Policy Against Drop-out in Italy

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Abstract: In this essay I set out the current situation of Early School Leaving (ESL) in Italy by considering both data provided by institutional sources (national and international) and a review of the most recent contributions from the educational work that have been done intensively to fight against ESL over the last 20 years. I will argue that the way followed so far will not lead to surprising results, due to deep and structural persisting factors of inequality. After a short overview on the position of Italy in the European rankings, the article recalls the main interventions that took place in the country by different investors (public and non-public), setting up a multiplicity of fragmented macro-politics. Then I will look at the mechanisms of differentiation and unequal distribution of educational opportunities and I will conclude with suggestions on how to make the fight against ESL more efficient and forward-looking.

Keywords: early leavers from education and training, NEET Neither in employment, nor in Education and Training, Italy, At risk student, preventive strategy

1. Labelling educational disadvantage throughout Europe: ELS, ELET, NEET

This essay aims to present school dropout in Italy in the light of the European policy for a knowledge-based economy and, consequently, of the widespread fight against early leaving from education, and the improvement of education levels in every sectors of population. As anyone knows, school dropout has serious impacts on the life of millions of youngsters in each country and affects economic and social development basically (Brunello & De Paola, 2013). Viewed from the inner side of the school system, early leaving is both a cause and an effect of the malfunctioning of education. Thus, it has worth taking seriously every attempt to know its factors and its consequences better. As many other 'slippering' phenomena into the liquid society, school abandon asks sociologists to take a special methodological concern, regarding how to individuate, measure and analyse it. Over the last two decades, many labels and measurement methods have been adopted, by both scientists and practicians.

Since the Nineties, the most recognized label used to identify who drops out (mentioned in any guideline document issued by the European Commission), has been Early School Leavers (ESL rate[2]). ESL is measured by 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). After 2010, Eurostat introduced the label: Early leaver from education and training, referring to a person aged 18 to 24 who has completed at most lower secondary education[3] and is not involved in

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[2] ELS Rate: Share of the population aged 18 to 24 with at most lower secondary education and who were not involved in further education or training during the four weeks preceding the survey.

[3] ISCED Level 0-2 for data from 2014 onwards; ISCED level 0-3c for data up to 2013.

further education or training; by consequence, ELET rate is the percentage of the people aged 18 to 24 with such criteria out of the total population aged 18 to 24 (Eurostat, 2018)[4]. Currently the two terms ELS and ELET are used interchangeably in the EU's documents (Oomen, Plant, 2014).

Since mid-2000s one other label has been added to describe the heterogeneity of disadvantaged young people, facing both the school and the job systems (inextricably intertwining): by the Lisbon Strategy 2020, NEET (Neither in Employment nor in Education and Training) are those people, aged 15-29 years, who are not employed i.e. unemployed or inactive (according to the International Labour Organisation definition); and have not received any formal or non-formal education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey. As statistics report, the Southern European and Mediterranean countries tend to have a large proportion of well-educated NEETs as a result of the crisis; among them, Italy currently scores the highest rate of NEET (Eurofund, 2016).

The two operating labels, ELET and NEET, are not overlapping one another (a relevant proportion of NEET youngsters hold a certificate), despite they look very close. Both refer to disadvantaged young people and, in the real life, the two facets of disease are often the same (who does not hold a school certificate is less protected from unemployment and is more likely to quit the job searching). In fact, a great number of ELET in a country produces a high amount of pupil with limited skills, thus high rates of NEET people, low rates of people enrolled in tertiary education and high juvenile unemployment and deviance.

In the following paragraphs, after a short overview on the position of Italy in the European rankings, I will recall the main interventions that took place in the country, then I will look at the mechanisms of unequal distribution of educational opportunities and I will conclude with suggestions on how to make the fight against school dropout more efficient and forward-looking, even in the light of a recent 'masterplan' issued by the Government in 2018.

2. Early school leaving in Italy: an endemic and neglected social issue

In many reports on education, both by national Ministry (MIUR, 2014; MIUR, 2017) and by the European Commission (EC, 2013; EC, 2017: 59) excerpted from the Report on Italy Social Cohesion (Istat, 2013), the serious consequences of the school dropout in Italy are clearly highlighted.

For Italy, despite the ESL's share that has highly decreased over the last 15 years, from 23% in 2003 to 13.8% in 2016 (Istat, 2018a: 178), the position within the European ranking remains unaltered. Italy is still ranking 4th from the last on the EU28 list, performing better only if compared with Spain (20%), Malta (19%), and Romania (18,5%). Although we already reached the national target of 16% (forecasted by 2020 but reached in 2016), we are still slightly away from the EU average (12.5%) and the EU target by 2020 (10%). Briefly, almost 1 out of 6 young Italian is unable to complete secondary education (13.8%) and 7.5% of the students attending upper secondary education are repeating the school year. This has great effects on the structure of the national workforce: in 2017, between the population of 25-64 year-olds, men holding a school certificate Isced-3 or less are 49.1%, and women are 45.3% (ISTAT, 2018b: 44); also the graduation rate is very low (17.7%) compared with the EU average (30.7%), since only 15.4% of men and 19.9% of women in the age class of 25-64 year-olds hold a bachelor or more (the delay is due mainly to the 35-64 class age). There is a huge gap, then, not only with respect to Northern European countries and Central-Eastern ones (the former U.S.S.R.), but also to some Mediterranean countries like France and Greece, that makes Italy less competitive in the global space, also wasting educational investment in favour of only one sector of the population. Moreover, Italy has the highest number of NEETs in Europe, with 24.3% of young people aged 15–29 (in 2016), 34.9% among young people with a migrant background are not in employment, education or training (ISTAT, 2018c: 202).

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[4] For Eurostat statistical purposes, an early leaver from education and training is operationally defined as a person aged 18 to 24 recorded in the Labour force survey (LFS): 1) whose highest level of education or training attained is at most lower secondary education. 2) who received no education or training (neither formal nor non-formal) in the four weeks preceding the survey. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Early_leaver_from_education_and_training

The progress in the fight against school abandoning over the last decades has been significant, as in 13 years that the ESL rate in Italy reduced by 9.2% (2003-2016) (-8.1% between 2000 and 2013), this variation exceeding the Eu average (-5.7%). But there are other Mediterranean countries, like Portugal and Malta that performed better: for example, Portugal was in a similar disadvantaged position at the beginning of the XXI century (historically it was just behind Italy as far as levels of schooling were concerned) but it has undergone better changes and now it looks close to a recovery from the issue, with more than 18% of the ESL rate reduction since 2004 (Sebastião & Álvares, 2015).

As the European Commission (2016:3) stated, this group of Southern countries (IT, SP, PT, MT) «have early school leaving rates above 10% but are nevertheless making significant progress, … with Spain standing out as the Member State with the highest early school leaving rate and Portugal among the fastest-progressing Member States in recent years». According this document, Italy stays in the middle between having lower ESL percentage and reaching its national target in ESL reduction. As a matter of fact, the efforts made against school dropout in Italy have only partially reduced the distance from the Eu average (-3.1% in 2016). Then school dropout still represents not only a constant alert, but also a neglected problem, due to its endemic nature and the low pressure coming from public opinion and the media.

3. Measures taken during the last two decades: great concern, some investment and unclear results

With any doubt, the school abandoning has been a priority in the Italian Ministry agenda since 2000 and its effort to fight it reinforced after the start of Europe2020's strategy, with the explicit aim to make Italy ahead in the Eu ranking. At the beginning of this century, costs and risks associated to an exaggerated heterogeneity among students and an uncompetitive human capital were clearly mentioned in many declarations of the Ministry of Finance and of the National Bank Director (see e.g. Ballatore & Sestito, 2016).

With the support of Eu funds mainly ESF (Eu Social Fund, such as Cohesion Action Plan – PAC F3), PON (National Operative Programme) and POR (Regional Operative Programme) for an estimated amount of 275 million Euro (Italian Paliament, Deputy Chamber, 2014), many structural measures and local projects have been carried out throughout the country, building partnerships between schools and several actors of the no-schooling field: local councils, civil associations, enterprises, third sector organizations, and professionals, such as counselors, mental health doctors, pedagogics and   social workers.

Despite this amount of work, and despite the evidence that 'something must have occurred' to bring about such ESL rate reduction, the neat contribute of each single measure has been untested so far. The policy against school dropout is still far from being an organic, explicit and comprehensive set of decisions and interventions. Rather it looks like a "rain" of micro-politics, or a chaotic sum of small-scale and occasional interventions, sometimes regional but mostly local. They have been implemented without coordinating one to another and often separated from the mainstream of the youth policy: school-to-work transition helping measures[5], cultivation of safe lifestyles, provision of health care, juvenile delinquency prevention, and youth participation incentives (youth work[6]) etc. In Italy, the cost-benefit assessments of these measures are rare, or of a multi-measure local plan (Morciano et al., 2018). Neither it is frequent to hear that students, or teachers, or parents have been audited at the end of a program to evaluate the outcome; and few are the follow-up studies on the target (the dropout students themselves). One good indicator witnessing how much Italy is behind in assessing the educational policies is that many studies committed by European institutions on this matter do not report about Italy (see, e.g., GHK consulting, 2011; RESL project, 2016[7]). I will return to this point later.

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[5] Youth guarantee in Italy: EU, 2018.
[6] See, on youth work in Italy: Morciano, Scardigno, 2014.
[7] See: Van Praag, Nouwen, Van Caudenberg, Clycq and Tinnermann, 2018.

There are three facets of the fight against dropout (and only the connection between the three can guarantee the efficacy of a social policy):

- at a strategic level: there is a need to 'protect' the studentry against the premature job offer, which is frequently an alternative way to studying (also by stating in clear words why young people must get a school certificate before entering the job market). Therefore the State must have an efficient monitoring system to be provided with data from each student about ones absenteeism and school performance and, at this level, there should be an office, which coordinates, if not the local, at least the regional actions.
- At a meso-level, there is the so-called preventive approach, able to contain the 'physiological risk' of school dropout[8]: obligatoriness first, that is, the legal control of school evasion; but also targeted support for poor families and poor students, mentoring and personal tuition, alert system for teachers etc.; together with alternative teaching and innovative educational methods, appointed specifically to the at-risk students because when a student is called at risk, it is not too late for supportive actions, rather it is the right time to give responses.
- at the level of remediation, there are all one-to-one solutions to re-engage the youngster into the study pathway: second-chance classes, job vouchers, school-work alternation, formative internship, school as workshop, and so on.

What has been done in Italy up until now is principally at the second level (some preventive measures) and the third one (many remedies), with a significant lack of responses at the top level.

Three general measures have had for sure a correlation with the decrease of the ESL rate:

1. elevation of the minimum of compulsory education for all up to 16 years (since 2007);

2. by consequence, not only the academic track but also the VET courses have been encompassed in the compulsory education. After 2007, statistics have immediately registered the increase of 14-18year olds attending secondary education, and the number of young people holding the school/VET certificate (of 3 or 4 year courses) rose. And more recently the implementation of a new monitoring method to identify those who leave secondary education after middle school within the VET paths made it easy to testify that most of them do not abandon education definitively but remain into the system, at least until they are 18 (MIUR, 2017).

3. The third general measure, which could be properly considered both strategic and preventive at the same time, was adopted in 2004, but implemented gradually, so that it showed some effects only a 5-6 years later. It consists in the early entry in Primary education at the age of 5 instead of 6 (optional). As many studies have shown (Del Boca et al., 2015; Heckman, 2011), the childcare attendance during early childhood has estimated effects on the probability to get high grades at the end of high school and, by consequence, is a preventing factor of school dropout[9].

At the remediation level, it is hard to compute what has been put in place and what has worked, given the huge fragmentation and diversification of projects and devices (according not only to the local scale of planning but also the episodic, unstable and unpredictable facets of funding). Many funded projects have been implemented thanks to the participation of single establishments (or networks of institutes) in a wider project coordinated by the local municipality, or a third sector organization; other projects have been formulated and implemented by the school itself with the aid of private contributors; the projects supported by European funds (FSE, PON or POR) have been intermediated by the Ministry of education (MIUR), with periodical Calls for projects, which strictly regulated both partnerships and cost, and the budget is distributed only if the school meets given requirements.

More recently, school dropout has been reframed in a new stream of social policy addressed to children and adolescents, called "Fight against childhood educational poverty". A special fund of

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[8] I spoke about the 'physiological rate' of school dropout, which is expected when school is elitist and driven by traditional values, such as closeness, conservation, rigid authoritative principles, and instructionalist (instead of participative) method. See: Colombo, 2010.
[9] See also Colombo, 2013.

120 million euros per year, fueled by banking foundations (that will be therefore eligible for the tax credit equal to 75% of the payments made over the three-year period from 2016 to 2018) has been established, initially as an experiment. In April 2016 a decisive step forward in implementing the Educational Poverty Fund was taken by adopting a specific Memorandum of Understanding among the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, ACRI (that is to say the Italian Association of Saving Banks and Foundations), and the Third Sector Forum. The goals of the Educational Poverty Fund are too general, such as "aiming at removing economic, social and cultural obstacles that prevent children from fully benefiting from the educational process" (art. 1), they define institutional framework and technical and organizational infrastructures for this operation, without identifying preferential fields of intervention or priorities to allocate the available resources. By doing so, the agreement aims at leaving the single promoter of local projects free to choose its own stream of intervention[10].

As a result, at a national level there is none ascertained knowledge about what it has been done and how; how much has been spent and to obtain what results. One of the rare evaluation studies in the field is that carried out in four big cities by Checchi (2014). This study mapped all initiatives taken by schools in Milano, Roma, Torino and Palermo. Among a sample of 278 schools in lower and upper secondary education (27.5% out of the total) the 5 most recurrent initiatives put in place during the s.y. 2012/13 (total initiatives encompassed within the study: 364) are: 1 - Strengthening of ordinary didactic activities in small groups of students with the same level of achievement (60% of projects), 2 – Laboratories (hand-craft activity, art and entertainment) aiming at improving the school-classroom climate (50%), 3 – Guidance, mentoring and coaching single students (33%), 4 – Activities with ITC and student empowering (33%), 5 – Activities for parents' involvement (20%)[11]. According to the national report, 80% of these projects lasted only one scholastic year; more than half of the measures were not individualized, but they operate with groups of students; only one out of 4 is targeted to students with a migrant background. As the management of the project is concerned, more than 50% are developed by the school itself without partnerships with no-schooling services (this condition looks more widespread in Milan and Rome, where the PON planning does not apply, as PON funds are eligible only if the school has a partnership with at least one external agent).

4. Why social inequality still remains in schooling

The main weakness of this work is that it is organized (and also perceived) mainly as extra-ordinary and managed by teachers who are committed in these projects occasionally (only when the actions are funded), not as a part of their daily job. This point is particularly critical: teacher training is a very controversial matter in Italy because, over more than 20 years, none planned stream to update and innovate the teaching method has been developed by MIUR and teacher training has been optional for a long time. Only in 2015, with Matteo Renzi Reform (Law n.107, operating since s.y. 2015/16) teacher training returned to be mandatory and each professional started to get an annual budgetary support (500 euro each) to afford his/her own professional improvement. In 2018, being still available a personal budget to incentive teacher's training, this reform has been put in stand-by (with an ambiguous consideration of teacher training not as a duty but as a right), then its impact on the fight against school dropout is hard to be measured.

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[10] In October 2016, two calls were published by Impresaconibambini (www.impresaconibambini.org) for the development of projects targeted respectively to poor adolescents and poor children. The first call was explicitly aimed at reducing school dropout rates among young people aged 11-17. It was recommended an integrated and systemic approach and a welfare community perspective, which promotes cooperation among a plurality of educational agents (families, schools and civic organisations). Different actions, addressed both to individuals and to school classes, were asked to be developed inside and outside school with the twofold purpose of improving school success and promoting life skills in disadvantaged youngsters. In two years, Impresaconibambini supported more than 272 projects all over Italy, to contrast children poverty, helping more than 6.500 organisations to implement networks and collaborative actions.

[11] For the weakness of parental involvement in dropout prevention and remedy, see: Colombo - Tièche-Christinat, 2017.

Without a strong commitment on teaching innovation (Cachia et al., 2010), all the remedies implemented during the period risk to keep the unequal distribution of educational opportunities unaltered, as the 'black box' of the school's structure still operates underneath. The major factor of inequity in Italy is the territorial ones, because of lower level of economic development, higher unemployment rates, market income differentials and lack of social care in the South compared to the Centre-North of the country. Even school dropout rate shows a clear territorial divide: 11.6% is the ESL rate in Central and Northern areas, whereas it rises to 19.2 in Southern Italy (ISTAT 2016a: 48). Underachieving is also a consolidate issue in dividing Italy's performances, due to the long-term stratification between high status population (living more in the North and in big cities) and the poor and illiterate population, generally located in Southern and rural areas. The differences among the territorial partitions are significant and persistent: -7.3 percentage points performed by the Southern-islands compared with the North-centre area in 2013, with a differential of 7.25% on average in 10 years (2003-13).

Also the rate of Italian low performers (fourth percentile in PISA scores) is higher than the EU mean. In 2015, Italy scored 19.5% in low reading (vs. 18.7% EU mean), 24.7% in low achievers in maths (vs. 22.1% EU mean), and 19.7% in low achievers in science (vs. 16.5% EU mean) Moreover, differentials in low achievers rates are evident between the four main regions: while the national mean was only a bit higher than the EU target (20.9% vs. 20 Eu target), North-west (15.1) and North-east (11.0) performed much better, the Central regions quite well (20.4) and the South with the two islands scored a very low performance with 30.2% of pupils aged 15 with low or insufficient skills in reading (almost one out of three) (Colombo & Santagati, 2016).

Social inequality becomes even much clearer by seeing the correlation between school dropout (and NEET condition) and family background. The probability to fall into the category of ESL is 10 times higher for the children of migrants than for those of native employees, and 5 times higher for children of one-single parents or of low income families than for children of clerks or 'silver retired'.

In particular, being a student with an immigrant background makes significantly increase (more than a double) the likelihood to delay or abandon the ordinary school track, comparatively to a native student. Istat (2016b) monitored that 77% of immigrant students, newly entered in the Italian secondary school at the age of 14 or more, attended a class inferior to their age by one or two years; MIUR (2017) and Fondazione Imsu- MIUR (Bonini, 2019) confirm that among foreign students the early leaving from lower secondary school is higher than among natives (3.3% foreigners vs. 0.6% natives, of which 2/3 are born out of the country). They also confirm that during the transition from lower to upper secondary school (at the age of 14), 5.7% of foreigners give up (vs. 1.2% natives), and that during upper secondary education 11% of foreigners give up (vs. 3.8% natives). Thus ethnic inequality facing educational opportunities are evident in all sectors of public education in Italy (see also: Azzolini et al., 2018: 723).

The increasing trend of NEETs people in Italy[12] (Alfieri & Sironi, 2017) strikes all the country but however confirms the huge divide between the Central-Northern area (18.4% out of the 15-29 year old population) and the Southern ones (35.3%) (Istat, 2016a: 44)[13]. The correlation between low performance in basic skills, like literacy and numeracy, and NEET condition has been statistically proved (-0.78 and -0.97 respectively) (Istat, 2015: 96), as well as the correlation between NEET condition and the level of education of parents.

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[12] See on: https://www.statista.com/statistics/729239/percentage-of-young-people-who-are-neet-in-italy/ visited June, 26th, 2018.

[13] As far as the presence of students with an immigrant background is concerned (who are the 9.7% of the total school population in Italy – according to MIUR, 2019 s.y. 2017/18), it must be recorded that the majority of them are living in the Central-Northern regions, with incidence rates around 15-17%, whereas in the Southern area the incidence rate of immigrant students does not go over 3%. Thus, the higher rates of ESL and NEET youth in the Southern regions (compared to the rest of the country) cannot be associated to the multi-ethnicity of the school composition, rather to other factors such as unemployment, impoverishment, and major family vulnerability.

Now the national frame requires a deeper sociological reading of the school dropout; the factors affecting school performances and school decisions, by the more vulnerable side of the population, are much more eradicated than expected by implementing the remedy strategy. In my previous studies (Colombo, 2010; 2013; 2015a; 2015b) I highlighted the main remote factors that hinder school integration and school success: a) first, a widely shared model of self-realization, that I called 'school-free' model, which emphasizes the job culture in opposition to the school culture and inhibits the credentials' aspiration. 2) Consequently, there are an increasing number of young people (both educated and not educated) that, coping with unemployment, trust in a self-fulfilling prophecy: 'I don't study no more because it is not remunerative'. 3) There is an underpinning elitist pedagogical model, according to which teachers are unable to deal with the so called 'bad students', to rise up their motivations and recognize their informal learning, due to the perceived social distance.

As a result, in many schools a negative and vicious circle occurs: at-risk students (mainly with poor, illiterate and migrant background) are segregated or become self-segregated in poor classrooms or establishments (called bad schools), often assigned to teachers who have little professional experience or a precarious status, because both students and staff make use of their freedom of choice to move to better schools. The bad schools, without serious investments by the State, have a great influence on maintaining high levels of ESL, by functioning as educational ghettoes and sharing a bad (and 'un-regaining') reputation with their urban neighborhood.

5. Looking forward: three pathways

Italy faces a long way to meet the target of less than 10% of young people abandoning school. There are three parallel pathways to follow from now on.

The first aim is monitoring: to improve the efficacy of the whole system of interventions is absolutely needed a State office where all data on school population (target) and school strategies (projects) must converge. That means to prioritize the completion of the national register of pupils (Anagrafe degli studenti) attending all levels of education (compulsory and post-compulsory) with a large intersection between the different sources (private courses, state and regional schools, INVALSI system of performance assessment). This register started in 2005 (Legislative Decree n.76) and in 2016 was integrated with data coming from preschool education (Decree of the Ministry n. 595, 26 of July 2016); but its implementation is still on the way, due to the uncomplete digitalization of the schools. It is firmly suggested to match data on school attendance and data on school success (included personal aspirations and desires about education), by intersecting data from MIUR, INVALSI and INAPP datasets.

Secondly the aim must be to improve the policies' targeting. To understand the ESL population a new sociological profile is required. The concept of early school leaver, both among school professionals and specialists, looks mainly conventional: based on deprivation theory (Bernstein, 1960; Douglas, 1964), it does not include a large number of non-motivated students who do not belong to the lower class nor live in poor suburban areas, but simply not invest in their education, sometimes even against the aspiration of their family. A non-conventional view of the 'at-risk student' should include not only teenagers pushed to abandon because of their poor school performance, but also those able to choose alternative ways of self-realization. For this target, it is recommended to find the way to create new matches between learning (in a school environment) and aspirations. For sure, the teacher should become a target of the fight against school dropout as well as the student. Briefly, the Italian teaching staff (especially in secondary education) lack of the so-called soft skills (Gordon et al., 2009), such as small group management, how to teach in workshop situations, body language and management of emotions, artistic sensitivity, mediation and intercultural skills, and ask for a better teacher education to cultivate these competences (Argentin, 2018: 186; Argentin, et al., 2018).

And finally, it must be created a lager social responsibility around early school leaving. Persistence of ESL rates and territorial spread are not only school's deficits, nor individual failures, rather they are wider social problems affecting cohesion, competitiveness and the future of the whole 'Italy system' (ICE, 2018). If their causes lie in a set of lacks, even the solutions must be found in a

network of interrelations: no-schooling system and local community service are engaged in pole position, following general guidelines and a clear institutional mandate (promulgated by the Ministry) for cooperation and social development. As states the Experts Group at the Ministry of Education in its recent guidelines (MIUR, 2018), school leaving is a complex issue which mirrors the wider educational crisis occurring in our country; only a global strategy would help to sort out from it. Until we will have 'missing students', the seriousness of this crisis will require to be contrasted by any emergency means, engaging all the best sectors of society.

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