school choice (gender, status, family background, cultural capital, residence, educational supply, helpful networks) play a great part in this perspective, as general functioning mechanisms, which influence personal and family choices, but I want to argue that, alone, they lack sufficient explanatory power in terms

of the deeper set of motivation underpinning effective decision-making among the new generations.

Several *macro dynamics connected to school choice* have been highlighted by a set of theoretical and empirical studies concerned with the reform of the school system and the distribution of educational opportunities across geographical contexts. These studies (that have focused on the situation in the US as well as in the EU) aim at contributing to the political debate surrounding social selection in education, given that it is well known that school choice encourages the development and consolidation of different forms of inequality and exclusion that must be tempered in order to enhance the performance of the whole educational system (Bottani & Benadusi, 2004). Inequality among schools increases when a policy of free choice enhances the probability that certain schools develop into communities in which students perform better, teachers cooperate for common purposes, or parents profit from more intense social networks (Strike, 2010), whereas other schools are excluded from this improvement.

The probability of improvement seems to affect mostly private/independent schools. Comparing public, private independent and private government-dependent schools at a cross-national level, Dronkers and Robert (2008) have found that competition among schools generates an “*élitisation*” process demonstrated by higher performances in Reading and Maths (see PISA scores) among students attending private and charter schools, as opposed to comparable public schools. Not all results, however, are consistent with a deterministic view of private schools as sites where more resources are allocated and characterized by greater social advantages compared to the public sector. The main explanation for higher achievement has thus to be attributed to superior social composition and the enhanced internal climate of private and independent schools; factors that are not only dependent upon state funding distribution policies but are also linked to socio-cultural and economic stratification that affects school composition. This leads the authors to the general conclusion that “the ‘universal’ effect of private independent or private government-dependent schools suggests that these differences in effectiveness may be a consequence of modern post-industrial societies, wherein education has become a major dimension of inequality alongside occupation and wealth. In these modern societies school choice and educational ‘markets’ have become important means for mobility along the education inequality

dimension, indifferent for historical and legal nuances and variations” (Dronkers & Robert, 2008, p. 296).

Butler and Van Zanten (2007), in a cross-national comparison of local cases controlling for different school choice regimes, similarly find evidence of the *plurality of social mobility pathways* and of fragmentation in the effectiveness/equality building process. Taking a European perspective as their standpoint, these authors highlights the increasing “breakdown” between family preferences (expressed at an individualistic level) and geographical imperatives (often established at a collective but also bureaucratic level) in the sense that, generally, most citizens, not only middle or upper-middle class representatives, are increasingly sensitive about the their right to choice in education. The explanation they offer draws upon three cultural factors: a) parental anxiety for their children’s school performances in relation to future life chances; b) parental desire to maintain control of cultural circuits in which children grow up; c) fears about preservation of social and cultural identities in multicultural urban areas and educational arenas (Butler & Van Zaten, 2007, p. 3).

Moreover, increasing levels of *school autonomy* (Landri, 2009) interact with this “right to choice” and transform choice in a duty. Many scholars, however, have posed the question of whether, currently, citizens are both aware and prepared for this civic duty. As a matter of fact, the increasing marketization of school establishments requires informed users (or consumers), prepared to select among a wide range of concrete alternatives that may range even far beyond their residence areas. Thus, the focus on school choice is strictly concerned not only with the topic of school reform but also with the issue of how to generate highly skilled target users/group of choosers (parents and students) in order to provide everyone the opportunity of escaping from traditional determinants, which can be either macro-social (economic and cultural background, quality and extension of educational supply; cf., Checchi & Jappelli, 2002; Mocetti, 2008)<sup>3</sup> or micro-social (gender, time and energies devoted to decision-making, perception of the different supply, beliefs and trust in school representatives and guidance supports, peer effect; cf., White, 2007).

So I don’t need to assume a neat position between libertarian school choice and communitarian public services advocates, because both presume that social agents *are* engaged in the decision-making process (albeit with

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<sup>3</sup> On the influence of territory and family background, see also the articles by Santagati and Scardigno in this volume.

different levels of awareness and commitment) and that they do elaborate information and develop values in order to select among different kinds of educational resources (non only formal but also informal) at the multiple stages of the process: at the end of middle school, at the end of college, or at other crossroads occurring when the choice made may seem unsuccessful and there is the need to change itinerary.

In order to discuss decision-making in education I therefore develop three types of theoretical arguments:

1. we must analyse what degree of *intentionality* is associated to the idea of choice, taking into account both internal preferences and external structural conditions or constraints. According to Rational Actor Theory, we can distinguish between unintentional and intentional choices, where the latter entails different kinds of reflexive thinking based on whether the chooser is aware of his or her own preferences and purposes – with the result of having an “internal conversation” (Archer, 2003) – or not;
2. we must also discuss what concept of *agency* underpins the view of the intentional chooser/consumer facing educational alternatives. That recalls the issue of whether educational choice as social action is referred to an internal behaviour (transforming behaviour into action) or an external structuration (transforming action into a structure). According to Campbell’s theory (2009) the former model of agency stresses voluntarism and autonomy of the agent, the latter stresses power and social change attributed to the action in itself. In the first case we have “power of agency”, in the latter “agentic power”.
3. we need to understand in what way educational choices are related to *social stratification* and inequality; that is, we must explore the interdependence between the actor’s choice individually considered and the composition effect on the distribution of life chances and life careers on the social pyramid. This means identifying whether there is a linear and deterministic relation between one’s own perception of social status and consequent evaluations of the actual possibilities of following a given educational pathway, or instead if there are discontinuities (and under which conditions), which imply either high status descendants choosing medium-low educational profiles or low status descendants choosing medium-high profiles.

The method chosen here is partially based on empirical data. Bearing in mind the aforementioned issues, in the rest of the paper I develop an

analysis of the data drawn from a national-wide inquiry<sup>4</sup>. I start by providing the profiles of the main social actors who face educational choices in Italy, extracting features from both quantitative and qualitative data. Then I proceed to define young people's educational decision-making in the light of the reflexive approach, to be examined via the qualitative data generated from in-depth interviews. I conclude by providing both a set of responses to the three aforementioned questions and indications for the politics for autonomy in decision-making.

### **Social actors facing the 'opacity' of educational choice**

I start considering the main social agents involved in the decision-making process – both adults and young people – with reference to the specificities of the Italian scenario. Firstly, we must explore the role of the family, and of parents in particular, given that they are the most significant socialisation actors accompanying the development

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<sup>4</sup> Part of this paper is based on the proceedings from the “Adolescents and Life chances” PRIN Study, carried out between 2005 and 2007 and funded by the MIUR (Ministry of Education, University and Research) The first outcomes of the study are published in the volume *Tra sogni e realtà. Gli adolescenti e la transizione alla vita adulta* (Between dreams and reality. Adolescents and the transition to adulthood), Roma: Carocci, 2009 (edited by Elena Besozzi). The study was based on two research hypotheses: a) concerning the sociological factors/supporting elements that influence life chances, the contextual/collective variables have relatively little significance in the case of positive results, whereas their influence is more decisive for unsuccessful outcomes; b) concerning the models of equality/inequality in life chances, there is a discontinuity between social and cultural capital, and in particular for certain categories of subjects: second-generation immigrants, male and female adolescents, depending on the region of residence (north/south, regional capital/province). The research methodology included two phases of data collection: in the first year a set of 117 in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with a sample of 38 students, plus their parents and teachers, based in five Italian cities (Milan, Turin, Bergamo, Bari, Salerno). In the second year a quantitative enquiry was carried out in the same five municipalities, using a questionnaire administered to a probabilistic sample of 1294 public upper secondary school students enrolled in either a Lyceum, a Technical Institute, or a Professional Institute (Italian vocational schools). A stratified sampling technique was employed, which consisted of extracting only the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students from the 41 schools participating in the study. In this paper data emerging from the quantitative enquiry are presented in third section, “Social actors facing the ‘opacity’ of educational choices”, whereas qualitative interviews are the basis of argumentation in the fifth section “Autonomy and personal agency in adolescents’ choices”.

of young people and whose substantial influence on students' school choices has been confirmed by numerous empirical studies (for Italy: see Checchi & Ballarino, 2006; Gasperoni - ISFOL, 2007; Treelle, 2009; for Eu countries: Dustmann, 2004; Broccolini & Presbitero, 2007; for US: Godwin & Kremerer, 2002). I will then turn to consider the profile of school teachers, as secondary auxiliary figures in student educational guidance. Finally, I will comment on what students say about their own school choice after lower secondary school so as to outline the set of profiles that emerge from the results.

### *Parents*

In times of "long-term" families (Cherlin, Scabini, Rossi, 1997), adolescents and young people feel the domestic environment and the proximate presence of parents as "elements of stability" in their lives, as opposed to the external context in continuous change. For the majority of young people, parents are *significant adults* not in the classical sense of the term (*i.e.*, as role models), but rather as exemplary individuals that can be trusted. Fathers and mothers, each in their own individuality, are the people to whom adolescents address deep requests of being listened to and being understood, of being supported and valued. The more parents display differentiated and incoherent behaviours the greater young people's demand for consistency and linearity from their role models will be. Parents are indentified as "good fathers and good mothers" not in the sense that they fullfill specific educational roles, but in the sense that they are the primary caretakers with whom children develop their first life-experiences of trust, security, affection, market-free relations, interpersonal exchange, listening and understanding. This occurs as a consequence of the shift from the normative to the affective family, a pattern that has been greatly observed in Western families (Donati, 2007a). In this type of family, parent-children relations are based on an intense relationship and on reciprocal support (dual interdependence) more than on filial obligations and economical investment (one-way dependence).

In such families the challenge of choosing educational paths and building the future may represent a real dilemma, because it is the first time teenagers can take on an independent role after a long period of protection and subordination. Despite the need to show that there is an independent will on students' part, the data collected confirms that the majority of

*adolescents* makes their choice according to and on the basis of parental suggestions and support. They often oblige children to choose the schools “that would be expected of them” without a clear inquiry into their offspring’s intimate concerns and real potential.

When parents are asked by researchers to recall the experience of their children’s school choice after compulsory education, they often state that their children have chosen completely independently, and this is generally confirmed by the majority of students. Teachers, on the other hand, report the opposite story. According to teachers, decisions on what school track to embark on are made, in high percentages, on the basis of parental recommendations or outright obligation, and not impartially and deliberately by students. Very few students ask teachers for guidance or educational counselling. This means both parents and pupils implicitly underestimate teachers’ counselling power and potential, revealing a low capacity, among families, to make good use of guidance counselling services (within or outside of schools), which are, nonetheless valid forms of supports against unsuccessful choices<sup>5</sup>.

As a matter of fact, parents interviewed on this point consider *decision-making to be a private activity*, to be conducted amongst family members and they trust very few external guidance counselling services, independently of the fact that they are public or private. Italian parents, in particular, tend to avoid teachers’ guidance advice for two reasons: on the one hand, they fear they will, in turn, be evaluated in their duty as parents and, on the other hand, they believe school-based guidance to be an abuse of office on the teachers’ part.

Data based on an analysis of students’ opinions confirms this trend. The large majority of 15-17 years old students (N = 1294; Table 1) state that their school choices are based on their mother’s (68%) and father’s (54%) recommendations. Only 34% chose an upper secondary school path on the basis of teachers’ advice; these are generally students who end up studying in a Lyceum (who tend to ask the Literature teacher for guidance rather than the other professors). Also in Table 2 one can see the scarce importance given to teachers as main providers of decision-making support when compared with friends and relatives. Only 10% of students see the

<sup>5</sup> On this point we can mention the case of the *Public Guidance Service* of the City of Milan, that reports that, in the a.y. 2008/09, more than 500 students attending upper secondary schools have sought guidance counselling *in itinere*, in order to change school in the second term of the academic year. This offers evidence of the high number of ‘unsuccessful choices’ we can contemplate in a metropolitan and developed social milieu.

schoolteacher as the main source of guidance and support as opposed to 49.6% who indicate the mother and 11.9% who favour the father. Guidance services in/out of school are consulted by students relatively little (one third of the sample has consulted them but only 6.7% says teachers are the main source of help regarding school choice).

The difference among types of school is quite interesting for a number of reasons. According to students' responses, teachers are consulted for guidance by students attending Lyceums twice as often compared to those attending Technical/Professional institutes. This may be due to the higher commonality which links teachers and Lyceum students as followers of academic values (such as achievement, competition, elitism, importance of family background, *etc.*)<sup>6</sup>. In Professional institutes teachers are consulted less than friends (Table 1 and Table 2).

*Table 1. Who has helped you in making your secondary school choice? (multiple choice) by type of school – % of columns*

	Lyceums	Technical Institutes	Vocational institutes	Total
Mother	72.5	62.5	64.0	68.0
Father	62.0	47.9	42.6	54.2
Friends	31.9	31.4	38.4	33.1
Relatives	30.2	34.4	37.2	32.8
Teacher1	42.5	27.5	24.4	34.5
Teacher2	21.2	12.1	10.5	16.5
Guidance service at school	34.8	39.1	27.1	34.5
Guidance service out of school	12.2	15.7	12.0	13.1
Professional Educators	2.5	2.2	6.2	3.2
Other help	11.7	12.9	13.2	12.4
Total	100	100	100	100
N. students=	673	363	258	1294

*Source:* Survey PRIN 2005-06 "Adolescents and Life chances" – Italy

Interestingly, teacher's perceptions are not in accord with this representation. The teachers who participated in the study report that it is in fact students who go on to pursue vocational training or enrol in

<sup>6</sup> Other surveys carried out in Italy (see i.e. Gasperoni – ISFOL, 2007) confirm that students with a 'regular' scholastic career have more positive experiences and relationships with their teachers than those who have 'non-regular' curriculums; this is more frequent among Lyceums than Vocational education students. This confirms the high correspondence, in the Italian education system, between family background and type of school attended. (see also footnote n. 12).

Professional/Technical institutes that are more dependent on teachers' recommendations rather than those who go on to attend a Lyceum. This is related to the fact that the former group belong to a category of students who receive little parental guidance in the process of formulating a school choice, whereas the latter seem to be more parent-oriented and supported by the family. Thus there is a clear mismatch between teachers' and parents' vision of the decision-making process; everyone claims for independence in the making of school choices but, at the same time, all actors seem to need more help in order to clarify and overcome all of the negative aspects associated with decision-making: anxiety, uncertainty, the dream/reality divide, the risk of unsuccessful choices, the risk of wasting time.

Table 2. Who has helped you the most? by type of school – % of columns

	Lyceums	Technical Institutes	Vocational institutes	Total
Mother	51.4	44.0	51.3	49.4
Father	12.1	12.0	11.4	11.9
Friends	6.3	11.3	11.0	8.6
Relatives	2.6	6.8	5.3	4.3
Teacher1	12.1	9.4	5.3	10.0
Teacher2	0.8	-	0.9	0.6
Guidance service at school	6.8	8.4	3.9	6.7
Guidance service out of school	-	1.0	1.3	0.5
Professional Educators	0.5	0.3	0.9	0.5
Other help	7.4	6.8	8.8	7.5
Tot.	100	100	100	100
N. students=	605	309	228	1142

Source: Survey PRIN 2005-06 "Adolescents and Life chances" – Italy

We can state that a great *amount of opacity* accompanies the crossroads at which school choice is situated. School choice is a delicate event, which indicates the transition from a basic, compulsory, comprehensive, standard educational track (lower secondary school) to a more specialized and personalized path (towards upper secondary school, college, university). What is unacknowledged by all three actors at stake (students, teachers, parents), ultimately, is: who truly makes the cost/benefit evaluation? who really makes the final decision? to what extent can the perceived freedom that students believe to have in making choices be genuine? what do parent-child divergences on the optimal choice mean? why does the perception of free choice not appear in teachers' representations? and so on.

Empirical evidence only thickens this opacity. In the national study conducted by ISFOL (Gaperoni & Isfol, 2007, p. 30) that compared mothers' and children's aspirations in terms of post-compulsory education certificates (qualification, diploma, or bachelor's degree) they want to achieve, researchers found a 29% differential of mothers who aspire for their children to graduate from university, when the latter do not want to carry on with further education and aspire to a quick entry in the job market after achieving their qualification or diploma. This can be seen as an expression of the discrepancy in inter-generational relations in terms of social mobility and cultural transmission<sup>7</sup>.

Another study, carried out in the metropolitan area of Milan by the Iard Institute on a sample of families dealing with post-secondary school choice (Cavalli & Facchini, 2001) confirms that mothers tend to provide ambiguous narratives on the decision-making process by not mentioning in interviews the existing divergences between their own aspirations and children actual aspirations and intentions. They don't emphasize actual forms of support given to children during their studies, nor the guidance provided by parents in the decision-making process; on the contrary, mothers report the decision-making procedure to be conducted entirely according to the child's preferences. As a matter of fact, parents see imposition and obligation as potentially noxious to the pursuit of the optimal choice. The authors conclude that: "this seems as much like the effect of a renunciation to one's guidance role, as the effect of a cultural model that assumes, axiomatically, on the one hand, the fact the children's preference 'must' be respected and, on the other, that the parental role no longer involves imposition but rather confrontation" (Cavalli & Facchini, 2001, p. 64).

Notwithstanding the "new" role of parents in the long-lasting family, based on dialogue rather than on imposition, parents *keep on exerting a huge influence* on their children's educational careers, with both direct and indirect pressures. International and national studies have recently explored both mothers' and fathers' involvement in their children's school experience, in terms of concerns not only with learning but also with relationships, social climate and study topics (Brooks, 2004).

As Poloni (2006) argues, in 78% of the sample considered in the Milan metropolitan area, the daily family conversation concerns school topics and

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<sup>7</sup> See on this point the essay by M. Santagati in this volume, showing the rise of a form of 'dyscrasic family'.

various problems children report. Biorcio (2006) also reports that in the Milan sample one family out of two (49%) is worried about potential learning difficulties among their offspring, especially in the case of sons who attend Technical institutes (58%) and daughters who attend the Gymnasium (55%); the main concern is more frequent among mothers than fathers. A report based on a set of structured interviews conducted in 2006 on a sample of parents shows that they make several decisions concerning their children's education daily in order to support academic achievement: more than one family out of two (53%) employs a private tutor, especially if their children are attending a Lyceum; but to a much lesser degree in the case of children attending Technical institutes (39%), and even less if children are enrolled in a Professional institute.

When adolescents' achievement is unsatisfactory parental intervention is explicit and consists in: 1) consulting school teachers and following their guidance and suggestions (1/3 of the sample); 2) curtailing pocket money or outings in order to sanction "underachievers" (1/3 of the sample); 3) providing incentives in order to coax children towards improvement (1/5 of the sample, with an overrepresentation of students from vocational institutes). In few cases, when the children's career is seriously compromised by the poor outcome, parents suggest they abandon their studies: this occurs in Technical institutes for 18% of students, for 15% of students in vocational institutes and centres, whereas for Lyceums students' parents who agree with interrupting education are 9% (Biorcio, 2006). Parental influence thus evidently affects the educational decision-making process more among high-status and upper class families than in low-income and low background ones.

### *Teachers*

Let us now turn to consider the role of teachers in young people's decision-making processes. In Italy, the ordinary exercise of teaching does not include specialised training in guidance and counselling skills; rather, these are considered implicit in teachers' 'vocationality'. In other words, when considering the representation of the teaching profession it is normal for people to attribute not only technical competences but also a specific moral capacity, which takes the form of: loving one's pupils, acting as a role model, having a high degree of human sensibility, and demonstrating the ability to commitment and self-sacrifice. According to a recent national inquiry on teachers (Cavalli & Argentin, 2010, p. 92), this new kind of

“vocationalism” – highly connected to teachers’ guidance power and influence – in the last decade appears to have increased across all educational levels. Notwithstanding this fact, as aforementioned, the school teacher is not really reputed by society an expert in personal guidance.

One of the possible reasons could be the confusion deriving from teachers’ bureaucratic functions and obligations. By law, by the end of the final year of lower secondary school, every middle school teacher has to produce an *official profile called “Guidance Recommendations”* for each student, which consists of clear indications on which of the four types of upper secondary school tracks students are most suited for (Lyceum, Technical institute, Professional institute, Vocational centres). Official profiles are not binding for parents and students, who are free to choose their preferred educational paths as they wish and not to meet the suggested recommendation advice, making this document compulsory for teachers but not particularly significant for users.

The ambiguity between the formality and the ‘rituality’ of the Recommendations (which calls upon the expertise of a number of school representatives: the teaching staff, the Head of School and sometimes an educational guidance expert) and the informality of its ‘normative power’ is well known by the majority of users who, for the most part, don’t take it seriously because, as aforementioned, they have little trust in teachers’ ability to adequately evaluate student’s potential and aspirations. What creates a lot of confusion surrounding how to make the best use of school Guidance Recommendations is due to the fact that the document is compiled on the basis of diverse and overlapping rationalities (Wilking, 2010): it might be based on the student’s individual characteristics (*i.e.*, performance, aptitudes, potential, skills), as well as on his/her social characteristics (*i.e.*, level of family income, family-based cultural capital, parental occupation and status). Sometimes the document seems to offer families a sort of teachers’ stamp of approval or “enabling criteria” (such as: “yes, you can go there, you have my permission!”) for some, or “stamp of disapproval” or ‘invalidating criteria’ (such as: “I don’t suggest you to go to that school, you are not able/competent enough to pursue this route...”) for others.

The ambiguity of school-based guidance can explain the sense of discordance and frustration that surrounds ‘guidance matching’ between

providers and beneficiaries of the guidance service in the public sphere<sup>8</sup>. Inevitably, the encounter with a guidance consultant – although formally scheduled and organized in every school – is one of the worst a mother (or, less often, a father) experiences during her children's school career. Parent's experiences are normally negative due to the fact they feel they are being evaluated as opposed to being supported by teachers, thus tolerating only indirect guidance actions on the part of school professionals, such as:

- rendering their subject matter attractive and interesting (vocational dimension of guidance);
- providing accurate and updated information about their particular field of expertise (instrumental dimension),
- avoiding quantitative evaluations of the student's profile or moral persuasion on possible/impossible educational routes (moral dimension).

### *Students*

In order to verify how secondary school students have experienced the decision-making process surrounding school choice at the end of lower secondary school we asked a sample of 15 and 17 year olds whether they consider it an easy choice or not and whether, in retrospect, they would now make a different school choice. The majority of Italian students who took part in the study consider secondary school choice to have been very easy or quite easy to make (66,1%), and do not tend to worry about it. This finding is in line with a generational attitude towards a 'presentification' of life among young people – which has been found to be widespread in Europe and particularly in the Mediterranean area (Galland, 2008). One third of the sample, however, expresses negative feelings and recalls the choice as a difficult experience.

Disaggregated frequencies of responses shown in Table 3 suggest there are some biographical determinants affecting the experience of post-compulsory school choice: gender, primarily and, secondly, age. Boys are less inclined to consider school choice to be a difficult experience. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that males affirm they have relied on their

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<sup>8</sup> See in this volume the essay by S. Capogna which illustrates guidance as 'disorientation'; see also the essay by V. Fabretti which discusses values that characterize the public offer of education. As a matter of fact, the discordance I mention with reference to guidance provided by schools can be seen also as a test-drive of the underlying contrast between public-private set of values associated with choice.

mother's help less than females have (45% versus 52%), which could confirm that boys are striving for independence more than girls. The older adolescents think of the experience of school choice as having been easier than the younger ones, perhaps because their memory of the event is weaker compared to their younger peers. Other significant differences refer to the type of school students are currently attending: students enrolled in a Lyceum are more positive with respect to the school choice made, whereas students attending Professional institutes tend to consider it as having been quite difficult or very difficult. This finding could be explained by the greater "individualism" among this group of students in the decision-making process (i.e., less help from significant adults). These are only hypotheses, however. Only a set of in-depth interviews would have provided more information about the nature of these perceived difficulties.

Table 3. How would you describe the process of secondary school choice? by gender, age, type of school – % of column

	M	F	15 years	17 years	Lyceums	Technical Institutes	Vocational Institutes	Total
Very easy	17.2	11.7	13.0	15.4	16.5	10.5	12.5	14.0
Quite easy	57.1	48.2	50.5	54.3	52.2	56.7	45.1	52.1
Quite difficult	20.1	33.7	29.8	25.0	26.2	26.7	33.5	27.8
Very difficult	5.6	6.4	6.7	5.3	5.1	6.1	8.9	6.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N. students	553	733	745	547	672	363	257	1292

Source: Survey PRIN 2005-06 "Adolescents and Life chances" – Italy

Continuing the analysis of students' opinions, let us now turn to whether school choice would be replicated, in retrospect. This measure was used as an indicator of choice strength (i.e., to what extent choices were perceived to be appropriate 2 or 4 years on): the assumption is that the greater the desire to make a different choice, the more the choice has proven inadequate and/or unsatisfactory for the student. Only 69% of the sample confirms their original choice; 6% is happy with the general education track chosen but would like to change the specific school institution, while 25% would make a different school choice altogether. Thus, one student out of three is unsatisfied and regrets his or her original choice. This seems to indicate a state of confusion among young people not only with respect to the future, but also in terms of present evaluations, and also seems to

indicate a widespread sense of discontinuity in the (imagined) relationship between present and future (life project and life career)<sup>9</sup>.

As before, Table 4 shows how biographical factors affect students' desire to alter their secondary school choice. While gender does not seem to affect the desire to review one's choice after having experienced an unsatisfactory outcome, age of respondents seems to play a significant role in revisiting previous educational decisions. Approximately one third of the sample of eleventh grade (IV class; 17 years old or above) students feel more uncertain than their younger peers about their present school experience and, were it a possibility, would like to change institute (5.4%) or educational track (30%). These responses seem to indicate the significance of potential educational mobility (both vertical and lateral) in students' eyes. They appear to be considerably attracted to open and reversible choices, as opposed to straightforward and well-defined itineraries, perhaps as a measure of self-defence in the increasing complexity of their scholastic and, more in general, social commitment. As Besozzi has noted, "being a student today, finding a meaning to one's scholastic efforts, appears particularly complex compared to the past, in which synergies and meanings were explicit and shared. The current image of the student in search of meaning for his existence in scholastic reality, is that of a sailor confronting icebergs and other various kinds of challenges, which range from a decrease in motivation to a discontinuity in commitment, from comprehension difficulties to relational pitfalls, and from the seduction of easier routes to the lack of cultural material resources or social means of support" (Besozzi, 2009b, p. 51).

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<sup>9</sup> See in this volume the essay by M. Merico which illustrates the degree to which adolescents claim to be confused about their future.

Table 4. If you could go back, would you make the same school choice? by type of school – % of column

	M	F	15 years	17 years	Lyceums	Technical Institutes	Vocational Institutes	Total
Yes	69	69	73,3	62,9	71,4	67,2	64,6	68,8
No, choose other institute but same type of school	6,5	6,0	5,4	7,0	7,1	7,9	6,3	6,1
No, choose other type of school	24,5	25, 0	21,3	30	21,4	28,9	29,1	25,1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N. students=	551	732	745	544	672	363	254	1289

Source: Survey PRIN 2005-06 “Adolescents and Life chances” – Italy

In conclusion of this section, ambivalence and hidden concerns are very frequently associated with decision-making in education and, more specifically, with secondary school choice. Empirical evidence has shown that structural conditions and socio-cultural attitudes normally affect the agent’s awareness and tacitly produce the following:

- a) on the parents’ side, what emerges is psychological resistance and underestimation of their role in influencing their children’s decision-making process;
- b) on the teacher’s side, frustration and a tendency to overestimate the impact of their guidance efforts well beyond the actual support they provide for students;
- c) on the students’ side, a declaration of independence and a two-faced attitude towards their future educational careers characterized, on the one hand, by superficiality and a sense of omnipotence and, on the other, by confusion and an attraction to easy routes.

All these are not necessarily negative features of decision-making, but can help to define in a flexible way the status of choosers as only partially conscious of their responsibilities in the process. They can also be seen as normal events occurring today in the construction of choice, especially when subjects expect to choose within a “fully intentional” and libertarian frame (Hargreaves, 1996) without recognizing how far they are from the perfect rationality of choice. Schooling and educational choices are with no doubt issues of intense preoccupation for contemporary agents because they imply long term and aggregated investments and, for the individual, the necessity of overcoming at all costs constraints that can act as obstacles

to one's freedom and desires. Evidently, personal identity (students), family tradition (parents) and professional reputation (teachers) are always at stake in the decision-making process and everything is invested in the search for successful outcomes: unfortunately, given that the test of the adequacy and accuracy of choices will happen only later, in the future, each of the three actors remains in a state of "opaqueness" where their power as active agents is *de facto* reduced.

### **The reflexive agent in the decision-making process**

The increase of reflexive thought is widely acknowledged to be a feature of late modernity. According to M. Archer, reflexive thought progressively replaces routine action (*habitus*) and supports both survival within a frame of structural ambivalence (as Merton pointed out; Merton, 1976) and the building of one's own lifestyle in order to reach personal interests by developing proper projects (Archer, 2007). Without rehashing the debate surrounding the concept of late modernity itself, in relation to what came before it, many advocates of reflexive modernization share the idea that the current forms of reflexivity are practised not only by an élite of knowledge experts or by defenders of cultural tradition, but rather that it has become commonplace among the majority of social actors and it applies to every human activity requiring personal commitment (Giddens, 1990).

What distinguishes *reflection* from *reflexive thought*, however – as Cunliffe & Jun (2005) have pointed out – is the relationship between identity and alterity. During reflection the subject looks at his/her actions and may control the course or the context in which the action is developed from an external perspective, according to an objective ontology. The outcomes of reflection (the subject's own thoughts) are projections of the Self in a shared reality, but which do not imply personal involvement with the situation or with others. In reflexive thought (reflexivity), on the other hand, the thought process becomes more complex and is based on the assumption that "action is something different from and more than thought". It implies a total revision not only of the situation in which one thinks and acts but also of the whole system of one's self-representations, self-guidance in thinking, and self-commitment in action in relation to the presence of others. In the course of reflexive thinking the Self is re-defined

with the aid of an Other that offers the possibility for a mirroring process and a meta-level of reflection is achieved – what D. Schön (1987) calls ‘second degree reflexivity’ (not only thinking the action but also thinking the thought).

Thus reflexive thought takes the modern concept of a utilitarian rationality (notably related to a means-to-an-end argumentation) to its highest levels of expression, enabling individual subjects:

- 1) to consider themselves as objects of their own thought (as Dewey and Mead originally argued) and to use their ‘looking glass self’ as the terminal point of an inner discourse, maintaining the distinction as well as the interplay between subjectivity and objectivity;
- 2) to consider themselves in relation to their social and cultural contexts facilitating a regular course of action, especially when coping with uncertainty and risks (Beck, 1994);
- 3) to draw practical consequences from the objects of one’s thought, such as subverting ordinary environments or creating new environments for action (Colombo, 2005), for instance generating learning outcomes from critical incidents and unanticipated consequences<sup>10</sup>. M. Archer and P. Donati speak of a “generative process” brought about by the exercise of reflexive thinking among individuals, differentiated by levels and types of reflexivity, able to modify social contexts and produce emerging structures (Archer, 2009).

Reflexivity is defined in practical terms by M. Archer as “the regular practice of the mental ability, exercised through the internal conversations we all hold about our personal concerns (what we care about most)” (Archer, 2003, p. 9). As aforementioned, in late modernity reflexivity has many purposes in relation to human beings’ developmental needs and the degrees of freedom/constraints they feel derive from social structures and historical destiny. One of the emerging purposes is no doubt that of *guiding or offering support in the process of life planning*, which is a prelude to the construction of identity and the possibility of social mobility. Applied to

<sup>10</sup> The fruitful application of reflexivity to learning processes in every kind of professional practice has been acknowledged worldwide, drawing upon Donald Schön’s lesson (1983; 1987). See also the international review “Reflective practice” (Sage ed.) and the website: [www.reflectivelearning.it](http://www.reflectivelearning.it). I offer a pilot-study on learning from accidents among Italian teachers in Colombo, 2009b). For application of the concept in social work, see: Folgheraiter, 2004; Kott-Scrag, 2007. For application of the concept in the analysis of social change and civic participation, see: Donati & Archer, 2010.

social mobility issues, reflexivity enables individuals to anticipate free courses of action and exert some governance over their own social lives. It can be practised in various ways according – firstly - to a temporal axis, as exemplified in the notions of *contemporaneous*, *retrospective* and *anticipatory reflection*, the latter regarding future actions and planned conditions (van Maanen, 1993). Reflecting on what possible action to take (both in a short-term or a long-term perspective)<sup>11</sup> involves a sort of forecast on what kind of future one imagines, on the basis of past experiences and mistakes, in order to choose the best way one can try to reach personal objectives and avoid worsening one's situation; it prepares the subject to overcome problems by forecasting difficulties and obstacles.

Secondly, anticipatory thinking can vary in the forms that affect future trajectories. Empirical cases studied by M. Archer (2003, 2007) have shown how reflexivity is related to personality traits, generating different forms of reflexive thought: *communicative*, *autonomous* and *meta-reflexive*. (A fourth type of reflexivity is designed in negative terms as “pathological” or “interrupted”, indicating a lack of internal conversation). When the first type prevails, life trajectories are inspired by family tradition and characterized by social immobility. When reflexivity is autonomous, on the other hand, we have subjects aiming to upwards social mobility. When, finally, reflexivity is predominantly of the third type, individuals are able to change their own destiny by moving laterally in new kinds of social structures and networks.

On the whole, the generalised use of reflexive thinking in the construction of one's life indicates the disruption of traditional and socially tolerated ways of proceeding – structured but also hindered by social and historical memberships – in order to achieve a more ambitious project: the completion of the contemporary Self as active agent. As Beck argues (2008), in postmodernity – pressed by the social imperative of self-realization – individuals are pushed to be even more committed to any sort of activity (*hyper-activism*) in search of their own itinerary: because each biography sounds experimental, arbitrary, not-identical, selective, the subject cannot avoid the urgency of choosing; everything must be chosen, when not outright invented (as tradition is put to the side).

Biographies shift in character from “normative” to “elective”, where the element of election underscores the subject's awareness and planning skills needed to build a “choice biography” (Beck, 1992). Social norms require us

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<sup>11</sup> On the temporality of anticipatory thinking see below the essay by S. Capogna.

to act not only to build the “One Self” but also to be aware of this process, that is to say, incrementing self-reflexivity in order to control every source of risk and uncertainty: “individuals are *condemned* to activity: in other words, there is active life even when its own structure of expectations and hopes are undermined. Thus to be able to speak of “one’s own life” the individual has to continuously construct and be aware of the interests that move him/her to activity” (Beck, 2008, p. 15). Similarly, Giddens stated that, “each of us not only ‘has’, but ‘lives’ a biography, reflexively organized in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life” (Giddens, 1991, p. 14).

The overemphasis of the power of choice seems not to offer progress but rather an additional element of risk for individuals. This is particularly true in the case of *young people*, who – according to Beck’s criticism – grow up under a sort of a duplicity in the moral law: on the one hand, they are subjected to their father and mother’s will (private), that is, obliged to stay under their family’s care and watchful eye; on the other hand, adults see them as already competent personalities – it is presumed that they know how to build their lives without having learned to develop aims or certainties from anyone. Unfortunately for young people, “the phase of life that should be used for forming the personal profile tends to be filled increasingly with spaces and chances which already presume grown individuals” (Fuchs, 1983, p. 341) Thus, young people not only become individualised but also claim for individualisation and act *qua* individualised by themselves; they become the «avant-garde» of their own lives (Beck, 2008, p. 103).

### Autonomy and personal agency in adolescents' choices

As young people are forced to be reflexive in making their own way in life, it is almost normal that they tend to over-estimate freedom as the basis for successful decision-making – i.e. claiming to have made the ultimate decision about where to go to school by themselves, neglecting the help received by parents/teachers/siblings/friends, and so on. In other words, they evoke independence of choice, and need to think of themselves as mature choosers/consumers in order to reinforce self-esteem and devote all personal resources to self-guidance<sup>12</sup>, all the while not realizing the complexity and multi-dimensionality involved. This is the case of all students, independently of whether they're following Academic or Vocational courses. Interestingly, there is no significant difference among subjects from diverse social and cultural family backgrounds<sup>13</sup>: all are aiming to build their own path for ascendant mobility. What does that mean? Is the autonomy they claim authentic or distorted? Is their relationship with social institutions (primarily family and school) neglected? Or are they unable to reflect?

One possible explanation could be that they engage in 'weak' reflexive thinking due to the immaturity and the egocentrism typical of adolescence. Alternatively, one might suggest that their passivity towards socialisation is so remarkable, and the internalisation of norms and cultural expectations so complete that they cannot separate their intentionality from the Other's conditioning (as in Reisman's heteronomous type; Riesman, 1956). In my view, however, it is preferable to considering the "self-centred" argument as a cognitive strategy that adolescents use to control what occurs around them and to distinguish their own beliefs from the opinions of others and from social/cultural constraints.

The definition of this aptitude as a Self strategy seems to fit what A. Bandura properly calls *agency*, that is, in the terms of a socio-cognitive actor's view: a sense of *self-efficacy*; a perception that one can perform effectively; that one is more willing to try to solve a problem; that one won't give up easily; the knowledge that one can reach one's goals through one's

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<sup>12</sup> S. Capogna in this issue draws up a checklist of personal resources for guidance: proactivity, self evaluation, imagination, procedural path, interactive dialogue, quest for autonomy.

<sup>13</sup> As aforementioned, family background in Italy is strongly associated with the probability of choosing a certain type of secondary school track. See footnote n. 6; Travagliati, 2009; Cavaletto, 2010.

own efforts, which is related to various dimensions of the Self (intentionality, forethought, reactivity, reflexivity; Bandura, 1997). According to Bandura, the majority of young people have enough agentic power to overcome the most important adolescent transitions without turbulence and conflict. A significant part of them, however, can fail in several life passages, such as academic success, because the lack of agency, which increases problematic behaviour, reduces academic aspirations, leading to greater depression<sup>14</sup>.

If the notion of agency is of enormous importance in order to understand adolescent's ability to exercise self-control or engage in free and voluntary acts – all features of decision-making from a socio-psychological perspective – from our sociological perspective, the notion must be extended and applied to young choosers with reference to their capacity to negotiate agency-structure constraints; that is, to show to what extent they possess the *agentic power* to contrast forces and factors located in social structure and culture – by assuming a global awareness of the decision making process and of the transition to adulthood. As Campbell (2009) argues, many actors in modern and contemporary society do have agency in the sense they are able to transform behaviour into action through voluntary conduct, but this is less spread out than the agents' causal power, that is, the ability to bring about changes in the structure they depend on by acting with creativity and free choice. In this case we would have meta-reflexive individuals, as Archer (2003) suggests, whose reflexive thinking would be capable of generating emerging structures and networks; in other words, individuals whose causal power would mediate between the subject's internal life (especially his/her ideals) and the external structural and cultural properties of his/her society (that means the actors use their personal power to act 'in this way rather than another' in a given situation).

If we have a look to two pieces of reflexive conversations drawn from the PRIN Study mentioned above (see footnote 1), we can find evidence of adolescents' agentic power. In the conversation with Serena (15 years old, Milano), for example, there is a latent request for autonomy in choice, typical of what Archer calls "*autonomous reflexivity*" aiming to upwards social mobility. As a matter of fact Serena belongs to a traditional white collar family and, as her mother is housewife, her aspiration is firstly to

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<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, self-efficacy affects not only school achievement but also career trajectories, because – as in a study focusing on this issue (Bandura, 2001) – the adolescents' choice tends to follow one's occupational self-efficacy beliefs.

gain a well-paid and pleasant occupation. In the conversation, much importance is given to her desire for social and personal improvement while the role of significant adults (the Design teacher, parents, middle school teachers) are in the background. Words frequently associated with personal choice are located in the semantic area of pleasure: “like, love, enjoy”.

*Why did you choose this Professional institute for graphic design?*

Because I love to draw, because I liked the school when I visited it and because I want to become a graphic designer.

*Have you ever changed institute or type of school?*

No.

*Who has helped you in choosing the Professional institute?*

I did it all by myself; that is, I met my professional design teacher when I had visited the school the first time, so she had an effect on me, and then I decided. But my parents didn't intervene in my decision.

*Was it an easy or difficult choice to make?*

When you are young, it is always a difficult choice.

*Did you really do everything by yourself? Didn't you receive any advice from your middle-school teachers?*

Yes, when the brochures arrived, I saw the one I liked most; that is, I saw that there was a Professional institute for graphic designer, which I liked and then I went there with my dad to visit it and I liked it.

*Have your middle-school teachers given you some recommendations or not?*

No more than giving me the brochure and saying: “Go and visit the school and check it out”, but, at any rate it was my choice.

Also in the following conversation with Lara (17 years old, Torino) there is clearly a form of “*autonomous reflexivity*” that highlights the girl's desire to overcome past negative conditions (i.e. the distance from school) and that leads her towards an open-minded future – albeit less defined than Serena's – thanks to the choice of a Lyceum. Having both parents employed in white-collar jobs, Lara has a liberal profession in mind when thinking about a potential career path (upward mobility). The insistence on freedom and personal involvement in the decision-making process (and also in achieving good results) indicates her ability to choose independently from parents' and teachers' advice. Words frequently associated with personal choice are located in the semantic area of self-esteem: “free, proud, better, achievement, regret”.

*Why did you choose this scientific Lyceum?*

Especially because I had no ideas about my future, and the Scientific Lyceum offers a stronger grounding for a variety of university options. Only for this reason because, honestly, I don't really have a passion for Maths, just for this reason.

*Who has helped you choose?*

Mmhh, I don't know, I'd say I've been quite free to make my own decision in this respect. I was less free in terms of the actual school, but in terms of what type of school I was very free to choose. Then my parents considered both a Lyceum in Settimo and one in Torino, and finally we decided on this one as it's closer to home.

*Are you happy with this choice?*

Yes, a lot. Firstly, because, having gone to pre-school, elementary school and middle school in Torino, I had much longer commuting times and less time for myself, to rest. Now, instead, going to school close to home I have more time to study, to...well, anyways, less time is wasted in the commute.

*But are you happy with the choice of a scientific lyceum?*

For now, yes. So far I have no qualms or regrets, so things are fine for now.

*Did your middle-school teachers give you any advice on what school to choose?*

My middle school teachers advised me against the scientific Lyceum because they thought... because I was not that good in Math, that is I'd get Cs or Bs but not higher marks, whereas in other subject I was quite good. But I didn't really follow their advice, I chose the scientific lyceum anyhow and I'm not having all the enormous problems they predicted I would have, thank goodness!

*How are you marks now?*

I am quite satisfied for now, also because I never got any help at home. Besides the fact that this was my choice, I was very determined and proud, I wanted to do it on my own so all I managed to achieve I did only on my own, without help from others.

Therefore, the respondents of the PRIN study show a considerable amount of self-efficacy and control of their beliefs by declaring to be free to choose whatever they want. But the autonomy they are referring to is a desire for independence (i.e., "autonomy from X"; power to do X) rather than the ability to adopt unconditioned behaviours aiming to vary the circumstances that affect their decision-making (i.e., "autonomy to do X" ; "power over X")<sup>15</sup>. A complete vision of agentic power, in fact, would

<sup>15</sup> As a matter of fact, the term 'autonomy' applies to both conceptions of agency, but – following Donati (2007b) – the preferred meaning is that derived from its Greek roots, *auto-nomos*, which refers to the ability to give oneself norms, compatible with (and in fact related to) inter-dependence from the structure of one's relations. Only with this kind of

include a reference to responsibility, which is absolutely absent in their narratives. Students interpret the experience of choice as a past event in which they were the protagonists, but they are neither totally aware of social and cultural conditioning nor of the possible fallacy of their deliberations; in other words, they are unable to anticipate the ultimate responsibility of the choices they made.

Conversely, the sense of responsibility linked to students' choices emerges from the interviews with their teachers: in these narratives pupils are at the centre of teachers' preoccupations and are seen as actors with various forms of difficulties (ranging from physical problems to eating disorders, emotional stress, the inability to leave home, anxiety in the face of multiple opportunities, etc.) whose effects do influence the decision-making process regarding school, occupation, future commitments and will lead to unsuccessful choices with a consequent loss of energy, time, and self-esteem. But this kind of "reflexive teacher" (see also Romano, 2009; Colombo, 2009b) also acknowledges that more responsible decision-making can be achieved only by avoiding to meddle with students' personal power of deliberation, but rather leaving young people to act and experience failure. The adult involved in the process of guidance has to be quite delicate as they are dealing almost entirely with the dimensions of: privacy (face to face conversation), freedom, voluntary risk and indirect responsibility. A Literature and History teacher (Professional Institute, Bergamo) says:

*To what extent can/must teachers accompany student's decision-making process?*

To be honest with you, I don't know! We can influence (their choices), like family, society or mass media can; this is one of the school's ambitions, but perhaps it's time we put it a bit more in perspective, we are not the only ones involved! I don't know how we can be influent, maybe in two ways: as an institution and as a school through the curriculum and our activities; and – if requested – through a personal relationship, with the specificity of our own humanity! But *only if students request it*. Taking on the role of a life-master, over and beyond that of teacher, is one of the worst things we can do. If one is a good role model (for students) and has ethical stature as a person, those who listen to you will decide what to take and what to leave. It is not up to me who decide what my students will do with what I offer them; what stays with them is up to them, and their freedom is also my risk.

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agentic power can the subject be seen, in a systemic perspective, as an agent of free choice on the environment on which to depend.

Many other teachers we have interviewed agree with this opinion about teacher's guidance role: lower secondary schools have the greater responsibility of leading young people to a significant educational choice but the majority of teachers cannot fully take on this responsibility because they are demotivated, not willing to listen to student's personal problems and projects, not open to the educational risk that a direct involvement in decision-making could imply. The main objective of a positive guidance in decision-making would be to push the subject towards autonomy in the sense of reinforcing his/her responsibility (that is, primarily, acknowledgment of possible conditioning factors hampering on the process). A vision of autonomy, thus, that is consistent with the agentic power described above: not only choosing by myself but choosing by mediating between personal concerns and the structure of constraints and chances.

### **Conclusion: which politics *for* autonomy in decision-making?**

As I have argued previously, the issue of freedom and autonomy is central in every debate surrounding educational choice because it entails the statement of what kind of social actor the choosing subject is. I understand freedom and autonomy to be indicators not only of self-efficacy (power of agency) but also of generativity and meta-reflexivity (agentic power) which depend on the subject's awareness of (and resistance to or desire to change) the social and cultural constraints involved in the decision-making process and in the choice itself, in the present as well as in future. As the PRIN Study has shown, educational choice is not free of determinisms and social impediments and is distributed in a variable fashion among the young population, linked to both biographical and socio-economic factors.

Therefore, those who choose must be guided towards autonomy, independence and personal agency in order to learn to make decisions as 'active' and competent members of society. In the sociological literature the family is often considered the 'real' author of educational choices, with the consequence that this vision - when applied to adults - is taken for granted. With the rise of the 'reflexivity' approach, sociology has had to pay more attention to young people (children and adolescents) as active

subjects in school choice. I have tried, in this essay, to open the ‘black box’ of school choice and portray it as a normal event of everyday life.

Nowadays students feel the need to make claims of independence, full intentionality, and freedom from (but not necessarily in discontinuity with) familial and social expectations. Their current ‘developmental task’ increasingly consists in composing their own biography in an ‘elective’ fashion by dominating all internal forces and devoting all concerns and personal resources (such as self-esteem, search for pleasure, projects) to decision-making. Although school choice is a public, objective, multi-factorial event, young people tend to interpret it as a simple, private and singular experience. What lies underneath, according to adolescents, is the role of socialization agents, both at the institutional and at the informal level. Institutional guidance seems to be confused and neglected (whether by students or by families), as are informal and more proximate forms of support provided by parents, which, though accepted by adolescents, appear in contradiction with freedom of choice and, consequently, underestimated.

Furthermore, as many studies report, educational choices are still very much influenced by social determinants (not only biographical – such as gender and age – but also contextual – such as territory, occupational status and level of education of parents), although the causal effects on social stratification are not as linear as they were in the past, because of the de-standardisation (Paul, Sauber, Walther, 2007) and the multiple variations of discriminating lines (gender, race, religion, income, *etc.*). As social positions reached by individuals through education become even less determined only by their cultural capital but must be planned for looking at the interplay between culture and other structural and personal factors, a guidance practice which enlightens students only on the subjects available (both academic and vocational activities) can no longer meet the target<sup>16</sup>. Much has to be done, in this direction, to promote young people’s agency<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This is precisely what the normal routine of guidance services provided by state and non-state school in Italy involves. See ISFOL, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> As suggested in many recent projects aiming to promote young people in EU countries (FATE project, Up2youth, ...) school choice is only a step along the lifelong transition to adulthood, which includes job training, employment, housing, family creation, etc. In each step youth agency in all its forms (choice, keeping options open, reconciliation, self-presentation, participation) must be protected through conventional and non-conventional actions in the public sphere (Paul, Sauber, Walther, 2007) in order to avoid the increase of vulnerability and social exclusion (Furlong, Cartmel, Biddart, Sweeting, West, 2003).

together with adults' fundamental task in offering guidance and empowering autonomous new generations. In our interviews, by comparing parents and teachers, we recognise teachers are actually more prepared to face this challenge than parents, because they use meta-reflexivity and ideal thinking in talking about school choice.

What is worth mentioning with regards to the politics for autonomy, is what teachers have suggested: as there is no prescriptive procedure for offering successful guidance, only the reference to some 'natural humanity' intrinsic to the social and cultural functions of teaching (but this could be applied to every educational function) would be useful. Thus the forms in which guidance takes place are subjective, unpredictable and based on the power of mediation of the actors in a situation of reciprocal respect and freedom: that means, for the adult, taking the *risk* of giving young people personal advice and the *responsibility* for both the potentially positive or negative outcomes; for young people, to learn across from the educational decision-making process how to be "causally efficient" not only on his/her own life but also on the actor-structure interplay, drawing from the acknowledgement of the objective conditions on which choice depends.

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