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## Disadvantaged Life Itineraries and the Use of Personal Agency Among Italian Early School Leavers and At-risk Students

*Itinerarios vitales de alumnos desfavorecidos e iniciativa personal en los italianos que abandonan de forma temprana la escuela y en situación de riesgo*

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**Abstract:** This paper presents preliminary data from a national study carried out in 2011 by the Italian Ministry of Labour- ISFOL through a structured questionnaire to a probabilistic sample of 1500 “at-risk students” (who have taken Isced-2 in 2005 with the lowest mark). Three life itineraries have been focused: ESLs (early school leavers) who are employed in low qualified, precarious jobs or in a NEET (not in education, training or employment) condition; students who have achieved Isced-3 certificate in VET (vocational education and training) courses or are going to achieve it; students who have achieved

Isced-3 certificate in school education or are going to achieve it. This paper describes some personal, social and scholastic determinants of each profile. The examination of ESL profile (n=576) leads to confirm the usefulness of a vision of ESL as a personal agent, unless avoiding to remark the weakness of social supports surrounding those subjects.

**Keywords:** Early school leavers in Italy; disadvantaged young people; underachievers; at risk biography.



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**Resumen:** En este artículo se ofrecen datos preliminares de un estudio nacional llevado a cabo en 2011 por el Ministerio de Trabajo de Italia - ISFOL mediante un cuestionario estructurado aplicado a una muestra probabilística de 1500 estudiantes en riesgo (escogidos de entre los que obtuvieron bajos resultados en el Isced-2 de 2005). Se identificaron tres itinerarios vitales. ESLs (*early school leavers*) que están empleados en trabajos precarios y de baja cualificación o en situación NEET (*not in education, training or employment*); estudiantes que han obtenido el título Isced-3 en cursos VET (*vocational education and training*) o están en proceso de obtenerlo; estudiantes que han obtenido el tí-

tulo Isced-3 en el seno del sistema escolar o están en vías de obtenerlo. En este artículo se describen algunas variables personales, sociales y escolares determinantes para cada uno de esos perfiles. El estudio del perfil ESL (n=576) permite confirmar que es útil considerar al ESL como un agente personal, a no ser que se evite destacar la debilidad de los apoyos sociales que rodean a tales sujetos.

**Palabras clave:** Abandono escolar prematuro en Italia; jóvenes desfavorecidos; bajos niveles de cualificación; biografía de las personas en riesgo.

#### EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN ITALY: AN ENDEMIC BUT NEGLECTED SOCIAL ISSUE

Within the last Report on Education and Training by the European Commission (Commission of the European Communities, 2011) excerpted from the Report on Italy Social Cohesion (Istat, 2011), the extent of the risk of school dropout in Italy is clearly highlighted. According to the Commission directions, two complementary indicators are used to measure the extent of such phenomenon: the number of 18-24 year-old young people who leave school before obtaining the upper secondary school qualification or the equivalent vocational qualification (at least 3 years) –this indicator includes early school leavers (ESL)– and the number of 20-24 year-old young people having completed and obtained the upper secondary school certificate.

In 2009 young Italian school leavers were around 800.000 (19.2% of the whole category) while those holding a certificate or a diploma, whose educational careers could be defined successful, were 76.3%. However, such figures are not sufficient, as being under the average rate of Europe 27 (ESL average rate: 14.4%; secondary schooling average rate: 78.6%) and very far from the benchmarks established by the 2020 Lisbon Strategy (maximum of 10% ESL and a minimum 85% of 20-24 year-old students with diploma / qualification). It is however true that the ESL's number has slightly decreased, both from 2000 (minus 5.9%) and from the previous year (minus 0.5%), but this is partially due to the positive effects of the European investments on permanent education, which all EU member states have been entitled



to; therefore, this does not appear to be a peculiarity of the Italian case. Furthermore, the position of Italy within the European ranking remains unaltered. As it was nine years ago, Italy is still ranking 5<sup>th</sup> from the last in the EU 27 ranking, best performer country only if compared with Spain, Portugal, Malta, Iceland and the Republic of Macedonia. There is a huge gap, then, not only with respect to Central-north **European** countries and former U.S.S.R. ones, but also to some Mediterranean countries like France and Greece (Commission of the European Communities, 2011, p. 81). In short: 1 young Italian out of 5 is unable to complete secondary education; 1 young Italian out of 4 does not obtain the upper secondary school diploma.

From a sociological point of view, the current trend of this phenomenon hardly challenges the traditional way to consider not only the causes but also the remedies of it. As a matter of fact the implementation of EU recommendations has been carried out in Italy with low correspondence between measures against early school leaving and decreasing of dropout rates, with the only exception of the enlargement of compulsory education (from 14 to 15 years-old pupils) prescribed by law in 2007. Many prevention programs have been developed in the Southern regions with the EU PON support, but the gap among territories still remains significant within the upper secondary school participation (Benadusi and Niceforo, 2010). Notwithstanding the fact that better results cannot be observed before a medium or large time post-implementation, there are several reasons to state that early school leaving still represent a *neglected problem* for the social and political agenda in Italy, due to its endemic nature and to the scarce pressure by the public opinion and the media (Colombo, 2011a).

This issue deserves being at the heart of the international debate on young people's integration and future possibilities (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007): educational breakdown seems to be strictly related to many life dimensions, from the school-work transition to the enlargement of transition times, from the life satisfaction to the risk of social exclusion (European Science Foundation / Standing Committee for the Social Sciences, 2011; Salmela-Aro and Tynkkynen, 2010; Shoda and Guglielmi, 2009). Over the last decades many explanatory models have been followed by sociologists of education both in Eu countries and in the USA. During the 60s-70s, a typical "physiological" explication was shared, which considered early school leavers as belonging to disadvantaged social backgrounds and for this reason were more likely to undergo a pushing out. This model fits strictly a selective conception of schooling in the light of a functionalist view of the education-society relationship. During the 80s-90s, according with the critical view of the schooling processes, an "emergency" model of explanation became more popular, connecting school leaving to the occurrence of pathologies or social unease, typi-



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cal aspects of the young generation as such (deviated behaviors, drug addiction and AIDS and family crisis, etc.). This kind of frame is also evidently inappropriate today, at least since when school dropout has changed in a structural fact, widespread everywhere not only in those areas characterized by high young people's deviance rates. From the identification of targets (poor or deviant young people) to the recommendation of measures (compensatory or emergency) most of the **sociological** studies have failed in coping with causes and consequences of school dropout or provided partial, weak remedies to the problem. In the meantime institutions and services have carried out programs to help and for prevention (addressed to those targets) based on a "bureaucratic" view of the ESL that now needs to be updated. As I suggested (Colombo, 2010), a full comprehension of the educational and social factors leading youth to leave school is therefore urgent with a more precise snapshot of the dynamics occurring during and after the dropout, and avoiding as possible the conventional image of ESL as a passive social actor, whose educational path is produced only by victimization or exclusion processes.

#### HYPOTHESIS: BREAKDOWN OF THE PUPIL / SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP AND IMPORTANCE OF LIFE'S TURNING POINTS

The phenomenon of school dropout in Italy seems to apply to a more **heterogeneous** target composed by people who, in the era of cultural fragmentation (Appadurai, 1996) and of the crash of the development model based on individual achievement, are no longer willing to invest in their education. The idea here presented is that the increasing de-standardized life might have produced a breakdown in the traditional "constructive relationship" between students and school, with the latter seen as a provider of educational services. This might not only affect those who are likely to leave school significantly, but also the reliability of the whole **education** system. In many of the recent studies on disadvantaged school itineraries this view takes the form of "educational disengagement" theory (i.e. see Kendall and Kinder, 2005; Morris and Pullen, 2007; Callanan, Kinsella, Graham, Turczuk and Finch, 2009; Lloyd-Jones, Bowen, Holtom, Griffin and Sims, 2010), which transfers the concept of non-affection from the socio-psychological field to apply it to school abandoning. The latter is seen as an ending point of a progressive loss of trust and commitment towards learning, culture and the scholastic environment together. Educational disengagement seems to not only affect the conventional early school leaver but also those who have achieved a certificate but are not **capable** to spend it on the labour market, falling then in a NEET (not in employment, education or training) condition (Allen, Mehta and Rutt, 2012).



Recent studies carried out in Italy (mainly at a local level) highlighted the changeability of school leavers' life experiences and the circumstances of post-dropout (Tuè 2003; Zurla 2004; Caputo 2004; Clarizia and Spanò, 2005; Perone, 2006; Grimaldi, Romano and Serpieri, 2011): from explicit unease to hidden discomfort, from the intentional choice to give up studying to professional self-fulfillment, from unemployment to NEET condition. In order to fully understand the phenomenon the methods used to interpret ESL life itineraries must start from a serious re-evaluation of their subjective ability to life planning through *personal agency*<sup>1</sup> (Archer, 2000; Campbell, 2009; Colombo, 2011b) either outside or inside school, with or without qualification, however high or low their educational level might be. An investigation is needed focusing on how these different educational approaches might result for some of them in vicious circles forcibly leading them towards descendent itineraries, while for others might represent a way towards personal activation and non-formal achievement.

However both sociology of youth and sociology of education cannot rely on the longitudinal motivation analysis as the unique way to understand school dropout and they must acknowledge the crucial role of institutions (school and educational supply) in guiding, influencing and facilitating each student's life itinerary. However, we are dealing with half-grown people: society owes them a special care and has a serious responsibility towards youth in terms of human promotion, also to ensure a balanced population increase. Indeed, the educational system keeps being one of the main ways to young people's social inclusion (European Commission, 2009): the question then is whether today's school leavers are offered alternative solutions and resources. Which role do these resources play within their life planning: job demand, mobility opportunities (particularly emigration: Cucchiurato, 2010) and family relationships? Which tools can they exploit for the development of their human capital after compulsory education (educational guidance, school years retaking, permanent education)?

Nowadays all students meet in solitude the future uncertainties, as they can no longer rely on inclusive educational institutions and standardized life itineraries (Beck 2008; Chisholm 2011). In this frame ESL are definitely more vulnerable to the risks deriving from old and new social inequalities as they have to strongly rival other young students within a context of long-term transitions (Walther 2006; Fur-

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1 *Agency* is here meant as the individual's ability to define himself in a positive and proactive way (self-esteem) which enables him to pursue goals and to achieve them, giving his own resources a direction and controlling his own performance.



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long, Cartmel, Biggart, Sweeting y West, 2003) and of increasing scarcity of goods and available social positions (especially in Italy, where “unequal life experiences” take place, see: Schizzerotto, 2006; Landri, 2006; Viteritti, 2009; Schizzerotto, Trivellato and Sartor, 2011). The question now is: which is the life approach of people who do not invest on their educational career? Understanding this target’s motivation is of crucial importance to social inclusion policies, which have to pay a special attention (as dealing with young underachievers) to the *turning points* of these people’s lives between study and non-study, employment and non-employment, mobility and immobility, dependent and independent life, etc.

#### METHODS: NATIONAL SURVEY ON A SAMPLE OF ITALIAN UNDERACHIEVERS

The present investigation focuses on a representative sample of 20 year-old Italians (born in 1991) who, after completing lower secondary school, have achieved the minimum level of school performance (evaluation: “sufficient”), which leads them to consider studying as unimportant to their life whatever the reasons for this might be. Looking at them we noticed a high risk of school dropout but at the same time there is a still ongoing decision-making process, as well as a re-arrangement of their life planning. The survey has been carried out by Doxa - Fondazione Pastore on behalf of ISFOL (Ministry of Labour)<sup>2</sup> over the period May-November 2011 and it comprises two main stages: a quantitative phase with a structured questionnaire (made with CAPI interview) to 1.508 young Italian students, chosen with the criterion of proportional stratified sampling in 199 Italian municipalities<sup>3</sup> and a qualitative phase with a focus group involving both Italian and foreign ESL (4 focus groups held in Turin, Brescia, Naples and Catania) and a small number of social workers operating within networked local services (2 focus groups in Rome and Milan).

The structured questionnaire comprises a part which is common to all interviewees (biographical and personal data to identify the various itineraries of students’ dropping out and their current conditions) and a section where each case is

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2 The complete research report is going to be published. A working paper has been presented in Rome (Crispolti, Spigola and Stroppa, 2012).

3 Three-phase probabilistic sampling of units: the first phase consists in selecting municipalities (among pre-stratified cells depending on geographical area and size of each area), the second phase aims at selecting the electoral sections (casually shortlisted among the municipalities), the third phase deals with the choice of students born in 1991 (shortlisted in n= 6000 by casual sampling among the electoral sections, representative of both genders; from the 6000 subjects contacted, only 1508 passed the sampling requirements).



individually investigated: ESL, qualified or still in VET, qualified or still in education (upper secondary school). Around 6000 students inscribed in the electoral register were shortlisted as the survey's target; underachievers represent 57% among them, with 25% of school leaving. The survey has then shortlisted a casual sample among underachievers.

The final sample of 1508 interviewees is composed by 48.5% young students who have not yet obtained a certificate (national diploma or regional qualification) both as being in a situation of educational delay and as school leavers; 51.5% students have instead completed their educational or training career. Interviewees have been divided into 3 sub-categories: 38% left school before obtaining any certificate, 6% enrolled in vocational training (after lower secondary school or after a year behind in upper secondary school) and are about to achieve a VET qualification; 56% have completed or are about to complete their educational cycle with 3-4-5 years-long diplomas recognized by the State<sup>4</sup>.

In all sub-categories the male group (56%) is wider than the female one (44%), with peaks of 61.4% among ESL, of 55.4% among VET students / qualified and of 52.4% among school students / qualified. An outstanding feature of the whole sample is the high incidence of years lost during lower secondary school: 12% out of the entire sample, which is even higher in ESL (21.4%) and VET students (19.9%) while is significantly lower in upper secondary school students (4.5%). Considering that the national rate of school delay for Italian pupils is 6.9% (year 2009-2010, only upper secondary education, see Banca d'Italia, 2012, p. 36), it is remarkable that **underachievers** are the mostly affected by this "critical incidents" and that such failure somehow foreshadows their subsequent decision to leave school (more than 10% students losing a year during lower secondary school end up as ESL).

Another striking aspect of the sample is the geographical distribution of school performances, which is hugely non-homogeneous: students from the North-Eastern and Central-Italy show better results than those of the North-West, the South and the Islands; this is true for all categories (ESL, VET students / qualified and school students / qualified). This reflects a geographical disproportion within the country that is a major problem in terms of human capital and socio-economic inequalities (Mocetti, 2008; Schivardi and Torrini, 2011; De Blasio and Nuzzo, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> The incidence of dropping out within the actual sample (38%) is higher than the one highlighted in the screening phase (25%), due to the weighting established by the survey's objectives.

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Furthermore in Italy students' performance in upper secondary education appears strongly connected with the parents' social and economic background (see i.e. Benadusi, Fornari and Giancola, 2010). Our sample also confirms that ESL' parents are those mostly affected by job precariousness and economic difficulties<sup>5</sup>. Among dropouts the rate of precarious employments is higher (12% vs an average rate of 7.8%) similarly to that of unemployed fathers (4.7% vs an average 3.2%). Also dropouts' mothers are the least employed (44% of them have permanent or precarious occupations) if compared with those of VET students (52%) and upper secondary school ones (55%) but also represent the highest rate of housewives (52.6% vs an average 46.6%). Parents' educational degree also reflects the above occupational disparities and is strongly linked with the distribution of dropout or

**Table 1. What are you doing now? (% of subcategories)**

	DROPOUTS	VET STUDENTS / QUALIFIED	UPPER SECONDARY STUDENTS / QUALIFIED
University student	-	-	35.6
Upper secondary student	-	-	16.4
VET student	-	15.5	1.2
Employed	50.5	63.5	20.6
Unemployed	15.3	4.6	2.9
In search of first job	24.9	13.9	19.2
Not in education, employment, training (NEET)	6.8	1.3	1.3
Others	2.6	1.0	2.9
Total (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0
N =	576	86	846

Source: Data analysis by M. Colombo from enquiry *I percorsi della dispersione formative*,

<sup>5</sup> For the description of economic and social status of the interviewees' family, only subjective indicators have been used. See Table 3.

training cases: both mothers and fathers' qualification is higher in upper secondary school cases, while it is lower in ESL and VET students / qualified.

As to the interviewees' current situation, the sample can be divided in a wide range of options (Table 1).

Only 1 out of 2 dropouts is now employed; on the contrary, among VET students and qualified ones, only 1 student out of 3 has found a job. Among those who completed their educational cycle, 54% are still studying, which means they still trust in the usefulness of education, and even intend to obtain a degree despite the difficulties faced throughout their careers, while 20% are working and another 20% are looking for a job. Nevertheless, unemployment has a different effect on qualified and non-qualified people: dropouts are more disadvantaged (25% unemployed) compared with students with a diploma (20%) and VET students / qualified (14%). Finally, a more detailed analysis of the dropout sub-category highlights that, when facing occupation, the most disadvantaged groups are girls (only 48.4% are employed, vs 56% boys) and Southern people: only 43% (South) and 38.5% (Islands) are employed, against 69% of North-West, 66% of Nord-East and 60% of Central-Italy inhabitants.

Gender differences are inverted when looking at the current situation of upper secondary school / qualified students, as girls performance is better than boys' (43.6% university female students vs 28.7% male students) which indicates the higher investment of girls on education, even in case of poor performance. However looking at the NEET distribution within the sample (Table 2), although they represent only 6.8% of the dropouts and 1.3% of the other two groups it is apparent that girls keep experiencing significant disadvantages in terms of social inclusion<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth underlining that the incidence of NEETs keeps being of difficult measurement, as surveys conduct different NEETs census depending on the type of investigation; the Istat (2010, 2011, 2012), for example, reckons that there are 800.000 20-24 year-old people (38% of the corresponding cohort) who are not studying nor working, but only one third of them could be really inactive or unwilling to any activity, while the remaining 70% could be doing or expecting to do an "undeclared", illegal or precarious job. Since at least one NEET out of two has a Isced-3 or higher degree, particularly girls living on their own in the North of Italy, or either still living with their parents in the South, we have reason to believe that the definition of NEET stands for many different situations: from undeclared work within family companies to *housewifing*, from disability to real discouragement towards job market.



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**Table 2. Subjects of the ISFOL sample in NEET condition, by gender and residence**

	TOTAL	GENDER		RESIDENCE				
		M	F	NORTH-O	NORTH-E	CENTRE	SOUTH	ISLANDS
Not in education, training or employment (%)	100.0	44.0	56.0	23.1	17.1	18.6	27.7	13.5
N =	52	23	29	12	9	10	14	7

Source: Data analysis by M. Colombo from enquiry *I percorsi della dispersione formative*, Roma: Isfol, 2011.

## RESULTS: THE ANALYSIS OF EACH AT-RISK PROFILE

### *Young early school leavers*

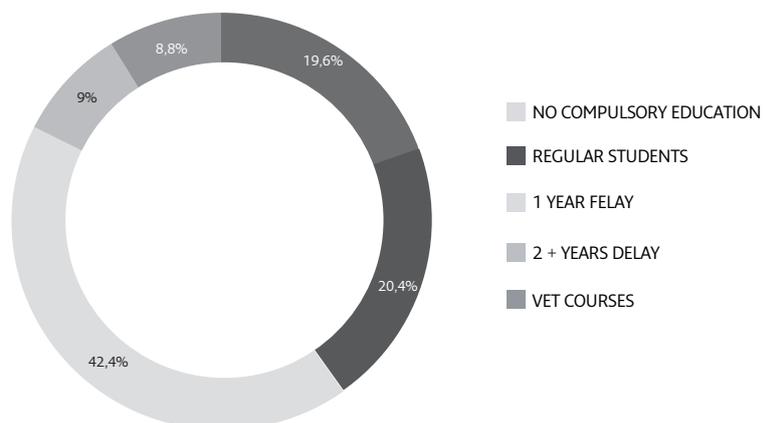
The ESL's pathways analysis shows that the sample includes different educational itineraries before dropping out (Figure 1): 1) youngsters who left school without completing compulsory education (42.4%); 2) regular pupils (did not re-take the years again) attending an upper secondary school who left school and never went on to study an alternative course (20.4%); 3) non regular pupils (repeated 1 year) who left the upper secondary school and never went on to study an alternative course (19.6%); 4) non regular pupils (repeated 2 or more years) who left the upper secondary school and never went on to study an alternative course (9%); 5) those who left studying after having tried a VET course (8.8%). As the features of these groups, girls are over-represented among regular students and males among non-regular ones. ESLs who left without going on to study alternative courses are living in the N-E regions more than elsewhere<sup>7</sup>. The economic situation of ESL's families does not differ significantly according to the educational pathway.

Looking at other characteristics, the at-risk profile of the Italian ESL is defined by the already known aspects: poor school performance, higher incidence of boys, high incidence of low-income and precariously employed families (Table 3), unemployed mothers, high percentage of people living in the South or in the Islands. 80% of cases live with both parents. The statistics shown confirm that the traditional factors operating behind underachievement are the same for early school leavers: poverty, underdevelopment and social exclusion.

<sup>7</sup> As in that area there's a huge offer of VET, it can be confirmed that VET has a consistent function of "second chance education" because VET students are less likely to become ESL.



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**Figure 1. Pathways of Early school leavers before dropping out (n=576) (v. %)**

Source: Data analysis by M. Colombo from enquiry *I percorsi della dispersione formative*, Roma: Isfol, 2011.

**Table 3. How can you define the current economic situation in your family? (% of subcategories)**

	DROPOUTS	VET STUDENTS / QUALIFIED	UPPER SECONDARY STUDENTS / QUALIFIED	TOTAL
Very good	1.0	0	1.9	1.4
Good	17.9	14.7	34.0	26.7
Satisfying	41.3	63.1	47.7	46.1
Quite difficult / bad	27.4	15.1	12.7	18.5
Very difficult / bad	10.6	4.2	1.5	5.2
I can't say	1.8	2.8	2.2	2.1
Total (Perc.)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	576	77	846	1508
<i>Very Good+ Good + satisfying</i>	<i>60.1</i>	<i>77.8</i>	<i>83.6</i>	<i>74.3</i>

Source: Data analysis by M. Colombo from enquiry *I percorsi della dispersione formative*, Roma: Isfol, 2011.

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The survey has also focused on the role played on the dropping out in some factors of family instability, i.e. the presence of a large family, the absence of **parents** if emigrated, the way of living in a single-parent family, the change of residence at the time of dropping out, the situation among the siblings and the possible distress deriving from a difficult situation of a relative. The results of analysis cannot permit us to emphasize these factors. The average of family members does not differ significantly between the subcategories (Table 4) and only one third of ESLs belong to a family with more than 4 cohabitants, more frequent in the South (36.5%) and Islands (50%). Only 13.2% of fathers and 14.5% of mothers emigrated at the time of dropping out (respectively 18% and 22% for those living in Southern Italy or Islands). As the parents' presence at home, 5.7% live without mothers and 17.5% without father, with no relevant difference between subcategories. The change of residence occurred only a few times in the case of dropouts (4.3%).

**Table 4. Composition of the family (% of subcategories)**

	DROPOUTS	VET STUDENTS / QUALIFIED	UPPER SECONDARY STUDENTS / QUALIFIED	TOTAL
Mother at home	94.3	90.9	97.4	95.8
Father at home	82.5	79.3	89.9	86.5
Brother / sister at home (1)	72.1	82.1	75.6	74.6
Brother / sister at home (2)	29.7	22.5	24.4	26.3
Brother /sister at home (3)	9.1	5.0	5.3	6.7
Average family members	3.08	3.03	3.04	3.06
N	576	77	846	1508

Source: Data analysis by M. Colombo from enquiry *I percorsi della dispersione formative*, Roma: Isfol, 2011.

As the position within the siblings order, 20% of ESLs are only child, 34% are first-born, 33.2% secondly born, 8.9% thirdly born. These values do not differ from school student / qualified, while VET student / qualified show a higher number of secondly and thirdly born vs. a lower number of only child. As the negative conse-

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quences occurring from relatives' difficulties, at the time of dropping out the percentage of occupational distress within the family seems a little relevant to be considered influential: only 6.5% have the mother in job mobility and 0.2% invalid; only 11.5% have the father were in job mobility, 4.4% unoccupied, 0.5% invalid; only 7.7% have first brothers / sisters in job mobility, 7.3% unoccupied; only 2% have second brothers / sisters in job mobility and 4.7% unoccupied.

If socio-demographic features do not completely satisfy the range of explanatory factors, it's worth shifting to personal motivations. In this area of investigation the most significant result is that leaving school appears to ESLs as a "personal choice" (Table 5) (84.6% of the whole sample) rather than a "contingent necessity" (13.4%). The vast majority of ESLs during the interviews made raising the "decision-making" surrounding the act to abandon studying. In the light of personal agency perspective, this decision does not seem suitable with a frame of **renuncia**tion and sacrifice, but rather as an expression of maturity and awareness of the difficulties of *life planning* (Merico, 2011).

**Table 5. Have you left school as a personal choice or as a contingent necessity? ESLs by gender, residence and perceived economic status (PES) (v. %)**

	TOTAL	M	F	NORTH-O	NORTH-E	CENTRE	SOUTH	ISLANDS	PES VERY GOOD	PES SATISFYING	PES DIFFICULT
Exclusively necessity	7.0	6.7	7.5	8.0	7.1	6.6	5.9	8.2	5.8	5.1	9.9
Exclusively personal choice	68.7	71.5	64.3	59.8	61.9	75.7	69.0	74.3	79.5	71.8	60.7
More choice than necessity	15.9	13.5	19.7	18.9	15.6	16.5	16.6	10.8	7.4	16.5	18.4
More necessity than choice	6.4	6.9	5.6	10.1	13.0	1.2	6.3	4.4	4.1	6.6	7.0
Don't know	2.1	1.5	3.0	3.1	2.4	0.0	2.3	2.3	3.1	0.0	3.9
N =	576	354	223	120	46	97	204	111	108	238	219

Source: Data analysis by M. Colombo from enquiry *I percorsi della dispersione formative*, Roma: Isfol, 2011.



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**Table 6. Why did you give up studying? ESLs by gender, residence and perceived economic status (PES) Max 2 choices (v. %)**

%	MF	M	F	NORTH-O	NORTH-E	CENTRE	SOUTH	ISLANDS	PES VERY GOOD	PES SATISFYING	PES DIFFICULT
School problems	38.6	36.6	41.9	34.0	42.9	56.6	39.8	24.0	42.3	45.5	30.8
Family problems	17.4	15.2	20.9	23.9	10.1	9.0	20.6	14.8	5.3	12.6	28.9
Personal problems	58.1	58.9	56.8	49.2	70.4	58.4	58.0	62.4	54.5	46.2	72.8
Economic / job problems	18.4	23.1	11.1	22.0	14.1	11.7	19.0	21.3	20.2	21.6	13.4
Friendship problems	3.9	3.9	4.0	5.0	0.0	0.9	7.1	1.3	1.9	3.9	4.7
Other interests	53.3	58.2	45.4	51.6	50.2	53.1	55.9	51.8	52.0	56.7	51.7
Lack of school nearby	12.8	12.7	13.1	13.1	16.0	9.0	16.6	7.7	14.9	11.4	12.4
Logistic problems	2.8	1.1	5.6	2.9	4.3	3.3	1.5	4.2	2.1	2.1	3.6
N =	576	354	223	120	46	97	204	111	108	238	219

Source: Data analysis by M. Colombo from enquiry *I percorsi della dispersione formative*, Roma: Isfol, 2011.

As to the reasons for school leaving, the prevailing ones are personal motivations (58.1%) and the presence of interests different from study (53.3%). The third main reason for school leaving, with an almost 20% gap to the first ones, is school unease (38.6%). Then there are work reasons (18.4%), affecting boys in a double percentage with respect to girls, and family reasons (17.4%) which mainly refer to students with disadvantaged backgrounds. The lack of adequate educational careers is also a reason for school leaving for 12.8% students (both boys and girls) while it is more frequent in the North-East and in the South. The motivations deriving from friendship (3.9%) and logistic impediments (2.8%) are minor in the sample, but data reveal a higher influence of friendship motivations among



students living in the South (7.1%) and students with economically disadvantaged families (4.7%).

When further exploring school leaving motivations, other relevant gender discrepancies emerge, like the higher incidence among boys of “other interests from study” (58.2% boys vs 45.4% girls) and the higher emphasis posed by girls on school motivations (41.9% girls vs 36.6% boys) and logistic ones (5.6% girls vs 1.1% boys) as being material reasons for leaving school. The male’s emphasis in other interests appears as a confirmation of the disengagement theory that enlightens a sort of lack of appeal and credibility by the school on a whole, which is sufficient to turn the subject’s attention to something else.

In terms of geographical discrepancies, we highlighted the high variety of personal motivations, which range from the 70% of the North-East to the 58% of Central and South of Italy. Family motivations also vary, from the 23% of North-West to the 9% of Central Italy. Additionally, personal and family reasons vary depending on the perceived economic status: students with economically disadvantaged families are more affected by these reasons than the average.

In contrast with the survey’s expectations, ESLs do not explicitly complain about school, which only 39% students recognize as the direct reason for school dropout; the main motivations remain the will to do something different from studying, the need to search an occupation in order to be independent, the idea that having a degree is of little help to gain success in life. Nonetheless many of them connect dropout with their bad relationship with school: this is not seen as the initial reason, but rather as a concomitant factor to their decision to drop out. Particularly apparent is their frustration due to years lost or bad marks, a negative sensation which is often aggravated by the attitude of teachers or parents.

Indeed dropouts tend to have a positive reaction to school leaving as if it was a sort of liberation; this is especially true for boys. The cluster analysis applied to the semantic differential scale identified five main attitudes (Table 7) of which two were fully positive: liberation (cl. 2 – 16%) and inclination towards work (cl. 5 – 20%); indifference (cl. 1 – 30%). One is neutral (Indifference) but it must be read in negative terms, and two are strongly negative attitudes: self-blaming (cl. 4 – 16%) and disorientation (cl. 3 – 18%).

Among those who felt themselves “liberated from school” there is a high percentage of students who repeated many school years as well as of young NEET; girls are a little more here than in the other clusters; the incidence of large families with social and economic disadvantage is also higher. As witnessed by a dropout in the focus group, the decision to leave school is clearly provocative towards social rules and sometimes towards the family.

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**Table 7. ESLs clusters obtained with procedure **FREQ** on the item: “How did you feel after school leaving? (semantic differential)**

CLUSTER N°	LABEL	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE	CUMULATE PERC.
1	indifference	171	30.05	30.05
2	liberation from school	96	16.87	46.92
3	disoriented	103	18.10	65.03
4	self-blaming	82	14.41	79.44
5	work oriented	117	20.56	100.00

Source: Data analysis by M. Colombo from enquiry *I percorsi della dispersione formative*, Roma: Isfol, 2011.

Among “indifferent” students, probably representing the most at-risk category, there are some with an average social and economic profile; there is also a high incidence of non-employed mothers and a higher number of boys than in the other clusters. Contrarily “disoriented” students generally have parents with a higher level of education than the average and are mostly only sons; their sense of **inadequacy** might be linked with parents’ high expectations. The “self-blaming” students remember a feeling of oppression, agitation and sadness at the moment of dropping out more than other clusters. They are also disappointed for not having received help from teachers. In this cluster it is prevailing young outs who abandoned school to do a job, particularly in apprenticeship.

The only cluster associated to positive and constructive feelings is that of “work-oriented”, composed mainly by the employed; they remark a pro-active behavior after dropping out and think more about future planning than the cost / benefit balance of their decision.

After a few years from their decision to leave school, the dropouts’ profile is also influenced by their life achievements: after dropout, not all of them have struggled for finding a job (6% experienced a phase of stalemate). The search for an occupation has been successful only for half the group, although they have mainly been hired on illegal contracts, with girls experiencing a more problematic access to job market than boys. As to the obstacles they encountered during their job search, 54.2% have met difficulties, especially in Southern Italy (60.3%) and Islands (55.7%) (Table 8) and 48.2% of the dropouts highlighted that “they did not

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know how to get moving and whom to address to”, pointing out their uncertainty as a result of their lack of life directions (shared by the majority of girls).

**Table 8. Which are the most important difficulties you have met in the search of your first job? Max 3 choices. ESLs by gender (v. %)**

%	TOTAL	M	F
I Did not know how to get motivated / whom to contact	48.2	45.3	52.2
There were not enough jobs	43.2	44.9	40.7
I did not have got enough knowledge / skills / job experience	27.9	28.3	27.3
My certificate were not considered by the labour market	25.6	23.9	28.0
Jobs offered to me were not suitable, I didn't like them	18.5	19.3	17.3
I did not have the certificate requested by labour market	17.0	18.7	14.7
Near my residence there weren't employment centres	11.1	12.1	9.8
No one has helped me (relatives, friends, neighbours)	10.2	8.1	13.3
I was hampered by family problems	3.0	3.6	2.0
I was hampered by health problems	1.1	1.9	0.0
N	296	175	121

Source: Data analysis by M. Colombo from enquiry *I percorsi della dispersione formative*, Roma: Isfol, 2011.

For this reason when being interviewed almost half the sample (48.9%) report that their decision to leave school appeared as something to regret, and more than 1 dropout out of 10 intend to go on studying (especially girls with disadvantaged families and living in the Islands).

In fact, we are not dealing with a real “repentance” for having left school but rather with a process of growth towards the adult age, which leads students who are over-eighteen to adopt a more realistic approach: indeed, most interviewees see themselves as low-profile future workers. This means they are not intransigent nor dreamers; on the contrary, they are used to live day by day instead of planning their



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future. Nonetheless, 30% are very confident and 41% pretty confident that they will somehow realize their potential in the future.

**Table 9. Have you ever regret to have dropped out school ? ESLs by gender, family condition and perceived economic status (PES) (v. %)**

	TOTAL	M	F	LIVING WITH BOTH PARENTS	LIVING INDEPENDENTLY OR WITH 1 PARENT	PES VERY GOOD	PES SATISFYING	PES DIFFICULT
Yes, often	11.1	8.7	14.8	10.5	13.3	13.0	7.5	12.3
Yes, sometimes	37.7	36.8	39.3	35.3	47.7	37.8	35.6	40.8
Never	51.2	54.5	45.9	54.2	39.0	49.1	56.9	46.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	576	354	223	463	114	108	238	219

Source: Data analysis by M. Colombo from enquiry *I percorsi della dispersione formative*, Roma: Isfol, 2011.

#### *VET students and young workers*

The second group of interviewees (only 86 subjects, 6% of our sample) is composed by those who have attended or are currently attending a VET course. In terms of socio-economic and demographic aspects this group is similar to the dropouts' one with even worse socio-economic situation: absolute prevalence of boys, low-income and low family background, prevalence of fathers with lower secondary school qualification, abundance of more than 4 family members. Furthermore, these two groups share a few cultural aspects: many students have faced difficulties and years lost during lower secondary school; as to the reasons for leaving school, this group's interviewees also highlighted personal motivations and alternative interests; many of them have lived their enrolment in VET courses as a "fallback choice" in contrast with a potential *best choice*, i.e. the obtaining of a diploma or a state qualification.

Otherwise, VET students show a group peculiarity, which is their approach to work. This is conceived as an important motivation as well as a real chance and a



feasible life opportunity: these students chose a specific course depending on the profile they wanted to achieve on the basis of very clear vocational motivations (an interest in *that* job). The professional ambitions these students had before attending VET were for some of them (15%) higher than those actually feasible after obtaining the VET qualification; we can therefore conclude that these students also had to put their optimism back in the right perspective. Their employment chances are wider than those of the other clusters, as 64% of them have found a job and only 4.6% are currently unemployed (1.3% NEET).

Very few VET students regret their choice (only 7.1% has the will to re-start some education or training activities) while many of them are satisfied with the career they started or completed (indeed, 35% have not yet completed it); these latter have a very optimistic attitude towards their future and even consider the possibility of doing more training in order to improve their professional skills (53% of them). This confirms the idea that VET is really useful in terms of job search and effective in guiding these young people –risking school dropout and disorientation– to more stable life itineraries and more challenging perspectives than the weak and unskilled ones pursued by dropouts. According to the school representatives interviewed in the focus groups, many students risking dropout and social marginalization tend to gather in vocational training centers: the most common profile is not that of “young deviated people”, but rather of “young uncertain people”, people unable to choose, lacking any ambitions and objectives (however realistic or unrealistic these might be). VET’s founding policy is fighting against school dropout and promoting students’ active access to the job market, despite its narrow and non-homogeneous distribution throughout the Italian territory: VET courses are widespread and renowned in the North of Italy and in Trentino-Alto Adige, while very little known in the regions of Central-Southern Italy and in the Islands.

#### *Upper secondary students and holders of a diploma*

The third subcategory of the survey is composed by students with a delay and by upper secondary school diploma holders (846 subjects, 56% of sample). This group can definitely be regarded as being *out of the risky area*, since a good 87% have completed the five-year long school cycle before being 20 (more females) and only 13% are going to finish the school track. This group’s social and demographic profile is different from the other ones’: there is a higher gender balance (47% girls, 53% boys), students’ family background is average, with both parents and brothers / sisters regularly employed, other brothers / sisters studying, averagely good wages, etc. As the current situation, 35% students are attending university courses, 16% are about to



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complete secondary school and 40% are employed or in job search: only a little 3% are unemployed and 1.3% are NEET. This group's general trend confirms the fact that the school degree and the enrollment in upper secondary school are considered as having a protective function against the probability of the disadvantages.

From a cultural perspective, these young students generally show a need for achievement, which leads them to continue studying despite the objective difficulties they encounter (highlighted by 1 out of 3 students, especially boys) and enables them to overcome critical situations deriving from an unsatisfying family life (this is occurring for half these students) or from a low cultural background (only 42% - 45% parents have a degree which is equal to a diploma or higher). These students generally recognize the importance of having a school degree and are aware of the efforts required to obtain one; as a matter of fact, the prevalent reason for the school enrollment is the "instrumental" ones (46.5% have chosen that school for having more of a chance to find a good job) and 30% indicate a "family compelling" at the origin of the school attendance. The list of reasons (and the hierarchy of their choices) varies by gender of respondents (more expressive and self-realization oriented are the girl's orientations, the male ones are more instrumental), but it does not change significantly, according to the perceived economic status, the situation of regular / non regular students and the residence area. Among those subjects living independently or with only one of parents are prevailing self oriented reasons, (as "this course of study fits my character", 20% vs. 11%).

It is however remarkable that this group includes a vast proportion of low performers: 31.6% repeated one or more years; 49% had failed at least one subject ("learning debt") in upper secondary education; within all their school career 33% of students came across unforeseen / negative events, especially occurring among those living in the North-Eastern area, boys and of good economic situation). The main reason for students' dissatisfaction is the gap they experienced between their commitment in studying and the evaluation they actually received, much lower than they expected (32,7%), even if they felt they worked hard to reach learning objectives (24.3%). This indicates how weak their relationship with teachers and school was. Indeed, the incidence of "mishaps" is significantly high: the outcome of their final examination was also poor (one student out of two usually gets a lower mark than 70-100). All things considered, there is a fifth sample (19.5%) of people who are not happy with their choice (especially those lacking a regular school career); if they could go back in time, these students would not enroll in the same secondary school. Half the unsatisfied students would choose a VET course, while the other half would look for a job: their families' social and cultural background is clearly the source of such attitudes.



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**Table 10. If you could go back in time, would you enroll at the same school? If not, what would you do? Students / diploma's holders by gender, family conditions and perceived economic status (PES) (v. %)**

	TOTAL	M	F	LIVING WITH BOTH PARENTS	LIVING INDEPENDENTLY OR WITH 1 PARENT	PES VERY GOOD	PES SATISFYING	PES DIFFICULT
Yes	80.5	81.8	79.1	81.2	74.7	83.3	82.0	70.5
No	19.5	18.2	20.9	18.8	25.3	16.7	18.0	29.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	846	443	403	748	97	303	404	121
<i>If no, I would:</i>								
Enroll in another course of study	59.3	57.6	61.0	57.8	68.2	60.4	60.1	49.4
Enroll in another institute but same course of study	9.4	11.0	7.9	9.6	8.3	11.4	8.0	11.2
Enroll in a VET course	9.2	7.5	10.8	10.1	4.0	5.9	9.3	15.3
Do an apprenticeship	2.5	2.5	2.4	2.9	-	0.0	1.4	8.5
Search for a job as soon as possible	15.4	17.3	13.5	14.7	19.4	15.6	16.4	15.6
Other	4.2	4.0	4.4	5.0	-	6.8	4.9	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	165	81	84	140	25	51	73	36

Source: Data analysis by M. Colombo from enquiry *I percorsi della dispersione formative*, Roma: Isfol, 2011.

As to the attitude towards future, those who have a diploma or are about to obtain it are generally optimistic (27% are totally confident to have a future self-fulfillment, while 50% are not entirely persuaded); however such optimism falls down according to their life conditions (especially for students of Southern Italy and for those who lack family economic support).



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#### CONCLUSION: AT-RISK BIOGRAPHIES AND THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN SOCIAL SUPPORT AND PERSONAL AGENCY

The three sample categories are marked by different social itineraries, which in turn correspond to different grades of likeliness of social exclusion (higher for ESL, while less probable for VET students and upper secondary certificate holders) and different ways of personal agency. The present survey identified a few risk variables, possibly linked with students' careers and their experience with the educational system. Among dropouts, such risk stems from the uncertainty they experience after leaving school, in case they fail to receive an effective support from specific vocational guidance or employment services. Their isolation from school, their sense of failure and disappointment, as well as the scarcity of job opportunities (higher for girls and for those living in the areas with the highest percentage of unemployment) and the opposing attitude of their families are more likely to make them end up as NEET than the other groups.

As to VET students, the risk might be that of feeling forced to choose the VET option, seeing it as a fallback choice; however, provided that the VET qualification helps them find an occupation, they are apparently out of risk. The risk, if any at all, depends on the lack of exhaustive and effective VET programs coming from local authorities: this is more likely to happen in the South and in the Islands, where secondary schools do not do any networking with local authorities, while putting unsuccessful students "on hold" and ignoring them until they have complied with compulsory school attendance.

As to diploma's holders or upper secondary school students, the risk is less likely to occur, as these students have interiorized the value of achievement; however, some of them continue studying despite the difficulties they encounter and despite receiving little support from their families, which often means they fail to obtain a degree; furthermore, there are some discouraged students who –despite having completed their career– experience a lack of self-fulfillment (probably due to: choices imposed by parents, lack of guidance and support to their motivations, uselessness of the school certificate when searching a job, fear of job precariousness, etc.). School representatives highlight an increasing "depression syndrome", especially among students whose families experience problems of mobility, unemployment, poor relationships, anxiety, etc. These adolescents end up taking no interest in their school career, while showing an overall lack of commitment as well as the need to receive a special help from teachers when facing tests, etc.

In addition there is a *management risk* which might be caused by the educational system as such: in Italy, poorly-educated young people are generally unwill-



ing to turn to guidance services and are not aware of the possibility to continue studying after dropout: only 6% ESL, 11% VET students and 12% secondary school students asked for teachers and experts' advice before choosing a career or before leaving school. Therefore, it is not possible to rely on the current offer of guidance services, as these latter –even when working properly– are unable to meet the potential demand which often remains totally unspoken. According to the school representatives, there is still an age-old problem in terms of governance of the networked local services: the very few existing services (school registry offices, counseling and guidance services, remedial lessons like LARSA, temporary careers to avoid losing school years) are badly managed, which results in a lack of coordination between schools and local authorities, often hanging in the balance between indifference and “bureaucratic over-efficiency” (Grimaldi, 2010; Grimaldi, Romano and Serpieri, 2011) and renewing the educational offer –sometimes in full– according to political changes.

In the absence of an effective network preventing disadvantaged students from school dropout and from descending life itineraries, the question again arises as to which resources these students might rely on, to choose the right way when reaching adult life. The present study highlighted that all the analyzed clusters include elements of agency which are worth underlining. Talking about ESLs, their family economic conditions are not so different from those of the other groups, which is indeed a good thing; as a result, social disadvantage is not to be seen as predictive of school failure; each student has then a margin of social or educational mobility to use for a positive life itinerary depending on his / her attitude (optimism and trust in the future) and on his / her commitment to work as an alternative to study. However, in order to compensate for the complexity of many life experiences and of hard familial situations, students should be offered real job opportunities (even if unskilled and precarious) and schools should endeavor to prevent them from falling into NEET condition or into marginalization, by also directing them to local social services and especially to VET.

Among VET students, the use of personal agency means willingness to do manual jobs and to live their profession “as a vocation”, regardless of the grade such profession might hold. Finally, students who completed their school cycle and obtained a degree show a clear need for achievement, which deserves being rewarded with the encouragement of adults and trainers towards independent life plans, however unrealistic these might be.

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