



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

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Article first published online

June 2015

HOW TO CITE

Ricucci, R. (2015). Orientation Activities in Times of Crises: New Challenges for Secondary Schools, *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 7(2), 99-125. Retrieved from <http://journals.padovauniversitypress.it/ijse/content/orientation-activities-times-crisis-new-challenges-secondary-schools>



PADOVA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Orientation Activities in Times of Crisis: New Challenges for Secondary Schools

Roberta Ricucci^{*}

Abstract: The relationship between educational/training processes and the world of work – between schools, universities and companies – is a topic which, for some time, has neither stirred great enthusiasm nor aroused much interest. It is by no means a new idea, even though in recent years it has continued to expand, shifting from a school-work binomial to the wider one of school-territory. Yet, in spite of increased efforts in the field, the school-work nexus remains weak. Indeed, workers in the field cannot help noticing that every season there appears a reform or a policy or a slogan designated to resituate the school, and its connection with the world of production, centre stage. Apart from the uneasiness, the indignation, caused by the condition of youth (from the points of view of education, level of qualifications obtained and occupational insertion), what interventions do schools carry out on behalf of tomorrow's adults? What is being done at the local level, which is where young people's competence is really developed and initiatives on their behalf put into practice? The paper tries to answer these questions focusing on a specific local context (the Piedmontese region in Italy), using qualitative methods.

Keywords: school, skills, orientation, labour market, youth

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Introduction

According to media reports, Italy is facing a new diaspora. Italy, along with the other Southern European countries, is among the main countries which are facing outflows of youth going to other EU countries. The framing of such new phenomenon is not univocal. Some voices, at EU and national levels, tend to focus mainly on its positive aspects in terms of individual opportunities and macro-economic rebalancing effects (Ponzo & Ricucci, 2015). Other observers and stakeholders, both in sending and in destination contexts, highlight and stress the negative implications of enhanced intra-EU youth mobility, in terms of the drain of human resources from sending places. Scholars are cautious in commenting on this new phenomenon: in fact, in contrast with an increasing interest in the issue, accompanied by pervasive, though uneven, mediatization and politicization, research on this new trend among Italian young people is still scarce (Da Prà & Tirabassi, 2014; Conti, 2012; Pellens, 2013). In the backstage of this mediatization, there are well-known leitmotifs: in the knowledge society and in the persisting effects of the economic crisis, various research (both at European and Italian levels) points out how young people need more education and training accompanied by a wealth of on-the-job experience in order to enter the labour market, to be competitive in a scene that is described as global and international (Baranowska & Gebel, 2010; Baronio, Gualtieri & Linfante, 2011; Cappelli, 2012; Biavaschi et al., 2012). Several voices from the world of politics, companies and schools have been raised regarding this matter (Quintini, 2011; RANSTAD, 2012). Data on NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training), on youth unemployment, to which brain drain and labour migration have recently added, have become topical issues of discussion on the present and future of Italy (Pastore, 2011; Brzinsky-Fay, 2007). It is almost impossible to take systematic actions with the deafening noise of numbers and controversy around. It is clear that the question of how young people succeed at school and perform in the labour market involves various factors, including the socio-economic context in which they live and the local settings where they grow up. Yet, if we take a look at the local level – where young people are trained every day – the concern is expressed through practices, experiences, proposals, which sometimes become

policies. Indeed, this paper focuses on how – at local level – secondary schools, on the one hand, and young people (and their families), on the other, manage information about skills, labour market characteristics and opportunities.

If it is true that the issue of how to guide young people who are leaving secondary school is among the most intriguing and difficult to address, it is also clear that the best level upon which to investigate the topic should be the local one. The constraints are many and not just tied to a world of work that seems to be characterized by the chorus “old in, young out” (Pastore, 2009). Representations of young people and families about the significance of work, tasks, characteristics of the environment count (and weigh). Lastly, the networks that schools are able to develop with the territory and the economic fabric in which they are placed are important. A closer link between what happens in the classroom and what happens in offices, construction sites, companies, and commercial premises represents a challenge that still has to be overcome.

However, beyond the rhetoric, it is difficult to say which tools and opportunities young people can rely on to define their own set of skills, experience and knowledge useful for orientation in the face of higher education or career choices. In fact, setting aside the recurring themes in the public debate (unemployment, disillusionment, lack of autonomy, low risk propensity), young people who are leaving secondary school are the beneficiaries of actions and initiatives related to different areas of policy, from education to employment, from social inclusion to active participation and citizenship. A synoptic view solicited by the European level of governance has strengthened, through programs and investments since the 1990s, the attention paid to young human capital, which is crucial for the construction of not only a competitive, but also a socially inclusive Europe. But how can these requests be put into effect at the national level? How are they placed in the local contexts and the changing economies, which, since 2008, have been sorely tested by the financial and economic crisis?

This paper is ideally written within the European framework that was the first setting for the Lisbon strategy and subsequently for “Europe 2020”. In particular, it aims at identifying whether schools (and their surroundings) are equipped (or not) to respond effectively to the demands of the market, politics

and knowledge society. The remainder of the paper is as follows: Section “New skills, old problems” presents the context to which the old issue of school-labour mismatch belongs and outlines both research method and sources; Sections “Something is changing: attempts in building bridges for young people enrolling upper secondary schools” and “Mission possible: teachers, students and families going in the same direction” deal with difficulties within schools. Sections “Putting it into practice: local institutions and their relevance in youth policies” and “Learning by doing: a better link between students, school and labour market is possible” describe experiences developed at local level. Section “Conclusions: lessons from a regional experience” summarizes the key issues of the discussion.

New skills, old problems

The policies that deal with young people – pertaining to education and training on the one hand and the entry into the labour market on the other – are those that have seen the greatest commitment in our country in recent years, including at the request of the European Union¹. The increasingly frequent attention drawn to the alarming situation of youth unemployment encouraged the rise of scientific concern at first and then the development of policies to facilitate entry into the labour market, reviewing the entry mechanism and its regulation (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011; ILO, 2013). Similarly, the public debate in Italy has also focused on the school and the effects of its many reforms (Ribolzi, 2009; Moscati, 2013). Schools have always been the first to

¹ With the interventions of the Sorbonne and Bologna, the European level of governance encourages member states to commit themselves to improving services for training, orientation and tertiary education, which are considered necessary not only to better equip young Europeans for the changes taking place in the labour market, but also to achieve the objectives of training and employability envisaged in the strategy of “Europe 2020”. From this perspective, upper secondary schools – and for those who are continuing with higher education – no longer represent the result of a training programme which then turns into a career path, but a step on the path of a lifelong education.

be addressed when it comes to the training of young people, the skills² and qualifications that they acquire to enter the labour market.

However, schools and the labour market are not widely separated arenas, although at a first glance they may seem little or weakly connected. Over the years, the demands of the scientific community for an ever-closer partnership have effectively resulted in experiments, rarely in lasting policies (Quintini & Manfredi, 2009). Secondary schools (mainly at their upper stage) have been placed under observation: firstly, technical and vocational schools have been under-scrutinized, with their mission focussed on educating and training good technicians (and, of course, a huge variety of skills); then high schools, which are nowadays under a profound transformation in order to define their programmes as much more interrelated with the socio-economic fabric than they were (Bottani, 2013).

Among the various Italian government attempts to update the school system in the framework both of the challenges of the knowledge society and the goals of Europe 2020³, the secondary school reform in 2010 influenced on the revision of the curricula, more specifically the issue of school-work alternation (Barone, 2012; Farinelli, 2008). More recently, a new document, called “La buona scuola” [The good school], has stressed the need of a strict (and strong) link between learning and job experiences. Stages and training activities should be developed in all the educational tracks. The latter is provided for all sectors, from professional to high schools. The public debate generally emphasizes the novelty and significance of the training activities. However, the possibility of implementing initiatives to “promote an organic link with the world of work and professions, including voluntary and private social services” also exists for high schools (Regulation no. 137/2010). From the legislator’s point of view,

² The current public debate focuses mainly on cognitive skills, leaving in the background both social and emotional skills (OECD, 2014). The relevance of those skills is stressed by several studies: these issues are slowly entering the school debate and they are well understood by human resources directors. Paraphrasing Cavaletto (2013), entrepreneurs want schools to prepare young people who are able to interact in team work, understand English documents and to react well in stressful situations, not well-versed in theories and historical notions.

³ Further information on how Italy fits in the European scenario see Eurypedia, 2012; Colombo, 2011.

the introduction of alternation is considered as an innovation of the traditional learning model, which should shift from an approach based on an individual subject to “a type of wider school community in which formal education activities are combined with non-formal and informal learning actions in other places of civil society and leads to an acquisition of recognizable skills” (INDIRE, 2013)⁴. The recent discussion in Italy in autumn 2014 on the government’s proposal “La Buona Scuola” (The Good School) on how schools should be changed to challenge the lack of skills, qualifications and competitiveness of young Italians in comparison with their European peers is also moving in this direction (Reimer, Noelke & Kucel, 2008).

Nevertheless, intentions collide with a complex school and extra-curricular reality that is somewhat resistant to change. Starting from the teaching staff (and management) that has to be updated on the methodology and on the school’s renewed role of guidance and bridge between family and entry into the world of work and/or adults.

In fact, if the school has long been unable to look around and build relationships with the surrounding area, these experiences are struggling to become a structural and a shared heritage within schools (not dependent on the goodwill of some teachers). On the other hand, the ability to interact with the surrounding environment (small firms, shops, associations, both public and private institutions and the local socio-economic fabric) means starting a Copernican revolution in some places, which causes the school to be (or be considered) no longer the only pole where the younger generation’s training takes place, but an element (albeit large and vital) of a more general education system.

The paper uses different research sources⁵ dealing with the results of two qualitative research projects carried out in Turin between 2012 and 2013⁶: 1) a

⁴ A debate has emerged in Italy on the possibility of introducing the German dual-system into Italy (Ballarino, 2011; Ballarino & Checchi, 2013; Checchi & Flabbi, 2007).

⁵ A press review was carried out from October 2012 to November 2013 in the following Newspapers: *Il Sole24ore*, *La Repubblica*, *La Stampa*. Around 600 news items were scrutinized on the wider relationship between young people and school-labour market transition. Preliminary findings of these activities have been already published in Ricucci (2013; 2014a).

⁶ These data were collected during two studies: *ERICA - Enriching Regional Innovation*

press review (see footnote 5); 2) a random sample of interviews (no. 30, age range 18-24, equally distributed between male and female and among them the great majority enrolled in either technical or vocational schools) collected during some institutional events dedicated to present job opportunities to students and young people in the Turin area; 3) 10 interviews to key informants (school managers, local administrators, scholars involved in developing local policies in the field of education, training and labour market insertion). In other words, we will look at the provision of information, training and orientation that characterize the specific sub-alpine territory as a paradigmatic case of attempts to match the offer between education/training labour-market. The paper presents the preliminary findings of an exploratory research aimed at identifying how students (and their families) on the one hand and educational institutions (and their surroundings) on the other are (or less) equipped to respond effectively to the demands of the market, politics and society of knowledge in understanding better what should be the range of skills and knowledge necessary for planning the future of the world of work and that of tertiary education. The aim of this contribution is to study, through a qualitative exploratory research, whether and how the different actors involved in the formation of the younger generation are using the tools available to orient them in a labour market which is complex and heavily influenced by the current economic crisis. From this point of view, the Piedmont observatory is particularly suitable for its employment dynamics and numerous experimental encounters between schools and companies.

Something is changing: attempts in building bridges for young people enrolling upper secondary schools

The topic of work is certainly difficult to deal with in school. It requires a paradigm shift. It is necessary to banish existing stereotypes that depict

Capabilities in the Service Economy (led by Manuela Olagnero at the University of Turin), and *Futuro Dove?* (Where will be the future?), a research project on youth mobility that I led at FIERI.

traineeship and internship as something suitable only for young people who “do not want to study”, or as something that “should not be of interest to those who are pursuing university studies and not a short-term job”. Yet many voices are raised, stating that opening the school system to the outside world, making it more oriented towards providing opportunities to gain work experience during the period of studies (Reyneri, 2011; Cardinale, 2013), as well as bringing it closer to university training programs, are ways to overcome the skill gap that exists between the demand and supply of competence (Leuven & Oosterbeek, 2011).

As already pointed out in the 1990s, the buzzword seems to continue to be ‘orientation’. Putting it in practice means a wide range of initiatives (from meetings with business men/women to organizing visits in firms; from inviting students in planning business activities to taking part in university courses). The issue has also been addressed by the so-called “L’istruzione riparte” (Education restarts) program (MIUR, 2014), which aims to implement and strengthen the curricula (e.g. improving skills in economics and geography in technical and vocational institutes; addressing funds to update and/or create scientific laboratories; providing a friendly website), to activate refresher courses for teachers (including favoring the acquisition of digital skills), to promote a corpus of interventions against the dispersion of and for orientation activities. This seems to be a kind of “Marshall Plan” of the school, designed to “rejuvenate and help both the school institution in a difficult time in its mandate and the students in the acquisition of a range of skills, abilities and knowledge that is increasingly seen as essential in order to orient themselves in the knowledge society, which is too often simplified and reduced to the use of the web” (Ricucci, 2014a, p. 76).

It has been said for some time now that entrepreneurial spirit, creativity and social skills are needed: those features that are only partly “learned in school”, but they are often the result of free-time activities, casual work, and associative experiences. Highlighting these fields in a CV or a job interview was avoided in the past; today, they seem to be rather crucial in distinguishing educational credentials that sometimes appear ineloquent by themselves. This is what, besides school opportunities, families and students have to take into account. Yet, on the other hand, the labour market needs more, in addition to certified

educational credentials. We do not want to reach the exaggerations of the United States, reported two years ago by The Wall Street Journal, which stated that personnel selections are made through an analysis of social networks in which young candidates have an account and where they are active. It is certain, however, that certified skills are not always enough to be called for an interview: an ideal candidate is not necessarily the one with the best grades. In a flexible labour market, often characterized by international management, with employees and work groups heterogeneous by cultural backgrounds, with the possibility of spending less and less on training (Reyneri & Pintaldi, 2013), employers are looking for employees with initiative, who are flexible, open to comparison, and already have experience of interaction in working environments (Cavaletto, 2013). This is the other side of the labour market that seems to reject young people (like adults), not giving them opportunities (Davico & Staricco, 2014), as confirmed by the data on youth unemployment⁷. There is a return of a (not so veiled) accusation against high schools, unable to get close to (and attract) the labour market and to give students the skills needed to orient themselves in the face of numerous professional paths and possibilities. Behind the ‘youth drain’⁸ and the alarming data on unemployment is the issue of orientation, both in entering and leaving high school.

The orientation activities organized by schools have been recently revised by the national legislature and summarized, in its main assumptions, as part of the National Orientation Plan of the MIUR (Ministry of Education, University and Research). Besides this, the process of autonomy has affected the school system in recent years has also resulted in a diverse organization and a scattered spread of initiatives to help students find their way through many university courses and possible entries to the world of work (Ballarino, 2013; Checchi, 2012). The recent plan for orientation launched in December 2013 by the MIUR, entitled “I choose, I study” seems to give a new impetus in this direction. An initiative that starts virtually (through a new website dedicated to

⁷ According to the latest annual data, at national level the rate of unemployment is 40% among young people (15-24). In Piedmont, it is 40.2% (Retrieved March 24 2015, from <http://www.istat.it/it/lavoro>).

⁸ It is not only a ‘brain drain’. Besides the so-called “fuga dei cervelli” there is a phenomenon of students with only vocational qualifications (Ricucci, 2014b).

orientation) and subsequently comes down to the daily life of schools, providing activities for teachers and students aimed at enforcing anamnesis skills for the former and keys to understanding how to move around myriads of old and new professions for the latter.

Mission possible: teachers, students and families going in the same direction

In the English-speaking world, the Millennials are the generation who are judged not only during job interviews, but also through their exposure on social networks, and they are the ones who should – in the imagination of the directors of human resources – consider English as a kind of “adoptive language”, instead of including it among their skills. This generation seems to have profiles that bring them closer to the “generation of daily life” which is typical of the 1980s instead of the imagery formed by the stories of Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg. Young people face job interviews with a diploma or a degree, but without the basics that enable them to orientate themselves effectively in seeking work (Young, 2009). As a teacher who was interviewed notes, “Our students do not know what to do. The school does not offer them the tools to help them move around the world. There have been many reforms, many changes to the program, but no one has really placed their hands on the basics: young people do not know how to write a CV, they do not know how to face an interview. We do not have time to teach these things” (School manager, Technical School, Turin).

There is no wish to give up on stereotypes that portray (mostly), young Italians as attached to their families and unable to make a leap: the issue is rather that of a generation that has become adult at this particular point in time of Italian society characterized by low credibility of schools, of work flexibility and less social security and social welfare protection. In this scenario, it is not surprising to witness the attitude of young people, who come to terms with life projects with a limited horizon, an idea of a short-term job, and little faith in institutions (from school to politics) unable to provide opportunities and

leadership to the world of youth (Ferrari & Emiliani, 2009). And in this vision, sometimes, their families support them.

Several local initiatives have been taken in recent years to guide young people, even with their prospect of going abroad. An analysis of the experiences has shown that, in addition to the specific (and not always continuous) actions taken by individual schools, efforts have also been made by the local authorities regarding the issue of orientation, and these qualify as more or less important depending on the resources and policies that characterize the individual territories (Pastore, 2012). As Ricucci notes, “Two striking data emerge from the analysis of these and other initiatives. First, there is the secluded position of the school. The school is in the background: the initiatives are often promoted and guided by institutions and companies, which are close to the labour market. [...] The second striking factor is the public success of these initiatives, which reflects the growing demand for information and orientation in choices after graduation. This is true especially for those who are less equipped in terms of social and familiar capital, which allows them to benefit from information networks and professionals with whom to deal (Ricucci, 2013). The large participation highlights the need for assistance.

It is not only the orientation that is lacking, but also a widespread commitment among teachers in considering that what lies beyond the school gate should not be the prerogative of the so-called “guidance teacher”, but of the entire teaching staff (Eichhorst & Neder, 2014; Istituto Toniolo, 2014)

The school is the target of criticism of young people in the discussion about their future, as it has always been the main reference in terms of their training, the skills and qualifications that they acquire in order to enter the labour market (Olagnero, 2014; Albano, Bertolini & D’Agati, 2014). Schools and the labour market are, however, no longer distinct areas. The demands of the scientific community towards an ever-closer partnership aimed at avoiding the mismatch between training and the needs of employers have effectively resulted in numerous experiments and rarely in lasting policies. In this framework, there is a plethora of good practices that have not only been able to consolidate in structural practices, but remain as a resource of the few who designed and tested them.

In fact, a careful look reveals a certain dynamism at the level of both high school and university education on young people's approach to the labour market and its opportunities, both in Italy and abroad. These are opportunities – as well as those organized by the local authorities – which always gather a large audience, bearing witness to the need for information, orientation and interest in what the labour market is offering outside the national borders. There is no intention of resorting to easy simplifications and even saying, “Information is everything”. At the same time, however, it is known that a good knowledge of the surrounding reality, of the productive fabric of reference, is necessary (but not sufficient) to orient and integrate oneself into the labour market.

However, information opportunities are only one side of the coin in terms of the role of the school in a discussion on the transition from school to work. It is important to think about what is learned in schools and in extra-curricular activities. Successive reforms of the school do not seem to have a significant impact on the review of the methods and the quality of teaching, thus failing to fulfill their task to develop the potential of individual students and encouraging an approach based more on continuous learning rather than continuous education, with the emphasis on the active role of the individual and no longer on the structures/institutions that should take care of providing educational opportunities.

In a school environment that offers little support and a local socio-institutional fabric that struggles to provide activities and tools for young people in search of opportunities for training and employment, family is the main resource on which young people can count. Yesterday as today, the social class and cultural capital of the family continue to make a difference. Apart from what can be learned in school, those who are backed by their parents with a solid social network, ranging over diverse professional fields, can have access to more information and enrich their awareness of the various sectors of employment compared to those who can rely on family and friends in one small professional field, from which they can obtain detailed information, but relevant only to a single field, which may guide the choices of the children towards their parents' footsteps or to sectors and areas of work, of which contents and required (manifest and latent) skills are unknown (Filandri &

Parisi, 2013). Faced with this scenario, where the school attended and the policies that can be benefitted from are only partly taken into account, the difference is represented by the social class and the opportunities it can offer. As recently shown by some scholars, young people face their entry into the labour market strengthened (or not) by the cultural, social and economic capital of the family of origin (Savage et al., 2013) and the intertwining of these endowments not only affects the level of qualification that characterizes the first job, but also the ability to defer entry into the world of work, waiting for the best opportunity which would ensure a position suitable to the level of education attained. This aspiration, which continues to be part of the popular imagination in which young graduates see their future, is contradicted by the data (Banca d'Italia, 2012) and leads to disappointment (and disillusionment), feeding the notion that young people can become adults and workers only by going abroad, and that Italy is a country where there is no concern or action taken for young people, from the weaker ones (the already mentioned NEETs) to those with respectable educational credentials (e.g. PhDs).

Putting it into practice: local institutions and their relevance in youth policies

Young Italians cannot count on an organic, national, policy framework dedicated to them. Although the young generations are targeted by various initiatives, both legislative and operational, policy tools directly concerning young people often have to be sought in the cracks of different, more general, measures referring, for example, to the school system, the labour market, housing and social policy in general.

As the dispenser of educational supply and guidance in labour policies, over the past two decades the state has increasingly taken on the role of guide, leaving it up to the regions and local authorities to programme activities in addition to their task of managing the integration of different policies throughout the land.

Over time we have witnessed progressive centrality at the local level, whose autonomy has however been threatened on the operational level by the scarcity

of available resources (Barella et al., 2012). From the point of view of financial resources, the progressive reduction of transference of resources from the centre to the periphery has highlighted that the decision (and the possibility) to intervene on each of the various axes of youth policies is increasingly dependent upon the development of positive synergy between local bodies and private subjects in individual territories. Conditions favourable – positively judged in international experience – to the interweaving of private funding from schools, operational partnership between education and business, seem to be coming about. A glance at the regional and sub-regional levels in some cases highlights a dynamism and tension beginning to overcome the rigidity which – according to the principle “first study, then work” – assigns dignity to work only when it comes after a period of studies (OECD, 2010). In doing this, it opens up to educational paths and models where work experience (whether during holidays, part time or after school) is valued and appreciated by the school understood as an environment for personal development oriented not only towards knowing but also knowing how to do (Abburrà, 2012). But from the point of view of human resources, successive reforms of interest to the youth-education sector, and policies specifically dedicated to that sector, seem to have had little meaningful effect on revising teaching methods and quality from the perspective of individual students’ potential and based on continuous learning as well as on continuous instruction, emphasizing the active role of the individual rather than the structures/institutions responsible for supplying educational opportunities (Braga, Checchi & Meschi, 2013). Such an approach calls for a review of the teacher-pupil relationship and a strengthening of the phases of orientation.

The outcome of the match between youth and their future in the labour market is a matter of local institutions. In fact, it is at the local level where national measures take shape and result in actions and projects. Italian youth cannot rely on a national framework of policies dedicated to them. Although the younger generation is recalled as the target of a number of legislative and operational types of initiatives, the policy instruments that directly affect young people can often be found among the details of different and more general measures, typically related, for example, to the education system, labour market, housing and social policy.

The interweaving that derived from different regulatory actions and various authorities in terms of policies for the younger generation in Italy is therefore multilayered and rather complex. Over time there has been greater centrality at the local level, whose effective autonomy is being challenged by the weakness of the available resources (Corbella, 2012). In terms of financial resources, the progressive reduction of the transfer of resources from the centre to the periphery has highlighted how the decision (and the possibility) to intervene on each level of approach to policies for young people is increasingly tied to the development of positive synergies between the local authorities and private individuals of each territory. Without too much enthusiasm, there seems to be an intertwining – positively evaluated in international experiences and still regarded with suspicion in the Italian context – of private funding in schools and operational partnership between “education and business”.

The regulatory framework represents the frame within which a number of initiatives at the regional and local level are placed, even though they continue to be set at a level of experimentation rather than at that of systemic intervention. These are initiatives on which young people of Piedmont can rely to a greater extent than their peers in other regions. Even in these years of crisis, the Piedmont Region has prepared “packages” of measures (variously called projects, plans, programs) intended for young people. Sometimes these instruments are connected and represent an evolution of the initiatives promoted in *Accordi di Programma Quadro*. “At other times they are a means of rationalization and systematization of the numerous measures developed in the early years of crisis, with an eventual addition. At yet other times, these programs are composed of a limited set of extraordinary and/or experimental *ad hoc* interventions” (IRES Piemonte, 2014, p. 11).

In 2011, the Piedmont Region implemented a plan aimed at young people, starting by noting that the level of unemployment among young people in Piedmont was higher than the national average. The program, called “Ten ideas for young people” was aimed at promoting their employment and supporting the transition from school (and family) to the world of adults and autonomy. The measures aim primarily at facilitating job placement, but there are also measures to promote the encounter between young people (still in school) and the world of work.

Apart from these measures (see some exemplifications below), what matters is the attempt to connect the world of secondary and tertiary education to that of employment. The analysis of the proposals – at regional and local level – which can be inserted in the prospect of “education & business”, indicates a greater dynamism in the business world than in education. On this latter point, as has already been pointed out, the credit goes to the enthusiasm and autonomy of teachers, who seem to have understood young people in the knowledge society’s needs for alternating school and work, that is to say having periods of on-the-job training alongside periods of training for the job. However, in a school and training system where one has to deal with the available resources, it is already a lot. Of course, the range of activities and how schools put are conditioned by budgetary constraints. The funds for these activities are not part of ordinary funding, so the teachers have to seek them. The same goes for contacts with businesses, agencies and individuals who can contribute to the experience of traineeship and provide places for training. The human factor intervenes here, especially teachers. A closer connection between the school and the world of work requires a new approach to the role of school and its relationship with the world of production. As emphasized by Ballarino and Checchi (2013, p. 11), “the relationship between school and the world of work, and in particular the transition of young people towards companies at the end of their studies, have always been entrusted by both sides to individual initiative at the local level, from the bottom”. As we have seen, this model has worked well in the past, but lost effectiveness after the 1970s, on the one hand, due to the weakening of the external actor (the decline of major industries, while the minor has lesser ability to invest in schools), and on the other hand, of the growing tendency of families towards academic-secondary school type of courses. Volunteer-teachers are not needed: at school, the work for the future of the students is a task that requires training, qualification and experience. It is not possible to improvise or leave it to the initiatives and contacts of a single teacher. If this was acceptable in the beginning, while still in the process of figuring out how to intervene and what might be the consequences of such interventions, it is no longer possible today when there is a demand (by scholars, policy makers, the business community) for the

education system to have a dialogue and a stronger commitment from both sides.

Learning by doing: a better link between students, school and labour market is possible

Many experiences, especially at regional or sub-regional level, actually have elements of great interest for their ability in finding new ways to establish the collaboration and encounter between the local fabric of education, training and companies. However, there should be specific and rather heterogeneous interventions, from the point of view of both the geography and the ability to involve a significant number of individuals, which are not the system response at national level (Botta & Montedoro, 2006).

When you go to a company, everything is completely different. At school you learn the theory, which is not always useful for what you will do later on. We have seen it during the internship. My other friends have been lucky but it also depends very much on the school. If you have teachers who are willing to help you get in touch with companies, then you end up in a place where you're not just watching or making photocopies, but they also give you responsibilities. Of course we are still students and we can not make demands, but if we do not learn anything during the internship, we will never have the experience that is required for job seekers (Fabrizio, 19 years old, Turin).

There's too much that is left to the individual teacher. The relationship with the territory and its labour resources should instead be taken care of by the entire teaching staff and a commitment from the institution is required (School Manager, Technical School, Turin).

If you want to gain experience, you have to work and you have to ask. There are some teachers who propose initiatives that allow you to have experience. Others, however, do not know much. Sometimes you get the feeling of not being in school, but out in the world, in the jungle. But aren't schools supposed to guide you? (Valentina, 19 years old, Turin).

As is often the case, the interpretation of a phenomenon in local terms can provide, with good accuracy, observational elements common to the whole country. This occurs even in this case, through the experience of Piedmont,

where there can be found elements of the current debate: an economic crisis that is severely affecting the local socio-productive structure (Durando, 2012), an international youth mobility that is more advertised than realistic (Ricucci, 2014b) and a school that is struggling to guarantee orientation courses (IRES Piemonte 2014)⁹. As recalled by a principal of a technical school:

“It is only in recent years that I was able to convey – by constantly working with the teaching staff – the idea that everyone, starting from the first year of secondary school, should invite students to look around, to understand how the world of work works, to be familiar with the offices they need to know, and the programs that they can benefit from as students and young people. It is not an easy task because it means introducing a new type of school. For many people – old and young – the school is still a fortress that can not be – nor should be – conquered by the surrounding territory” (School manager, Vocational School, Turin).

The key element seems to be the relationship between the educational institution and the productive sectors, between schools and companies, where – repeating the words of the Principal of the *Istituto Tecnico A. Avogadro* of Turin – “interesting results can be achieved by students and companies. The first will deal with the working environment and will understand what it means to have a good preparation, even in theoretical terms; the second will appreciate new recruits who can “humbly” operate the instruments, which are inevitably more updated than the ones we have in school. But this is not what they are asking for, in other words, to prepare students for the latest technological innovation, but rather how to provide good technicians with a sound preparation, curious, lively, and eager to learn” (Ricucci, 2013). There is still scant resort to the possibility of school-work alternation due to the fact that the schools – and also those which are work-oriented – are hardly perceived by families as an environment that goes hand in hand with the companies.

This also applies to Piedmont, where – as it has been anticipated – there are institutions of excellence, initiatives promoted by local authorities, and good

⁹ The three classic indicators that measure the ability to use the human capital (the employment rate between the ages of 25-64, the drop out rate between the ages of 18-24 and the percentage of graduates between the ages of 30-34) show an alignment of Piedmont with the rest of Italy, and a notably weaker position compared to Europe.

postgraduate orientation projects and experiences. Paradoxically, in the age of school autonomy and the centrality of the local level, there seems to be a complaint about the lack of an “external” pressure which forces schools to be innovative, to open up to the surrounding area, and even to expand their horizons beyond the borders (Ricucci, Premazzi & Scali, 2013).

From the analysis of the context of Piedmont and its activities it emerges how, beyond the specific (and not always continuous) actions taken by individual schools, the issue of orientation is handled mostly by local authorities, which qualifies as more or less important depending on the resources and policies that characterize the individual territories. This commitment is also strained by a situation of financial and institutional uncertainty wherein local authorities have been struggling in the last three years¹⁰.

We can cite a few examples in the context of Piedmont, including the fair of the Piedmont Region called “*Job & Orienta*”, funded by the European Social Fund and entrusted to the provinces, which proposes to students (and more and more to young people and adults looking for a job) meetings with companies and training workshops on topics related to the labour market.

Similar to this is the initiative of the City of Alba, in partnership with the Ferrero Foundation, which offers workshops and presentations of the world of work for students and families. Furthermore, there is the fair called “*Wooooow! Io e il mio futuro*” for post-diploma orientation, organized by the local *Gruppo Giovani Imprenditori dell’Associazione Industriali*, in collaboration with the provincial office of the MIUR and the Provincial Council of students.

There emerge two striking data from the analysis of these and other initiatives. First of all, there is the school’s laid-back stance. The school stays backstage: the initiatives are often promoted and taken by institutions and authorities, which are close to the labour market. The world of education seems to be rather “driven” to take care of orientation, to “get their hands dirty” with those who are still considered by a part of the teaching staff and the families to be “on the other side of the fence”.

¹⁰ Starting from provinces, which have competencies as well as in the area of school construction, orientation and post- graduation job placement.

The second striking element concerns the public success of these initiatives, which testifies to the growing demand for information and orientation in post-diploma choices. This is true especially for those who are less equipped in terms of social and family capital, which allows them to benefit from networks of information and professionals with whom they can exchange ideas. As recent research has shown (Olagnero, 2013), in a school environment that leaves little room to assistance and orientation and faced with the local socio-institutional fabric that struggles to provide activities and tools for training and labour, the main resources on which young people can count are those of their own family.

Whatever you want, please be aware of your future

Institutions, schools, universities, and businesses: all agree that young people need a compass. Although they are always connected, they have poor ability to extricate themselves from information, opportunities (even fraudulent ones), news, and bureaucracy. While it is necessary to rethink the effectiveness of the various agencies of socialization on this aspect, on the other hand there is a need to think about the needs of young people at this particular socioeconomic moment in Italy. Demands for a more practical training, greater interplay between the world of schools and outside, even foreign, with which to deal are transversal to different groups of young people (university students, high school or university graduates looking for their first job). This is what emerges from a study conducted in 2013 on a sample of 400 young people living in Turin. In other words, there is a demand for an opportunity to get involved and experiment. This is not for everyone. Social class and gender differences still mark the differences: young people who are financially and culturally well-equipped look towards a future within and beyond Europe; girls show that they have clearer ideas than their peers, and they have well-defined guidelines, whether in education or employment, in Italy or abroad (Ballarino et al., 2010). And it is abroad, for the present and for the future. As shown in the policies addressed to them, from the local to the European level, there is a concern for young people which is expressed through education, non-formal

training, policies for families, activities promoting their civic participation, supporting their creativity and, in recent times, accompanying them more and more frequently into the world of work (and adulthood) (Bray, 2011). The event “I Work”, a meeting that first started in 2005, in which the Piedmont Region organizes an exhibition dedicated to orientation and work, aimed primarily at young people, can be a good example of an initiative addressed to help young people in matching educational skills and future plans¹¹. Despite being born silently, in recent years this initiative has seen a boom in participants (even older ones). Through participant observation conducted during the event and interviews with the operators and representatives of the companies present, one can use this event as a prism through which to reflect on the questions of young people and the relation between representation and reality of their relationship with education and work. Three constants emerge.

The first concerns the need for information, or even more for literacy. The questions asked, the clarifications, requests for simplification enlightened unarmed youths who are not yet equipped and ready to “take the leap”. It might appear paradoxical in the age of Internet where everything is just a click away. But who teaches what, how and where to look? The finger is pointed once again at the school. Everyone is not the same. As an interviewee recalls, “We have it all: there are those who already have a specific project, a job they want to do or a country where they want to go, and then there are those who seem to grope in the dark. They have no idea what to look for and what it means to look for a job. They do not even seem to know exactly what they can do with their diploma. Many of them ask about opportunities abroad, even if you realize right away that they do not have a specific project, but they feel that there is this trend so they ask” (Civil servant working in an institutional employment service).

In fact, the seminars dedicated to working abroad have drawn public attention. Some are competitive and tend to be young graduates and young adults. The others are young secondary school graduates or college students who listen with a lost gaze. The idea of departing is in the air. But the step from idea to project is not short. In fact, as it is emphasized in every speech, it is

¹¹About 13,000 people participated in 2013 and quite the same in 2014.

necessary to be prepared (from the point of view of skills), and also equipped (from language to knowledge of how the rules of the labour market work) before departing. The risk is that of remaining on the sidelines, trapped in their own dream of finding glory outside Italy, passing their days working as a waiter in an Italian restaurant. In the era where smartphones symbolize the connection with everything and everyone, the danger of ignorance is higher, if you are not equipped with a compass in the research and decryption of information. Interviews with operators in the world of work show that the anxiety of having to go abroad, to “be able to have more chances”, is widespread among young people: what really makes a difference, however, is the preparation for the trip.

Information is also the basis of another issue on which schools insist less, and that is starting up their own business. It may seem easy to say, “I want to be a start-upper”. The idea of starting their own business might seem something suited for young adults. In fact, a few years ago, the initiatives dedicated to addressing this issue with young people multiplied, even before they finish upper secondary school¹².

Conclusions: lessons from a regional experience

In recent years, political and public rhetoric, following numerous requests and empirical evidence, have emphasized the need to bring about closer connections between school and work. The crisis is biting painfully the Italian context and the Piedmontese one, as confirmed by the data on youth unemployment, which would seem to support the “young people in the backstage for a while” hypothesis (Banca d’Italia, 2013; IRES Piemonte, 2013). This is why debates on how, on the one hand, the educational system

¹² Career days, job meetings, information days: these are some examples of initiatives carried out by upper secondary schools (mainly technical and vocational tracks) in order to improve students’ labour-market information. All these activities are planned directly by schools without (or with slight) interaction with other local institutions (i.e. Jobcentres, the Municipal Youth Information Office). This lack of connection with the broad socio-institutional context is one difference between the Italian context and other European countries (Italiavoro, 2014).

has to be reformed and, on the other, students have to be supported to be prepared on entering the labour market, have grown stronger in the last two years. It is no longer just a discussion about the side effects of an Italian “brain drain”, but also reflection on how upper secondary school students can be prepared for their future (e.g. what kind of skills they need; in which sectors they should look for a job; in which field they have to grow to be more competitive in, and appealing to, a labour market strongly influenced by the knowledge economy).

In other words, the school is not an offshore island, which – once you graduate – you leave behind and reach an unknown destination. Of course, not all post-diploma experiences are disorientating nor disillusioning compared to stereotyped images of university or work. Some young people are better equipped when they go to their job interview. In fact, a careful look reveals a certain dynamism at the level of both high school and university education in young people’s approach to the labour market and its opportunities, both in Italy and abroad. These are opportunities – along with those organized by the local authorities – which always gather a large audience, bearing witness to the need for information, orientation and interest in what the labour market is offering outside the national borders. However, the opportunities of information¹³ are only one side of the coin in the discussion of the school’s role in the matter of youth mobility.

The other side of the coin involves teachers, trainers, operators of the services for employment: successive reforms of the educational system and the policies dedicated to its “guardians” do not seem to have a significant impact on the revision of methods and quality of teaching, thus failing in their task to enhance the potential of individual students and encouraging an approach based more on lifelong learning than on continuous education, with an emphasis on the active role of the individual and no longer on structures/institutions that would provide educational opportunities. As the Piedmontese experience shows, a change of perspective is possible but - at the same time - it is expensive: it requires teachers open to re-thinking their role (not only within schools but also in the territory and its socio-entrepreneurial

¹³On this issue see Ponzio & Ricucci, 2015.

fabric); students prepared to invest in their own future; local institutions able to invest in structural orientation policies, avoiding the idea that experimental initiatives could be strongly effective in helping youth in their school-labour market transition.

It is not just about offering more training but rather broadening the range of knowledge and experience that young students – from high school to technical colleges to professional ones – must have from the economic and productive fabric of the context in which they live. In other words, a new approach – much school-labour market oriented - requires a revision of the student-teacher relationship, a strengthening of the phases of orientation, as well as an intensive internship experience during upper secondary school, in order to create a greater dialogue between education and the world of work.

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