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# The Influence of the Family on the Value of Training Pathways in Young NEETS: a Qualitative Study in an Area of Southern Italy

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# The Influence of the Family on the Value of Training Pathways in Young NEETs: a Qualitative Study in an Area of Southern Italy

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*Abstract:* This article discusses the link between training pathways, young NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and their parents' attitude towards education, starting from a qualitative study carried out in an area of Southern Italy. The need to focus on NEETs, and in particular the link between training courses, young people and the family, comes from the need to consider the Italian peculiarity of the phenomenon, which in recent years has emerged in all its complexity. The study starts with the importance that young NEETs and their families give to training courses in the context of their biographies. This occurs within a framework in which the relationship between education and work changes due to the flexibility of work: on the one hand, the working system requires more and more adaptability and high levels of training, while on the other, training courses do not always manage to guarantee training that facilitates the transition into the world of work (Blossfeld et al. 2005, Blossfeld, 2014). The analysis of the results shows how the young people interviewed perceive training mainly as an "obligation" and not as a benefit. They are young people who live in a dimension of *habituation to the context*, perpetually waiting, within a family stuck in an attitude of deresponsibilisation which, in the illusion of respecting their choices, makes them feel more alone than free.

*Keywords:* young NEETs, training courses, educational poverty, family

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## **Introduction**

After an initial phase of studies and research aimed at tackling the NEET phenomenon from a quantitative point of view, recent studies show how the biographies of young NEETs are often characterized by fragmented and contradictory training courses, along with an early departure from all forms of learning. Numerous studies have highlighted how, upstream of the problem, there are early school leaving and above all the disaffection towards study and training. They have shown how the belief of many young NEETs that accumulating knowledge through studying is irrelevant to future growth and well-being ends up generating a spiral of no return which risks producing phenomena of significant social drift, thus generating effects not only on the life of the individual but also on families, future generations and the entire socio-economic system (Rosina, 2015; Nanni & Quarta, 2016; Alfieri & Sironi, 2017; Save the Children, 2017).

The phenomenon in our country has had a significant development, making Italy the European country with the highest rate of young NEETs: according to ISTAT data, in 2019, 22.2% of young people aged between 15 and 29 years old did not study or work (the European average is 12.5%). Within this percentage, there are significant territorial differences: the South records a much higher percentage (33%) than the North (14.5%) and the Centre (18.1%).

These are differences that make it necessary to carefully look into the folds of the phenomenon as well as indicate any differences in the pathways that may lead to becoming a NEET. Taking into account several elements such as unemployment and school dropout rates, there are different reasons for why young NEETs living in the north or south of Italy find themselves in this condition.

In the South, one of the first reasons why there is such a large number of young people (15-29 years old) who neither work or study can be associated to the phenomenon of leaving school early with 18.2% (compared to 10.5% in the North and 10.9% in the Centre). For these young people, once they have left the training system, it is not simply a question of not being able to find a job due to the crisis in the labour market, but rather of not having that wealth of knowledge and skills to use in a possible job.

The unemployment data processed by ISTAT, referring to the same age group, highlight the primacy of the southern areas with percentages equal to 45.5% compared to 19.4% in the North and 26.6% in the Centre. Considering the phenomenon of undeclared work, despite not having data specifically referring to the age group 15 – 29, the significant presence of undeclared work in the South suggests that the determinants of being a NEET may also be linked to this factor.

The centrality of the family and the still too slow process of leaving the family of origin also weigh on the NEET condition of young people in Italy and in the South in particular. These are elements that refer to historical, social, political and economic components connected with the experiences of totalitarian regimes, the delay in the industrialization process, the fragmentation of the labour market and the widespread diffusion of an underground economy (Saraceno, 1991; Naldini, 2003; Gal, 2010).

Current literature and research on the national context (Agnoli, 2015; Rosina, 2015; Nanni & Quarta, 2016) highlight how being a NEET in Italy depends not only on the fragility of the training path but interacts with the presence of inadequate family models that act on the life paths of young people, generating dysfunctional and potentially destructive dynamics.

The need to pay attention, in a study on NEETs, to the link between training courses, young people and the family, comes from the need to consider the Italian peculiarity of the phenomenon, which in recent years has emerged in all its complexity. Most of the recent literature on the subject (European Commission, 2014; Colombo, 2015; Save the Children, 2017), rather than considering the difficulties encountered by young people during the school path, focuses on their failure to return due to the lack of consideration gained towards training in general, experienced as a completely irrelevant tool in promoting entry into the labour market.

The same studies show how the progressive process of disaffection towards school and training has contributed to strengthening and radicalizing this category of young people, which is that of greatest concern today. They are those young people whom Rosina describes as «precipitated in a spiral of progressive corrosion of their condition, not only economic but also emotional and relational» (Rosina, 2015, p. 21) and who, if left to themselves, risk being stuck in one social undertow space that will eventually lead them into situations of social exclusion (Nanni & Quarta, 2016). They are young people whose training path is poor and incomplete, which remains so since it has never been invested or transformed into experiences and skills.

The question from which the research started regards the importance that young NEETs and their families attach to training courses in the context of their biographies. This occurs within a framework in which the relationship between education and work changes due to the flexibility of work: on the one hand, the working system requires more and more adaptability and high levels of training, while on the other, training systems do not always manage to guarantee training that facilitates the transition into the world of work (Blossfeld et al., 2005; Blossfeld, 2014).

It was therefore attempted to re-read the life paths of some young NEETs using those concepts from Blossfeld's analysis that allow to con-

nect individual choices and paths to the broader and more complex process of globalization (Blossfeld et al., 2005; Blossfeld, 2008; Blossfeld, 2014). Blossfeld's studies show that one of the main consequences of this process is the spread of a form of structural uncertainty that has significant effects on the younger generations and changes in intensity in relation to the action of the institutional filters that he identifies in the family and education systems, in welfare regimes as well as in the employment system.

The approach used by Blossfeld seems to be particularly effective in analysing the phenomenon of young NEETs in the Italian context, characterized by the (poor)functioning of many of the filters to which he refers. In Italy, for some time, the precariousness of the employment system, the diffusion of atypical contracts have hindered young people entering the labour market, creating a dichotomy between workers "guaranteed" by an indefinite-term contract that ensures access to welfare systems, and precarious workers who sometimes lack the most basic forms of protection (Barbieri & Scherer, 2009; Reyneri, 2007). Furthermore, the presence of a sub-protective welfare system (Esping Andersen, 1990) typical of the countries of the Mediterranean basin, leaves the family not only the function of care and support but above all that of catalyst of situations of discomfort and weakness of young people, in the absence of useful interventions for their timely and effective insertion into the working world (Walther, 2006; Karamessini, 2007, Robson, 2008; Gal, 2010). In addition, there is the poor interconnection capacity between training and the world of work shown by the Italian school system which makes the transition from school to work very slow and problematic (Bernardi & Nazio, 2005).

This paper analyses some of the most relevant moments that mark the training path of the young NEETs interviewed, focussing on those parts of the interviews in which they talk about their parents' attitude, while also considering the contribution they gave to the training choices made. Highlighting any difficulties, failures, adjustments and renunciations, it was attempted to identify the role played by the family in understanding the influence it had on the way the young NEETs relate to education and its relevance in the construction of their biographical paths.

School success or disaffection towards training, which although seem to depend on individual choices, are affected by family, social, educational, socio-economic influences and inevitably fall on them. Following Bourdieu's (1986) analyses on the topic, an attempt was made to understand how social disadvantage, poor level of education or lack of perception of the importance of study and training by the family can be considered elements that remove young people from school and activate their decision to leave their studies (NESSE, 2009).

## **Research: objectives and methodology**

A qualitative methodology is adopted to carry out the study, with a semi-structured interview being used to analyse the training courses of young NEETs in an area of Southern Italy.

The considerations made in this paper are part of a broader path, started some time ago in the studies and research conducted by those who write on the NEET phenomenon (Quarta, 2015, 2017; Nanni & Quarta, 2016; Quarta & Ruggeri 2017), which highlight the need to pay more attention to those processes that lead young people to develop the conviction that education has little influence in the construction of satisfactory biographic trajectories and that sometimes it generates obstacles and is a waste of time and energy. In addition to the importance of education, the role of parents in building attitudes towards school education and its usefulness emerge as an intervening variable on the youthful imagination.

In a study carried out in 2015 on young NEETs who turned to the Caritas Listening Centres (Nanni & Quarta, 2016), it was found how much the malfunction of institutional 'filters', which include the family, welfare and training systems as well as the labour market system, had produced situations of significant social unease. The family, in a state of complete poverty, characterized by the absence of work and the presence of serious problematic situations (illnesses, absence of one of the parents ...), ends up being a repulsive force towards the training courses of young people (Lewin, 1972), which hinders rather than encourages the development of adequate life paths in their children. Many of the youths interviewed told of their complex family situations that made their early departure from the educational path necessary, they talked about parents who had not been able to play a supporting role or motivate study or extra-curricular training, along with the need to play a parental role in a kind of early adultization. These are all situations that resulted in de-structured biographical paths, sometimes difficult to intercept since camouflaged in circuits of social unease.

The results led to the need to study in greater detail the theme dealt with, through the research described in this paper, considering those young NEETs from less problematic family contexts, characterized by the presence of a job and a level of education in many cases higher than compulsory school, in order to verify the importance of cultural capital as a factor of social protection, along with the role of the family in the construction of the transition processes to adult life, in contexts that are neither deprived nor poor.

The information was collected through the administration of a semi-structured interview divided into four sections: family context; learning path; work experiences; daily life. 40 young NEETs were interviewed,

identified according to a mixed technique: judgmental and snowball sampling. In identifying the target audience of the subjects to be interviewed, the following variables were taken into consideration:

- geographical location in one of the provinces of the Salento (Lecce, Brindisi and Taranto);
- gender;
- socio-cultural level of the family (presence of a stable work situation and a qualification equal to or higher than compulsory schooling in at least one of the parents)
- age, between 18 and 30 years;
- leaving the school path after obtaining a qualification or the conclusion of a training course, for at least six months;
- absence of any work experience for at least six months.

From the interviews collected, it was decided to select 25 (13 women and 12 men) residents of the Salento (Lecce, Taranto and Brindisi)<sup>1</sup>, aged between 18 and 25, in order to focus on the period of life characterized by the need to make important choices capable of directing and giving a change to life trajectories. As noted by research on the transition to adult life (Cavalli, 1985; Cavalli, 1997; Pais, 2003; Pasqualini, 2012; Walther, 2006), it is believed that in most cases it is a phase of life in which young people have to become aware of their skills and knowledge acquired in school and learn to insert them into a wider and longer term horizon. It is the moment of life in which it becomes important, sometimes compelling, to ask yourself “what will I do when I grow up”, in which you begin to face difficulties and contradictions, in which you are faced with a plurality of options and must try to manage at best the resources available.

It was also decided to focus on the interviewees who belong to families of a low and medium-low socio-cultural level, leaving aside those from more culturally and economically advantaged families, with subsequent studies being planned for these subjects. This choice is due to the fact that studies on the phenomenon reveal how families with low socio-cultural levels have a greater incidence not only in letting their children enter the condition of NEET, but also in making them remain in this state for a long period (Alfieri et al., 2015; Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Unicef, 2019).

The areas of the interview that have been analysed in this paper are the stories of the young people interviewed regarding the most important stages of their training path, in which they have experienced their ability to choose, to deal with critical issues up to the decision not to continue their studies; the value of the study and the perception of the relationship be-

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<sup>1</sup> The interviewees were identified with the help of the students on the degree courses in Psychology and Sociology at the University of Salerno.

tween training and job opportunities. In these areas, the need to narrate life and study experiences is constantly accompanied by questions addressed at the exploration of the ways their family accompanied their journey, asking them to tell of the ways and times their parents made their presence felt; how the family had influenced the choice of school, what was the level of sharing of this choice by the parents, what was the reaction of the parents in the face of difficulties or their school failures.

For editing reasons, it was decided to include only a few significant phrases in the discussion of the data analysis.

### **Elaboration and analysis of the collected textual materials**

The collected textual material was processed using the NVivo software, chosen as a valid tool for the treatment of qualitative data, which allows to reconstruct the methodological strategies adopted, the choices made for the purposes of interpretation while keeping the memory of the analysis process carried out. The use of NVivo allowed for the identification of some conceptual nodes with reference to both the thematic areas of the interview and the topics that emerged spontaneously during the comparison with the young people.

The conceptual nodes identified are represented by: the family situation, the relationship with the parents, the school choices, the school path, the relationship with the teachers, the reason for the interruption of the school path, work experiences and the reasons for their interruption and daily life.

Only those relating to the relationship with parents, the choice of the type of school to attend and the school path have been analysed in this paper.

The textual materials selected using the identified conceptual nodes were elaborated, through a process of *decontextualization* and *recontextualization*: “the *decontextualization* consists of selecting a text segment and making it semantically independent so as to create categories or themes that group other segments of text of equal meaning. The *recontextualization*, on the other hand, is the result of an operation aimed at linking the categories or themes to reassemble them according to a new conceptual or thematic structure” (Pacífico & Coppola, 2010, p. 92). Nvivo, therefore, through a process of re-semanticization of the textual material into a new container, allowed for the construction of the following second level conceptual nodes: importance given to education, favourable, indifferent or contrary attitude of the family when choosing the school and during the school path, inability of the family to follow their children during training, useful elements for finding work (education, experience in the field).



### **From illusory autonomy to the “training gymkhana”**

One of the first conceptual nodes identified through Nvivo has to do with the moment of the choice of the type of school path to be undertaken, the first important moment in which to begin to express preferences, making a choice that will characterize the future forever (Cavalli & Facchini, 2001). For young people, this is the first time in which they must consciously activate the process of connection between past, present and future which leads to delineate their identity between stability and change, between a before and after (Crespi, 2004); they must learn to project themselves into a possible working future which they begin to see, albeit in a confused and distant way. To do this, they must internalize the temporal norms that adults try to transmit and that will regulate the course of their life, as an external barrier to the excess of variety of choices of an individual, trying to contain subjective choices within socially shared parameters (Leccardi, 2009).

The interviewed NEETs show that they are unable to “manipulate” the process that would force them to look into the future, to grasp the links between today’s choices and the consequences of tomorrow, to commit today to reap the benefits tomorrow; in this arduous journey often families, and especially those of a poor cultural level who end up communicating to their children their attitude of lack of trust in the utility of study and education, even if only passively with attitudes of indifference and disinterest, are not adequately supported and helped.

“I went to school because it was something I had to do, I never thought about what I would do when I grew up ... I knew that for better or worse I would find a job, after school ... even my father was convinced of this” [M 20]

“I didn’t know what I wanted to do as a job, I didn’t have clear ideas, my mother told me that there is always something to do and that school was not important; ... I wanted to do a job, to work ... maybe a hairdresser” [F 22]

Once the three years of lower secondary school have ended, even if they are convinced that they will not immediately interrupt their studies, in choosing the type of school to attend these young people show a clear preference towards technical (to a greater extent, boys) and professional (especially girls) institutes in the belief that they do not want to continue with university studies<sup>2</sup> and with the sole objective of entering the job market as soon as possible, represented as a much richer experience than going to school which implies, on the other hand, a great commitment which does

<sup>2</sup> Only one girl expressed a desire to enrol in the university but was unable to make a decision on the direction to take.

not correspond to immediately usable results (Alulli, 2011). Their choices are the result of short-term training strategies conditioned, probably, by contained economic and family resources, consistent with the socio-cultural belonging (Zurla, 2001), mainly medium-low, of their parents.

Concrete behaviours, even if apparently individual, are always the result of a sort of synapse, of synergies between individual inclinations, conditioning of the family (Santagati 2009) as well as of the family atmosphere always perceived as a space of freedom, even when it is actually only characterized by a form of “temporary responsibility” (Lo Verde 2013). The conceptual crux referred to the way in which the parents had influenced the choice of school, the most frequent expressions with which the children tell their experience refer to a particularly permissive attitude on the part of the parents:

“I chose by myself. My parents never said anything to me about the school I had to choose. My mother told me that I had to go to school and that is why the choice was up to me ... she couldn't force me to stay in a place that I might not have liked” [M22]

“They let me do as I thought best, they didn't force me into anything. I chose the school because my friends went there, for my parents one school was the same as the other and above all they didn't want to hinder my choices and they let me do it ...” [M24]

“I was free to choose, nobody forced me. I thought that the professional school could be fine and when I told my parents they didn't make a turn, they didn't really get into the matter, they told me that if I was happy, they were happy too” [F19]

The level of reactivity of the parents when faced with the decisions of their children, at least that reported by the children, helps to understand and better define the differences, in particular if put in relation with the socio-cultural level of belonging<sup>3</sup>. The responses were categorized into conceptual nodes with Nvivo based on the reactivity (low, medium or high) of the parents and related to their socio-cultural level.

The young people belonging to low-level families represent an attitude of indifference towards the choice to be made: “they didn't say anything” (M 19 years old), “nobody was interested, they only asked me where I wanted to go and I told them...” (M 23 years), “my family has always told me do what you want” (F 20 years).

In families belonging to an average socio-cultural level, advice “appears”, provided without believing in it much, leaving the children alone in the choice, assuming an autonomy and responsibility in the choice that is not

<sup>3</sup> The answers were categorized into conceptual nodes with Nvivo based on the parents' reactivity (low, medium or high) and related to the socio-cultural level of the parents.

always adequate for the age and all to be verified: “I can only advise you, it’s your life, you have to decide, you have to take your own path” (M 19).

Among the high-level parents, the conditioning towards children becomes a little tighter and the young people follow their parents’ choices: “my father said that the school I had chosen was good” (M 24), “my mother chose, I couldn’t do otherwise” (F 19).

A choice of school that is not always conscious and responsible is often followed by courses of study that are not always linear. Many times the young people had difficulties because they were disoriented by the high degree of difficulty of the subjects to study at school: they had to face difficulties related to the subjects studies, as well as relationship problems with teachers who “demand too much and make you agitated” (F 25).

A group of conceptual issues that emerges and which is of fundamental importance was that relating to the degree of closeness of the family during the training course. Also, in this case, the software allowed to relate the conceptual issues with the socio-cultural level of the family: when dealing with the difficulties of their children, the intervention and support of the parents is once again greater in families of a high socio-cultural level.

The indifference shown by parents with a low socio-cultural level, at the time of choice, continues during the school career, taking on negative accents of exhortation to drop out of school, when faced with the complete failure of their children.

“My father told me to forget it, that it was better if I stayed at home because everything was so bad at school. He was convinced that it was time wasted and that I could start looking for some work to do without wasting time at school” [F23]

“My parents told me that I was wasting time sitting at a school desk, I was not doing well and for them it was clear that I had to leave and think about other things” [M21]

This negative attitude of parents, in some cases due to the inability to follow their children and, in reality, beyond the will of the parents themselves, produces different consequences depending on the gender of the children. Males were the worst in this group of young people: many of them have a particularly rough school path, dotted with failures, resulting, for some of them, in dropping out of school. In these cases, the girls stood out for better performances than their peers: a sign probably of the fact that obtaining a qualification takes on a very strong symbolic value due to the change in the female role. If not in a generalized way (in rural situations and in family contexts marked by a low levels of the parents’ education and almost marginal social positioning, little is invested in the training of girls who risk being expelled from the circuit which contains far more boys), studying and reaching

higher educational levels is a means of social redemption for young women, an additional tool against the risk of remaining out of the work circuit (Istat, 2017; Vargas Vergara, 2014).

Regardless of the gender of the children, although within a generalized attitude of poor normativity represented by the children in their stories, the support of the family increases as the cultural level of the parents increases.

The concrete and active intervention towards the children by their parents takes place only when the real risk of failure becomes apparent, using a conceptual node that allows to identify the attitude put in place by the parents, we were able to see the different paths implemented: usually the attitude is oriented towards external support to ensure the promotion of the children, by changing their subjects or institute, in a sort of “assisted gymkhana”. The reaction of the young people to their parents’ efforts is not always a commitment to study more, very often it is only the beginning of a tortuous and fragmented path towards the diploma which is also characterized by continuous changes of school:

“I changed schools many times, I first went to the industrial, then to the commercial one, it was a disaster, I didn’t like it, I didn’t like studying and I didn’t like the teachers ... in the end I got a diploma in catering” [M22]

“I switched from IT to social and health care because it wasn’t really for me, I wasn’t made for that school, I changed but I struggled ... in the end I graduated” [F23].

The process of intergenerational transmission of cultural resources that, for some decades, has lost its linearity under the push of the democratic process of massification of the school, allowing most of the younger generations to access training courses regardless of their social origin (Zurla, 2001), in the case of the NEETs manifests all its complexity leading to very often unpredictable outcomes (Santagati, 2009).

Some young people (especially women) from a family background with a low socio-cultural level, by gaining a diploma, managed to improve their social positioning compared to their parents, while young people from families with a medium-high socio-cultural level, without adequate and effective support from the family itself, remain indifferent to the importance of studying, devoid of the awareness of the relevance of knowledge and without any aspiration to improve their socio-economic conditions. In this way, they end up maintaining, with minimum effort, the position acquired without being able to enjoy the favourable family context, being content with a sort of inherited social position.

A lot of the research on the topic (Astone & MacLanahan, 1991; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Rumberger et al., 1990) underline the connection between school

performance and family conditions. More than the socio-economic status of the family, the degree of *expectation* of the parents influences the academic performance (Colombo, 2010; European Commission, 2011, 2014). In particular, the factors that most affect school failure are those that were also noted in this study: a poor presence/supervision of the family, a permissive educational style, poor aspirations and little commitment to the school education of their children.

Until a few decades ago, access to school was a means of social mobility, an instrument of redemption for the working class. The lower and middle classes could see their individual skills valued, while also implementing a social redemption that would have been impossible in other times. Education constitutes a “means” even for those who are at the top of the social class since it is a necessary tool to maintain social positioning. For the middle class, education becomes a value in itself, rather than a means, because social growth can also be achieved through the change in lifestyles that are attributed to higher social positions (Schizzerotto & Barone, 2006; Leonbruni & Taddei, 2009). The loss of importance of education probably lies in the fact that education is no longer one of the main means through which to change social position.

The motivational process activated by the families towards the young interviewees is weak and fluctuating: driven by unambitious and easy-to-achieve objectives, these children fed on a sort of disaffection towards the school, a feeling that does not seem to fade even after obtaining a diploma. The late intervention of the family, once the damage has already occurred, would seem to have worked, since most of the young people interviewed still obtained a secondary school qualification (20 out of 25 young people have a diploma), but had no positive effects on the perception of the validity of education in their children.

The repeated school failures of young people, not accompanied by moments of reflection and re-motivation, contribute to creating a ‘scar’ effect (Arulampalam et al., 2001; Gregg, 2001) on the life paths that feed their feelings of distrust, not only towards the school but in general towards the validity of education as a useful means to place itself adequately in the world of work and as a tool for protection from social exclusion.

In this way, the family acts as a repelling force towards education which is also strengthened by the weak motivational force expressed by the school. An attitude of mistrust towards education takes shape in young people, activating a vicious circle of definitive departure from training courses.

There is a risk that for the young people interviewed, it is already, in part, a reality even in consideration of the fact, as Blossfeld states, that «low levels of training and low human capital amplify the effects of globalization on the lives of young people: for them, more than for white-collar workers, flexi-

bility ends up becoming a trap from which they will not be able to escape» (Blossfeld, 2005, p. 9).

### **“Education is not needed ... and in any case it is not enough”**

After reviewing the training experiences, more specific questions were asked regarding the value of education with particular reference to its ability to encourage insertion into the labour market. This part of the interview gave the opportunity to make a conclusion regarding the value of the training system in relation to work: it allowed, on the one hand, to see what kind of relapses the sense of distrust had matured towards education with respect to a possible projection towards the working future. On the other, it allowed to understand the way in which young people have been affected by the filter of institutions such as family and school, in projecting themselves into the world of work.

To direct and explicit questions such as «how important do you think education is to find work?» or «some studies point out that it is important to have a good level of education to have more chances to find work, in other words, is it easier to find work with a good level of education? What do you think about it? », the young people in the first instance give positive answers: a reaction probably due to the effect of social acceptability (Gobo, 2002, p. 56) that arises when a question is asked that contains references to socially acceptable values. It is a reaction that returns a positive self-image (Stefanowka, 1979; Goffman, 1971) and avoids any possible discrepancy between declarations and the social conventions shared in society in general. The “but” that follows the first statement, however, reveals nuances that are sometimes distant from the initial expression that were used to create a conceptual node, through NVivo, referable to the perception of the importance of education: the opposing expression is followed by a whole series of affirmations that outline the conviction that education alone has no use if it is not accompanied by other elements ranging from experience, intelligence, to the ability to know how to relate to others and to question oneself; in a not entirely residual way, recommendations and personal relationships with “someone who matters” are also called into question:

“Education is important but if you don’t have the intelligence and the ability to adapt to the world of work, you won’t do anything with a diploma ... because at school they don’t teach you certain things” [F20]

“Yes, it is useful... but it is more important to have knowledge. I know of people who have not studied that much and only work because they have a friend who helped him get into that office or company ... it is not that he entered only because he had a diploma” [M19]

“I got a diploma but if you don’t know someone who helps you, you don’t do anything, the diploma alone doesn’t get you work ... you always have to know someone who helps you get to work ... otherwise you don’t do anything” [F22]

The interviews reveal how much the feeling of mistrust towards the training courses is transformed into the conviction of the significant uselessness of school as a force to reach the “goal” of a job. In this process, young people implement another-directed responsibility: to avoid the feeling of failure, they attribute the cause of failure as school as a *bad tool* (Lewin, 1972) to achieve the “work” goal.

It is an awareness gained at the end of a tiring school path that only partially met their initial expectations, the young people expected more from the school, they declare themselves dissatisfied and frustrated:

“I expected to find a job once I finished, I chose the professional because they told me that it is a school that gives you a diploma that allows you to work immediately and instead, I have been graduated for two years and I have not done anything yet!” [M21]

“School gave me some notions, it didn’t teach me anything that could be useful later in my work, if you don’t experience the notions you don’t do anything ... you don’t need them at work, they are only valid on paper ...” [F23]

“I expected more practical things from school, I expected to learn something that could really serve me, in the sense ... to put into practice in the world of work: I expected to learn something practical to know how to do and then spend it looking for work ... and instead we did only theory ... which is of little use” [M24]

Even today, Cesareo’s statements that, with reference to early school leaving, highlight how “traditional economic causes and failure assume less importance and other factors, such as a lack of interest, desire to enter quickly into active life, the conviction of the choice of studies made previously proved to be wrong” (Cesareo, 1988, p. 134). What emerges as particularly relevant in understanding the NEET phenomenon is to consider it as the culminating phase of a process of growing disaffection towards education, which these young people attribute to the inability of teachers who were too focused on the programs and lacked the skills needed to “Give a practical foundation to the notions imparted” (M 25 years), to the low attractiveness of the school that “is not able to give tools to find a job” (M 25 years) and that it cannot even make young people understand that “studying cannot be an obligation but a benefit” (F 20 years).

Despite a general tendency of disappointment, the women appreciated the educational function of the school more, without any difference in the

socio-cultural level of the family. This element reinforces the general trend that shows how women engage more in training courses precisely because they believe that a qualification can help them support their growth and autonomy paths, increasing the chances of entering the job market (Quarta, 2017).

What seems not to be assimilated is the value of the knowledge acquired and acquirable in the school path; what neither the school nor the family can teach is the usefulness of studying and learning not only in the search for a job but in the whole sphere of daily life:

“In my opinion, mathematics is not needed to find work, if you have to fix a fridge you don’t need it! You need to know how the mechanical parts of a fridge work, you don’t need calculations or all those things they teach you in school subjects” [M 21]

“In recent times they have been exaggerating a bit with training, special training is also required for very humble jobs; to be able to do a manicure you have to take courses also for that you have to train, you have to study... it seems exaggerated” [F 22]

Accumulating knowledge can be a useless effort because there are other ways and other equally valid tools to find work. First of all, work practice, experience and a recommendation. They are young people who consider an obsolete way of acquiring skills linked to the “going to the workshop” typical of traditional societies rather than being aware of the need for a broader and more in-depth training and specialization as required by the production system (Rosina, 2015). The reasons for disaffection can therefore be summarized in three categories such as *expectation, disappointment, failure*:

- first of all, the high initial expectation from school, whereby young people enter school convinced that they will acquire the tools and knowledge necessary to enter the world of work;
- the second category is disappointment, once the training courses have begun, with respect to the commitment that the study requires; the young people interviewed do not expect going to school to involve a commitment to study and think that attendance alone may be enough to acquire the necessary knowledge to be ready to enter the world of work;
- the third category is almost a consequence of the first two and is strictly connected with failure at school, because it is precisely the repeated school failures in the educational path that do nothing but feed in young people, distrust in themselves and in the value of the school thus generating a vortex that increasingly distances them from training courses.

In these dynamics, the lack of effectiveness of the institutions “filter” (Blossfeld et al., 2005; Blossfeld, 2008) manifests itself in transmitting to young people the essential tools and ways of life to face and live the sudden



changes taking place in contemporary society and to face the sense of uncertainty that inevitably has a negative impact on their lives.

The process of intergenerational transmission seems, in reality, to have become blocked due to a lack of propulsive force, first of all, from the family that contains but does not stimulate, leaving their children apparently free but substantially alone, which gives them an idea of completely formal formation, devoid of value in terms of long-term investment; then from the school which does not always manage to transmit to young people knowledge that can be immediately used in the job market.

The greatest risk is that in these contexts young people do not accumulate significant experiences, capable of increasing their cultural capital which on the contrary is depleted, thus precluding the possibility of entering or re-entering the labour market (Saraceno, 2015), with the projection of a future becoming less intense, held back by the perception of not being able to do it. Suffocated by constant disappointments, biographical time crystallizes in a sort of free zone, suspended in an endless wait, folded up into a daily life filled with reassuring and consoling actions: an amplified present that serves as a refuge and protection against expectations.

In light of the results of this research, it would be interesting to carry out an analysis of several “points of view”, of young people and their parents, on school paths and on the importance of training to mark lifepaths.

### **Young NEETs: the losers of globalization**

Based on the characteristics highlighted by the stories, analysed as a whole, the interviewed NEETs fall into two of the four categories of NEETs<sup>4</sup> identified by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2012): the *infantile*, those who are actively seeking work but are never satisfied with what they find, and the *discouraged*, those who refrain from looking for work because in any case they do not feel a particular need for it.

Many of the stories collected speak of young people who have struggled to obtain a qualification, their training has been difficult, suffered, with in-

<sup>4</sup> The groups identified by the *European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions* are: “conventional unemployed” both in the short and long term; “The chronic”, young people with early family responsibilities, sick or disabled; “The discouraged”, those who voluntarily refrain from looking for a job or from a training course, without being bound by particular forms of hardship or incapacity (discouraged workers and other young people who lead an imprudent and antisocial lifestyle are included in this group); “The infantile” who are actively looking for a job or a training course but do not find satisfaction in the opportunities found, because they believe that they do not suit their abilities; the “NEET by choice” those who spend their lives travelling and who are mainly engaged in intangible activities such as art, music and self-learning.

terruptions, changes of school. All express the weight of the effort of studying. Work experience is occasional, almost never connected with the qualification obtained: they have worked in catering, tourism or commerce, with low-profile tasks, very often in contexts of seasonality in the nearby seaside resorts.

As previously stated, they live in middle or lower-middle class families, have at least one of the parents who works and, in many cases, have at most a diploma; all the children dealt with in this study belong to reassuring families, inserted in a supportive social environment.

They spend their daily lives between family routines – going shopping, taking care of household chores (especially women) – and looking for work mainly on the Internet. Lunch or dinner are the moments around which their daily life revolves and when the relationship with their parents is realized and made explicit in a reassuring ceremony (preparing lunch and/or lunch, tidying up or resting after lunch and dinner).

Free time is narrated as a vague time in which among the *new* (Internet, computers, new media, video games) or *old* (street, associations, reading books, television) *non-schooling* activities (Mongelli, 2009), the first aimed at chatting with friends or looking for work are prevailing, while the latter are less important and not very present in everyday life, thus resulting in having an irrelevant importance in their training.

They are all young people who have developed an idea of study and training as a burden and not as a tool to improve their future life. Education is emptied of meaning and takes on a vaguely positive value only if imagined as a sterile tool for insertion into the job market. Paraphrasing Lo Verde, they could be defined as *un(tied) (by)/to education* precisely because they do not attribute to the educational system the function of “vector of social meanings”, along with the value of social inclusion and integration (Lo Verde, 2005, p. 113).

It is the result of a process that in young people comes to life from the interaction of endogenous and exogenous forces that result in having a braking action against the training system: the risk is that young people located in an unfavourable social climate that strengthens this mechanism, end up applying the method of distrust and avoidance of the obstacle not only in the school context but also in other spheres of future life.

The family is stuck in an attitude of deresponsibilisation with respect to its role which, in a sort of pacification between fathers and children, of convergence of values and motivations (Cavalli & Facchini, 2001; Mancarella & Manieri, 2016). It is very similar to the condition defined as “embrace between generations” (Ramella, 2003), that hides «the fearful pitfall of isolation and delegation, when the desire to *leave free* and *to respect* the preferences of their children can prove to be a source of profound insecurity in the

moments in which they find themselves alone in a decision of undoubted complexity as the choice of secondary school can be» (Perone, 2006, p. 66).

With their demotivating and sometimes devaluing attitude, parents represent a decisive vector in the construction of the feeling of distrust towards education which ends up characterizing the attitude of young NEETs. It is an attitude that ends up growing and feeding on the feelings of disappointment generated by repeated school failures, not hampered by the teachers' low motivational force, transforming into a repulsive force towards education, causing behaviours of total distrust and abandonment.

As Lewin explains, «failure to reach a goal can increase the negative value of the obstacle until the constellation of forces is transformed in such a way that the person temporarily or definitively abandons the field. This renunciation often accompanies a blatant or hidden conflict that can manifest itself in the form of aggression» (Lewin 1972, p. 358).

In contrast, it is possible to see how much school as an institutional filter does not always manage to motivate young people and evidently finds it difficult to offer the knowledge and skills that can be immediately spent on the job market.

In his writings, Blossfeld speaks of young people as the “losers” of globalization precisely to underline how much the process has greater negative effects on the younger generations. In reality, young NEETs risk becoming the “lost” losers because they participate in the worst aspects of globalization and are protagonists of situations in which the risk of social exclusion and isolation lurks (Rosina, 2015).

These are the most dangerous contexts, difficult to recognize because they are covered by the patina of normal life, by a family that protects but hides, supports but does not emancipate and ends up *immobilizing* their children in a suffocating but comfortable role of *long-term protected children* (Quarta & Ruggeri, 2017).

Among the possible *futures* (Merico, 2017), they are more inclined to think of a short-term future (Leccardi, 2009) which is realized in an immediate job, immediately after finishing their studies; they are unable to project themselves into a possible working future, to insert and articulate the choices within life paths guided by a project with broad and distant horizons. In a context of generalized instability and precariousness of the future, the temporal perspectives of these young people end up closing in an increasingly dilated present and folding into a daily life poor in long-term design tension. They fully demonstrate themselves as children of a post-modernity which, amid uncertainties, fluctuations, discontinuities, inversions and oscillations, marks the lives of everyone, especially those of the younger generations (Bauman, 2002) and pushes towards the construction of “do it yourself” biographies in which the biographical experience becomes a bricolage of

short-term projects, to be adapted to circumstances, obstacles, successes and defeats (Pirni, 2013).

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