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Introduction to the Special Section: Educational Paths, Social Inequalities and Life Trajectories

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Introduction to the Special Section: Educational Paths, Social Inequalities and Life Trajectories

Mauro Palumbo and Valeria Pandolfini***

Premise: aims and contexts of this special issue

This special issue of the *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* deals with 'Education paths, social inequalities and life trajectories'. When this special issue was first conceived, our purpose was to bring together scientists from different social sciences to develop an interdisciplinary understanding of how characteristics of educational systems (primary, secondary and tertiary education) are related to various sorts of social inequalities, promoting the sharing of theoretical and empirical reflections. Thus, the aim was to deal with one of the most central issues in sociology, i.e. inequality, which acquires a great importance in sociology of education, inviting authors to submit manuscripts presenting theoretically engaged studies that explore and address such issues in conceptual and/or empirical ways, assuming either a local, national, European or international perspective. The largely debated question is about whether the educational system can effectively overcome social inequalities, or just merely reflect or even intensify them. In order to deal with such a question it is necessary to recognize the multidimensional nature of contemporary inequality, as the focus of debates on inequality has become ever more complex over time, involving more of the traditional dimensions regarding inequality, such as class, race, gender and disability.

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Doubtless, inequality in education is a key question for social theorists, sociologists, policy makers and practitioners committed to equitable distributions of educational and other social goods and to education development as a moral, social and political goal. Indeed, education and equity have been posited as key themes for the future, as confirmed by the Europe 2020 Strategy shifting Europe toward a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy. This requires a careful attention on the role of education in the present society: indeed, different possible roles attributed to education could lead to very different interpretations of inequality and its significance.

Recently Mr. Renzi's government proposed a school reform that actually is under discussion in Parliament and that met the opposition of Unions of Teachers, preoccupied for the reinforced role of school principals and for the introduction of evaluation. The reform has stimulated only partly a debate on the main goals of the school, which has instead occurred following the introduction of the national system of evaluation¹. It doesn't matter to summarize here the relevant debate that is taking place in Italy, frequently ideologically oriented. We can recall just two main observations. First of all, every educational system must warrantee three different goals, which haven't an optimal mix, because they depend on the context.

The first is obviously to ensure equal opportunity to all, for combined reasons of social justice and optimization of social functioning: the principle is sometimes defined 'meritocracy', but luckily Elise Tenret (2011) and Carlo Barone (2012) learned well the lesson of Michael Young (1958) and showed the ideological bias of this term. Nevertheless, a real debate on this topic can lead us to recognize the necessity of 'positive actions' to ensure real equality of opportunity. As a previous Vice Minister of Education recently said, we must enrich the principle of equal opportunity, 'giving more to people that start with less' (Rossi Doria, 2014). But of course the problem of 'how much more' and 'how much less' is a problem of social justice and not only of good functioning of the society (in terms of cost/benefit analysis, you should give 'more' only till the increasing performance obtained thanks to additional help encompasses the cost of the given help).

¹ See Palumbo & Pandolfini (in press); Faggioli, 2014; Allulli, Farinelli & Petrolino, 2013; Castoldi, 2012.

The second goal is to ensure to every young person the success in their educational path; this means to zero the NEET, combining vocational guidance and differentiated educational and vocational training tracks. In this case the risk of ‘cooptative mobility’ (Bowles & Gintis, 1976) is very high, as the segregation one. The success of the ‘dual system’ in Germany is accompanied by questioning the way in which families or teachers orientate students’ choices. This goal is strongly linked to the forms of convergence between structural and rational choice theories (e.g. Bourdieu, 1974; Tenret, 2011) and we briefly shall come back to this argument.

Finally, there is a third goal to which also European Educational policies urge us: citizenship competencies must be warranted to everyone, regardless of his/her starting point, personal goals and conditions. The European Parliament and the European Council on the 18th of December 2006 approved a recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning, specifying their necessity for personal fulfillment, active citizenship, social cohesion and employability in a knowledge society. An additional goal is an equalitarian one, which considers not the equality of starting points (the first one), nor the differentiation of the arrival points (the second one), but the equality of the arrival points without considering the points of departure.

Faced with these three main goals of the contemporary educational systems, scholars focused their attention on mainly one of these. One of the most interesting approaches tries to combine structural and individualistic perspectives. Analyzing the level of meritocracy perceived by Italian students, Elise Tenret (2014) finds that $\frac{3}{4}$ of the sample thinks that the educational system is meritocratic, also if this perception isn’t related to the perception of the utility of the educational qualifications in the labor market. In fact, a lot of empirical evidence shows that in Italy the access to the labor market is related to social origins both directly and by means of school attainment and in a period of economic crisis and lower mobility the over qualification of young people strengthens the combined effects of social and cultural capital. Also for this reason we see that young people (and their families) embed the ‘structural’ constraints (and their consequences in terms of hierarchy of schools, segregation of educational paths and so on in their strategic action, Devleeshouwer, 2015) and live their educational destiny as the result of individual (or familiar) choices, not as the fruit of structural conditioning (see also Carriero, Filandri & Parisi, 2014). Nevertheless, also in the studies based on students’

perceptions, we meet (luckily) the importance of the role of teachers and of the atmosphere of class (frequently declined in terms of mutual aid among students and respect from the teacher – see Devleeshouwer, 2015). This is a non-secondary final remark, because both structural and individual approaches can hide the role of the school and of its main protagonists (teachers and students); through their everyday relationships, they encourage the hope that the school can be an instrument of social emancipation and civil and cultural growth.

Inequality and education: some reflections on contemporary society

After the launching of our special issue, the Italian and European scientific debates on such topics have been enriched by the publication of important contributions, confirming how the topics related to inequality and education constitute even nowadays a very fertile land for theoretical and empirical studies. Among others, we can recall three important special issues: *Scuola Democratica* (2014), *Quaderni di Sociologia* (2014) and the special issue of the *Oxford Review of Education* to mark its 40th anniversary (Furlong & Lunt, 2014). Also a special issue of *MicroMega* (6/2014) has been devoted to the possibility to achieve in the same time equity and excellence in schools.

We think that this renewed interest towards the relationship between social inequalities and school systems is due to the convergence of at least three distinct but related topics in the political and scientific debate.

First of all, we can quote a renewed interest in social mobility. In Italy for a long time this topic has been cultivated in the inner circle of experts but, after the crisis of the last years, people have felt that in a declining economy the phenomenon of social immobility and the polarization of social stratification (with the great crisis of middle classes – see Palumbo & Poli, 2013) are increasing, as confirmed by a recent research (see: Barone, Lucchini & Schizzerotto, 2011), according to which downward mobility in Italy is quite null and, on the other side, upward mobility grows only in the periods of economic growth. A greater interest into social mobility leads to a greater attention to educational systems, not only for the relationship that in modern societies exists between the two, but particularly because in Italy the first job is strongly related to educational attainments and, in addition,

the first job is a good predictor of future social status, particularly in the last generations (Barone, Lucchini & Schizzerotto, 2011).

So interest in social mobility overflows in analysis of the role of educational systems in reproducing, modifying or reducing social inequalities (Barone, 2012). Scholars of different backgrounds converge, observing that democratisation of access to secondary and higher education – the generous ambition of all social-democratic reforms of the sixties of the past century – produced *massification* instead of *democratisation* of school systems (Dubet, 2014); such topic is well debated by Daniela Sideri. An important side effect of the extension of educational paths has been the creation of a great amount of failures and of NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training), or the differentiation of tracks with the development of vocational training. In the Italian case a high youth unemployment rate and a high number of NEET, combined with a high rate of dropouts and flunks, are registered (the Italian student failure and dropouts are analyzed by Anna Siri, who focuses in particular on the Italian University dropouts).

Briefly, both the Bourdieu perspective (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964; 1970), which states that the school is an institution that allows social reproduction, and the Boudon approach (1973), according to which schools produce social inequality thanks to differentiated individuals' rational choices, are always able to explain why schools have difficulties to play a role in reducing social inequalities.

This is not a strange phenomenon because, partly for the same reasons, partly for the opposite, both functional and Marxist-Weberian scholars assign an important role to the school in contemporary society. For the first scholars because the 'right' placement of people in a differentiated society depends on the 'right' functioning of school giving skills and competences in a diverse way, according to diverse quality, needs and aims of young people. Hence the importance of the equality of opportunities, for functional and not for ethical reasons (i.e. to ensure that 'the best' people occupy 'the most important' places in the society, (Davis & Moore, 1942; 1945). Of course the concept of equality of opportunities can change for different authors, also because recent studies pointed out that the differences in learning capacity of people begin very early to work, and also for this reason, schools risk to certificate rather than compensate the effects of social origins (Huttenlocher, 1998; Barone, 2012).

Recent comparative analysis (Dubet, Duru-Bellat & V  r  tout, 2010) showed that the capacity of the school to modify social inheritance depends, from one side, on the importance assigned to educational systems to determine social status (also in terms of signalling potential skills in the job placement process – see Shavit, 2014); from the other side, it depends on the way in which other social mechanisms intervene, inside or outside the school, to determine an individual’s social position (Spartaco *et al.* well debate such topic in their article). This is an increasing problem because, as Poli (2015) pointed out, also in a society in which there are a lot of *classless inequalities*, job placement strongly depends on the ‘family welfare’, i.e. social origins of young people.

Also studies that use a transition approach (see Walther, 2006) show that social capital of young people plays an important role in building the individual biographies and strengthening people’s awareness and identity (Benasso, 2013). On the other side, transitions studies underline that social reproduction is far to be an automatic consequence of social background and school choices and school results depend on individual life courses, which are influenced in turn by teachers, school environment, etc... (M  ller, 2014). In our special issue the transition approach and the focus of life trajectories are well explained and dealt with in the articles of Walther, Pandolfini and Poli, Gomensoro and Bolzman, and Ricucci. The authors analyze, assuming different approaches, the ways in which cultural models, social order and institutions, as well as personal expectations, ambitions, individual features and individual plans influence the course of an individuals' life. Their focus is in particular on the role of education, integrated with an attention on the working environment, the family, the market, and the sphere of political, media, interest associations and informal personal networks.

This leads to the crucial question: *Can Education Change Society?*, to quote the title of a recent book of Michael Apple (2013). His answer is honest: ‘it depends on a lot of hard and continued efforts by many people’ (p. 2). One of the qualities of this book is to underline that school has been considered relevant to change society not only from the left, but also from conservatives, and the attacks that he describes (referring to other countries) ‘on teachers and all public employees, on unions, on schools and on the curricula ...’, remind us that some people sometimes give to the school an importance as an institution crucial for the democratization of the society greater than social reformers.

In the Italian case, authoritative voices (see: Bottani, 2013) highlight the difficulties faced by the school in carrying out the tasks that are assigned by a complex society, in which the needs of competitiveness coexist with the need for greater social equity. And for a long time no public debate on the main task of the school in a democratic society took place; on the contrary, a strongly ideological debate arose around the creation of a National Evaluation System and particularly on the role played in this system by INVALSI's test and data (see the article of Argentin and Triventi in this special issue).

The Italian educational system is not very healthy; in 2013, 17% of young people aged 18-24 years were early school leavers (20.2% boys and 13.7% girls), without having obtained a qualification recognized in the labor market. There were about two and a half million (26% of the total) young people between 15 and 29 in 2013 who were before Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), a phenomenon that concerns all countries of Europe but that in Italy is much more serious: only Greece has a higher incidence, while Germany and France registered NEET's ratios as much smaller. In addition, the data from the international survey PISA (Programme of International Student Assessment) show that Italy is below many European countries (OECD-PISA 2012 dataset referring to the Italian sample is used by Brunella Fiore in her essay). And the countries that have the highest unemployment rate in the range 25-34 years are the same where there is a higher percentage of people with low education; likewise, the countries with the highest unemployment rate in the group aged 25-29 are the same with the worst results in PISA 2009 and 2012. On the other hand, in Italy only 22.4% of the age group 30-34 hold a university degree or similar. The increase of 6.8 points between 2004 and 2013 is not adequate to reach the target of 40% set by the European Strategy for 2020. Also for these reasons Mr. Renzi Italian Government proposed the previously mentioned school reform.

Approaching the theme from different observation lenses

In replying to our call for papers, we have received 21 abstracts: a quite explanatory result of the great interest in the topic by the scientific community. At the same time, however, a hard selection has been required: after selecting 12 abstracts among those proposed, the papers have been

submitted to a double refereeing process (a blind review from a qualified expert and the guest editors' comments). At the end of such process, the special issue contains nine articles (in addition to this introductory article) written by 16 authors from different countries and differing backgrounds.

The papers composing the present special issue approach several of the aspects involved in analysing the dimensions of educational paths, social inequalities and life trajectories. The range of the sub-topic that we are dealing with appears wide and rich: inequalities in education related to social and economic conditions, gender, ethnicity/migration background; education/school-to-work transitions; over-education and over-skilling issues; social inequalities and educational success measured by grades and test scores (PISA and INVALSI); educational attainment, occupational career and inequalities over the life-course; early school leavers. From a methodological point of view, almost all the essays report meaningful results generated from fieldwork and are carried out with a variety of research methods and conceptual toolkits, both quantitative and qualitative. Most of the article focuses on the Italian national context; three essays show the current situation of educational contexts in two other European countries (Germany and Switzerland).

We think the collected essays provide a very interesting overview on the aforesaid themes. Taken together, though they were surely not meant to make up a systematic approach to the subject matter, we hope they offer very important ways to explore, through the various theoretical, methodological, professional and cultural perspectives, several of the issues on the debates about the causes and consequences of educational inequality and how it might successfully be addressed. At the same time, we hope the reader will be stimulated to identify new research questions, leading to develop future lines of inquiry as well as to deal with theoretical and methodological challenges in order to better explore the proposed issue concerning the social inequalities and their link with education.

The first four essays focus on school-to-work transitions, dealing with social inequalities issues by adopting an analytical perspective on life trajectories and life-courses, reporting research results implemented in different European countries: Germany, Italy and Switzerland. Andreas Walther's article, *The Struggle for 'Realistic' Career Perspectives: Cooling-Out Versus Recognition of Aspirations in School-to-Work-Transitions*, deals with the interactive and conflictual production of what is held 'realistic career perspectives' of young people at the end of lower

secondary education in the context of the German transition system. It is based on the analysis of qualitative data of a research project evaluating the programme ‘Berufseinstiegsbegleiter’ (literally: ‘accompaniment of professional insertion’) of the federal employment agency aimed at accompanying disadvantaged young people from lower secondary schools into the dual system of apprenticeship training. The article contextualizes school-to-work transitions in Germany, referring to comparative findings on transitions in Europe; the question is if and how pedagogical practice of vocational orientation necessarily reproduces mechanisms of ‘cooling-out’ young people’s professional aspirations in accordance with labor market possibilities. Combining the concepts of cooling-out (Goffman) and recognition (Honneth), the author analyses central aspects of the construction and production of ‘realistic career perspectives’ by reconstructing the constellations of recognition in the trajectories of two interviewed young people. In the conclusions, the question for pedagogical rationality is reformulated in terms of pedagogical assistance in transitions to work contributing to compensation of limited choice and agency or rather to adaption to situations of disadvantage.

The essay of Pandolfini and Poli, *Education as a Capability for Young Adults’ Life Trajectories: Some Evidences from an Italian Case Study*, aims to observe the effects of educational path on achievement of individual wellbeing for a sample of young adults. Adopting the Senian Capability Approach in educational perspective, the authors aim to investigate how nowadays education affects young adults’ life trajectories by reconstructing their biographical paths and exploring relations between education, work experiences and life trajectories, in order to observe the effects of the educational path on realisation and achievement of individual wellbeing and doing. The article analyses a quantitative case study realized in a typical context of flexible labor market, the city of Genoa, Italy. In such a metropolitan context of Northern Italy, the local labour market reflects quite paradigmatically the problematic shift to a post-Fordist model from a traditional industrial economy, made even more complex by the contemporary crisis, where job precariousness and salary instability reproduce harder occupational and living conditions especially for younger generations. Adopting a mixed method approach, the questionnaire used in the survey has been designed in the form of a structured biographical interview, so that it has been possible to reconstruct and observe in a capability perspective the overall path of respondents, deepening the

different settings of life trajectories, particularly in education, training, employment and family dimensions. The results lead to differently conceived education as a value in itself, as well as a mean or a conversion factor, meaning heterogeneous results in terms of individual wellbeing and doing. Moreover, the empiric evidences underline the effects of educational credentialism in accessing higher occupational status and thus acting as a factor of social stratification. In the conclusions, the authors reflect on the methodological use of the Capability Approach in education study and, in terms of policy recommendations, underline the importance of a better combination of study and job experiences while still in schooling to improve the young adults' school-to-work transition.

In Andrés Gomensoro and Claudio Bolzman's essay, *The Effect of the Socioeconomic Status of Ethnic Groups on Educational Inequalities in Switzerland: Which 'Hidden' Mechanisms?*, the main questions are What is the impact of the socioeconomic status (SES) of ethnic groups on educational trajectories? And by which 'hidden mechanisms' does the SES background concretely influence the educational trajectories of youths? In order to answer to such questions the authors have adopted a longitudinal approach so they can identify how SES concretely affects education over time. First, based on the 'Transitions from Education to Employment' (TREE) database, they propose a typology of post-compulsory educational pathways and compare the trajectories taken by both second-generation ethnic groups (every person who was born in Switzerland or who arrived before the age of 10 and who has two parents born in the same foreign country) and by natives (youths born in Switzerland with both parents born in Switzerland). Then they control for SES to observe if there are any changes by ethnic group in the odds of taking different pathways. Finally, in order to analyze in detail how SES concretely influences educational pathways, they conducted 50 biographical interviews with children of Albanian-speaking immigrants, an important group in Switzerland.

Their analysis shows that, compared to other ethnic groups, second-generation youths from former-Yugoslavia, Portugal and Turkey are overrepresented in vocational and more problematic pathways mainly because of their low SES, but not exclusively. They identified the fact that the SES effect is often nested with other negative factors related to the family which constrain educational opportunities and reproduce educational inequalities, such as: precarious legal statuses, difficult living conditions and health problems, low social capital, a lack of knowledge (both youth

and parents) of the educational system and, in some cases, latent discrimination and related to the educational system that selects students into different tracks. However, the authors conclude that, fortunately, the accumulation of disadvantages and the effect of 'hidden mechanisms' related to a low SES are sometimes compensated for by high educational aspirations or by a certain willingness to invest in economic and professional success.

Roberta Ricucci's *Orientation Activities in Times of Crisis: New Challenges for Secondary Schools* too focuses on the school-work nexus, aiming at identifying whether schools (and their surroundings) are equipped (or not) to respond effectively to the demands of the market, politics and knowledge society. Her essay presents the preliminary findings of a qualitative exploratory research conducted in a specific local context (the Piemonte region in Italy) with the purpose to study whether and how the different actors involved in the formation of the younger generation are using the tools available to orient them in a labor market which is complex and heavily influenced by the current economic crisis. It is based on different research sources dealing with the results of two qualitative research projects carried out in Turin between 2012 and 2013 (*ERICA – Enriching Regional Innovation Capabilities in the Service Economy* and *Futuro Dove? – Where will be the future?*): 1) a press review; 2) a random sample of interviews (no. 30, age range 18-24) and 3) interviews to key informants (school managers, local administrators, scholars involved in developing local policies in the field of education, training and labour market insertion). The research was aimed to look at the provision of information, training and orientation to match the offer between education/training and labor-market. In the conclusions, the author states that a new approach – much school-labor market oriented – is required: it demands teachers be open to re-thinking their role (not only within schools but also in the territory and its socio-entrepreneurial fabric); students be prepared to invest in their own future; local institutions be able to invest in structural orientation policies, avoiding the idea that experimental initiatives could be strongly effective in helping youth in their school-labor market transition. Such changes are conceived by Ricucci as key elements to create a greater dialogue between education and the world of work.

The next three articles deal with social inequalities and educational success measured by grades and test scores. Two of them focus on the Italian context, basing specifically on OECD-PISA (Programme for

International Student Assessment) and INVALSI (National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education System) data; the third one deals with Canton Ticino's school system. The main objective of Brunella Fiore's article, *Improving Excellence in Schools: Evidence from the Italian OECD-PISA 2012 Data*, is to highlight the characteristics of students and schools that seem to favor (or decrease) the probability of being top-performers in mathematical literacy. The author examines the factors associated with excellent performance (top-performing), with particular attention on three dimensions: the cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of the families of students; the Italian macro-area where students come from and their gender. Her research aims to test the following hypotheses: a) students coming from families with higher cultural and socio-economic status gain more chances to be top-performer students than their less privileged counterparts; b) students coming from regions with the lower socio-economic status of their students show lower probabilities that they should be top-performers and c) the chance to be top-performers for girls is lower than for boys. In order to test such hypotheses, Fiore uses family cultural and socio-economic backgrounds as derived from the OECD-PISA 2012 data, referring to the Italian sample. Logistic regression models have been developed based on such datasets, performing three types of analysis: on top-performers; on the characteristics of resilient top-performers and on the advantaged top-performers. The main results indicate strong differences in the Italian macro-areas: North-West and North-East obtain better results than the regions of the South in improving excellence. This is particularly true if the student comes from a family disadvantaged context. Another result refers to the persistence of gender stereotypes in mathematics, which seem to be activated more strongly during adolescence. The stereotype reflects in factors such as higher math anxiety, lower self-awareness and lower self-confidence. On this point, the author states it is possible to operate along two paths: on the one hand, the orientation of girls towards more structured courses in mathematics and, on the other hand, the strengthening of the mathematical content.

In their article *The North-South Divide in School Grading Standards: New Evidence from National Assessments of the Italian Student Population*, Argentin and Triventi aim to examine whether and how teachers' grading standards and marks signal content vary across geographical areas in the Italian educational system, focusing on the differences between the Northern and Southern regions. In particular, they investigate two different

dimensions in teachers' grading practices: a) the *grading standards*, degree of strictness in attributing marks by teachers and b) the *coherence* between teachers' marks and students' INVALSI test scores. The authors used data from the National Assessment Programme INVALSI-SNV (Sistema Nazionale di Valutazione) on the whole student population in the 5th, 6th and 10th grades in 2011/12, with relevant information on two subjects (Italian and mathematics). The results show that at the national level there is a positive correlation between marks and scores and this is stronger in primary (but not for mathematics) and lower secondary education, while it is weaker for all tracks in upper secondary education. This indicates that teachers' evaluation moves in the same direction of the results obtained by their students in the standardized assessments. Moreover, analyses showed that Southern regions are characterized by what seems like higher generosity in grading students, who display lower performance in the INVALSI assessment compared to their counterparts with the same marks and socio-demographic profile. Moreover, this generosity in attributing marks seems stronger for higher marks (9 and 10) and in mathematics, especially in lower secondary schools and lyceums. At the same time, differences in grading standards among Italian provinces even within macro-regions have been observed, so that Argentin and Triventi state that the North/South dichotomy hides a relevant fact, the high heterogeneity existing among provinces and schools in the generosity/severity bias. Discussing the main implications of such geographical heterogeneity for the Italian educational system, the authors underline two critical points: a) over-rating Southern students risks distorting the information used by students and families in taking educational choices, especially at the end of lower secondary school; b) the fact that marks are poorly correlated to students' skills in upper secondary schools is quite worrying considering that such marks could be used by employers in the labor market and by universities in the selection of applicants.

Spartaco Calvo, Luciana Castelli, Jenny Marcionetti, Alberto Crescentini and Angela Cattaneo write on *Inequality in Canton Ticino's School System: Between Conservation and (Some) Opening*, analysing the role of socioeconomic origin on educational achievements from primary up to middle and high school. In order to do this, they offer an analysis of data from five surveys conducted over the same period of time by the *Centre for Innovation and Research on Education Systems* (CIRSE) of the *University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland* (SUPSI). From a

methodological point of view, they used a ‘pseudo-longitudinal approach’: since it was impossible to follow the evolution of the same group of students over time, they opted for observing different groups with similar characteristics at the same time, each of them in a different stage of education, from primary school to post-secondary education. The systematic comparison of the five different surveys allows considering two closely interrelated issues, namely the issue concerning differences in the acquisition of skills and competences within the same level of education (educational achievement) and the issue of inequalities in achieving a specific school grade (educational attainment). The empirical data show that the members of higher social classes are facilitated to start and finish the career that is considered to be of greater social value. Those belonging to the more privileged social groups have better results and tend to enrol more into academic education, rather than into the vocational one. A sort of self-protective action undertaken by the leading classes seems to be confirmed. Moreover, results from the different presented researches show how education systems enact implicit selection mechanisms, which seem to privilege the more advantaged social classes for what concerns the educational attainments. Even when merit criteria seem to prevail (namely, the results obtained in Mathematics and Italian language at middle school), these have to be considered as an expression of a selection that has already taken place.

The special issue ends with two articles focussing on the higher education system, referring specifically to the Italian context. Anna Siri’s essay, *Predicting Students’ Dropout at University Using Artificial Neural Networks*, aims to contribute to the continuing debates on the possibilities of how to reduce student failure and improve educational processes. Her study asked two main research questions: a) How accurately do pre-entry students’ characteristics predict the risk of dropout? and b) Which characteristics weigh most in predicting the risk of dropout? The research is based on the analysis of data and information originating from primary sources: administrative data related to the careers of students; statistical data collected during the research through an ad hoc survey and data derived from telephone interviews with students who had not completed the enrolment in the subsequent years. The population consists of 810 students enrolled for the first time in a health care professional degree course at the University of Genoa in the academic year 2008-09. Using the mathematical models of Artificial Neural Networks (ANNs), the author identifies some

factors which are most significant in defining the probability of abandoning and the velocity of acquisition of formative credits. Among such factors emerge: family background (parents' limited educational qualification); formative background before enrolment (provenance from secondary schools different from the lyceums, low degree marks); non-participation in experiences of pre-university guidance and/or ineffectiveness of them; choice of enrolment for stereotyped and/or inadequate reasons (relevance of the diploma, possibility of studying with friends, degree course believed prestigious or presumed offering easier job and career opportunities); choice of the course as a makeshift after the exclusion from another limited number course; little interest in what is being studied and having been chosen without a proper motivation; and lack of satisfaction with the results achieved, which engages a circuit of demotivation with respect to the work still to be done. In the conclusions, Siri states that application of the Artificial Neural Network model can offer a valid tool to design educational interventions to deliver to those who score high in the level of risk. Having a predictive model of career development of university students, in terms of success, irregular paths and dropping out, allows us to know precociously the difficulties and thus to initiate targeted policies of guidance and support.

Finally, in her essay *Access and Selection in Higher Education: Exploring New Pathways for Effective Social Inclusion*, Daniela Sideri examines the higher education open entry policy in light of the current over-education and over-skilling and marketisation and consumerism phenomena. She hypothesizes that open entry policies may encourage consumerism and credential inflation, entailing negative effects on the quality of the teaching-learning environment and wasteful competition in the labor market, increasing the risk of professional and social exclusion instead of guaranteeing more and greater opportunities. The author provides an agenda to guide both future research to enlighten and explain these phenomena and policy-making in higher education, discussing opportunities to adjust open entry policies with a specific focus on the Italian system. In the conclusions, some recommendations are provided including developing quality devices such as teacher peer-control, self-reflection and self-assessment, establishing a compulsory orientation programme in the first year of study and thereafter meeting certain performance standards.

While the introduction derives from several discussions between the authors, Mauro Palumbo has written the section *Inequality and education: some reflections on the contemporary society*; Valeria Pandolfini has written the sections *Premise: aims and contexts of this special issue* and *Approaching the theme from different observation lenses*.

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