

# ADOLESCENTS OF TURIN FACING WITH THE CRISIS OF THE LABOUR MARKET. POSITIVE MICRO-TRANSITION IN THE LEARNING DOMAIN AS SOURCE OF SUPPORT OF EARLY SCHOOL-TO WORK PATHS.

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## THE IDENTITY CHALLENGE OF SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITION: FLEXIBLE BALANCE BETWEEN CONTEXTUAL ADAPTATION AND PERSONAL COHERENCE

Adopting a developmental-contextual perspective, we conceptualised school-to-work transition as a multidimensional and time-extended change process composed of several micro-transitions (Vondracek et al., 1986; Blustein et al., 1997; Heinz, 2002a; Reitzle et al. 1998; Silbereisen et al., 2005; Bonica, 2007, 2008). The social relevance that the school-work domain assumes makes the processes and outcomes of this transition of great importance for social and personal well-being and life-span identity construction (Havighurst, 1964, 1973; Erikson, 1963; Bosma, 1992; Silbereisen and Todt, 1994; Evans and Heinz, 1994; Schoon and Bynner, 2003). Considering the social changes that have taken place in Western societies, school-to-work transition could be considered a real identity challenge. The flexible labour market and restructured work organisations shape individual experiences by requiring people to construct and assess their school and work-related transitions in response to frequent discontinuities and multiple options (Shanahan, 2000; Schoon, 2007; Heinz, 2002a; Rudd, 1997; Sverke and Hellgren, 2002). In terms of identity development, the *individualisation* of the pathways and the *greater exposure to changes* make it more challenging to achieve an optimal and flexible balance between contextual adaptation and personal coherence (Beck, 1992; Sannett, 1998; Heinz, 2002b; Giddens, 1991; Chisholm and Hurrelmann, 1995; Larson et al., 2002). On the one hand, these conditions make the transition path increasingly sensitive to the quality of the various micro-transitions the subject is exposed to, since it is precisely in these micro-transitions that personal and contextual resources interact in a dynamic way, each time offering occasions for new protective or at-risk trajectories. On the other, it appears more and more complicated to establish just what the optimal outcomes of a school-to-work transition are. Starting from this latter point, we aimed to discuss the outcomes of this transition in relation to two relevant dimensions: the achievement, or not, of an occupational status and the quality of that status.

### **The outcomes of the school-to-work transition: content and quality of the roles assumed**

*The achievement of an occupational status* refers to the possibility of finding one's own professional collocation that satisfies material, psychological, and social functions (Warr, 1992; Jahoda, 1981; Jackson et al., 1983; Kessler et al., 1989). Several studies emphasise the negative effects of unemployment on psycho-social well-being in terms of mental health (Warr et al., 1988), life satisfaction (Bockerman and Ilmakunnas, 2006), happiness (Clark and Oswald, 2002), quality of the family relationship (Conger and Elder, 1994), and an apparent increase in criminal behaviours (Farrington et al., 1986). Furthermore, when unemployment is prolonged it can lead to isolation and social exclusion by preventing the subject from carrying out active and productive roles within the community (Erikson, 1963, 1968; Havighurst, 1973; Jahoda, 1981; Shamir, 1986) and these risk impacting the young adult stage in a significant way (Winefield et al., 1991; Petersen and Mortimer, 1994; Caspi et al., 1998).

However, the increasing relevance attributed to the exploration process in ego-identity development research (see Bosma and Kunnen, 2001) and the great flexibility demanded by post-modern society (see Shanahan, 2000; Heinz, 2002b), suggest the need to consider as transitional outcomes, not only

the status of employee, but also the *quality of the role assumed*, which is a more complex aspect. On the one hand, in fact, it refers to the degree of subjective personal satisfaction, and on the other, it leads to a consideration of the quality of the choice processes that support the taking on of such a role. Job satisfaction, recognised as an important component of subjective well-being (Warr, 1992), appears to be a complex construct composed of a number of possible parts. In one study of job dissatisfaction, Mayo (1982) emphasised how job dissatisfaction involves several psychological and social aspects, such as low level of agency expressed within the work activity, low professional involvement, role dissonance (personal ability and organisational constraints in roles) and incongruence between job-life values. Moreover, several authors have shown a relationship between job satisfaction, job values (Kanugo, 1982), work involvement and work representations (De Polo and Sarchielli, 1983). Comparative research among working classes highlight how subjects involved in more skilled and socially-recognised jobs attribute greater centrality to their work (Brown et al., 1996), satisfy intrinsic motivational objectives with it (Gruenberg, 1980), activate identification processes (Brown et al., 1996; Fouad and Brown, 2000), and feel they have greater opportunities for personal self-realization (De Polo and Sarchielli, 1983; Brown et al., 1996).

On the developmental level these factors seem of particular importance inasmuch as they support the construction of a coherent identity, favouring an optimal collocation of one's work role in the broadest trajectory of personal life. Operating in a psycho-social perspective of the study of identity, we believe that such optimal development depends on the quality of the continuous subject-context transactions, within which the subject looks for a balance between personal coherence and social recognition (Erikson, 1963; Dubar, 1992; Dumora, 1990; Markus and Nurius, 1986; Bonica, 2008). In the specific instance of vocational development, Dubar uses the concept of "double transactions". According to this author, the aspirations of youth in transition and the choices that derive from them are the fruit of a continuous negotiation between *Past and Present Selves* (biographical transaction) and between *Ideal and Possible Selves*, proposed and sustained in the social and cultural context of belonging (relational transaction). Within this framework, the possibility of "self-realisation" in the work domain depends on how much the work role assumed is representative of one's own life path, of the educational investments and aspirations that have characterised it (Nurmi et al., 2002), and to what degree it is a source of social recognition (Erikson, 1963; Dubar, 1992). In this process, today more than ever before, personal resources like agency, individual planning, the capacity to assume responsibility, the readiness to deal with change and the motivation to engage in school or training are significant (Clausen, 1991; Rudd, 1997; Nurmi et al., 2002; Schoon, 2007; Heinz, 2002a; Hendry and Kloep, 2002). In *behavioural terms* it is a question of assuming flexible commitments based on processes of personal exploration and experimentation. In fact, the trajectories of identity development recognised as being most protective are those that see the subject capable of integrating continuity and discontinuity, alternating moments of exploration and the assumption of commitment (Stephen et al., 1992; Bosma, Kunnen, 2001; Berzonsky, 1990; Bonica and Kunnen, 2005). In terms of *self-representation*, this process depends on how aspirations and life plans were developed on the basis of potentialities and competencies rather than individual or social constraints (Nurmi et al., 2002; Nurmi, 1993; Bonica, 2008; Schoon, 2007). Processes of avoiding challenges can lead instead to a prolonged suspension of assuming commitments or to forms of *negative compromise* that we theorise here as "settling for" the current conditions based on a narrow margin of perceived possibilities. The condition of compromise conceptualised in this way finds a parallel with what has been theorised by Dumora as the "logic of resignation" (Dumora, 1990), by Bresciani and Franchi as the principle of "self-assurance" (Bresciani and Franchi, 2007), and by Dubar as "identité catégorielle" (Dubar, 1992). In terms of identity, all these concepts refer to an adapting of the "ideal self" to one's own limitations, resigning oneself to follow paths perceived as the only available possibilities. Regarding school-to-work transition, people who live this condition of compromise aim mainly to cope with unemployment without worrying about the quality of the chosen job. Dubar sees this risk as being strongly connected to more critical transition paths typical

of teenagers who drop out of school early, while Bresciani and Franchi identify in the principle of “self-assurance” a phenomenon typical of the era of job uncertainty, which affects even those who invest in longer educational paths.

## **ASPECTS OF RISK AND PROTECTION IN THE EARLY TRANSITION TO WORK**

The relevant role of timing in a school-to-work transition has been considered by several authors and most of them have defined a precocious transition to the work market as critical and at risk. This phenomenon is, however, complex to study and to interpret in its risk and protective implications especially because of two aspects that we believe are significant: the multidimensionality of the processes that are at the basis of this timing, and its interaction with the structural and institutional characteristics of the context.

### **The multidimensionality of the early transition to work**

As regards multidimensionality, the literature highlights how the risk factors of an early transition to work are the result of an interconnection of variables: socio-cultural (belonging to a low social class), developmental (confronting the world of work in a delicate moment of structural changes in terms of identity) and experiential (experiencing failure at school).

In various study perspectives, belonging to a low social class has been associated with a lesser possibility of amassing human, economic and social capital (Marshall et al., 1997, Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Caspi et al., 1998), with a lesser breadth of educational aspirations (Schoon et al., 2006; Vondracek et al., 1986), and with forms of “differential identity” that contrast with the prevailing educational culture (Willis, 1976; Fouad and Brown, 2000).

In a psycho-developmental perspective, dropping out of school early is interpreted in relation to the tasks of adolescent development. In adolescence, in fact, important structural changes in identity take place (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980; Bosma, 1985; Bosma and Kunnen, 2001; Havighurst, 1973) that help define the personal aspirations and life plans that will influence the next developmental path (Clausen, 1991; Nurmi, 1993). In this perspective, the risk of the early school-to-work transition refers to the narrowing of the space for “safe” exploration, which one presumes school can guarantee inasmuch as it is primarily a context of “learning” and “experimentation”.

On the experiential plane, it refers instead to the experience of failure and lack of motivation towards learning that frequently characterises early transition-to-work paths.

Although the co-occurrence of these aspects makes it difficult to examine the contribution of each of them separately, various studies highlight the crucial role of the latter dimension. Schoon (Schoon et al., 2006), for example, shows how school involvement constitutes a resilience factor within trajectories at risk of social exclusion. Furthermore, studies on the Italian sample involved in the PISA survey of the skills of 15-year-olds (Programme for International Student Assessment) highlight how adolescents from lower social extractions, who nevertheless manage to get into good schools where they have positive school experiences, do not show any differences in terms of competence when compared with their peers from more well-to-do social classes (Checchi, 2007). On the other hand, school failure is recognised as being a greater threat precisely for youth of low social extraction. According to Gambetta, (1990), in Italy the probability of dropping out of school after having failed appears to be three times greater for this population compared with more well-to-do youths. Moreover, Gottfredson (1981) emphasises the central role that school success plays in defining the highest limit of educational-vocational aspiration, while social class determines the greatest effect on the definition of the minimum limit of these aspirations. The identity risk associated with school failure has been amply highlighted by the psycho-educational literature. Precisely because of the social relevance that school assumes, failure can lead to a low sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993; Schunk, 1991), self-esteem (Harper and Marshall, 1991) and to global, internal and stable types of causal attributions for that failure (Weiner, 1985). In the

perception of the subject, these attributions do not offer any hope of change and are connected to an “entity” theory of intelligence that views the capacity for learning as something “innate” and unchangeable more than as an ability that is “incremental” over time (Dweck, 1999; Dweck and Leggett, 1988; Honess and Edwards, 1990; Malewska and Joannides, 1990). In support of this, vocational psychology has also shown how students who are weaker in terms of school success construct an image of themselves, both personal and social, that is based on poor skills and low intelligence and perseverance (Gilly, et al., 1972; Dubar, 1992; Laks, 1983). These experiences provoke a restriction of the Ideal Selves and the degree of educational and work aspirations. The choice to enter the world of work early can thus become the fruit of a true *negative compromise*, as hypothesised in this paper. Therefore, while on one hand failure is experienced in more negative terms by individuals of low social extraction, on the other, it reduces the quality of the school experience as a context for self experimentation, thus making staying in school an experience that is not necessarily protective. Finally we aimed to underline that the school failure phenomenon involved all the European countries, and especially Italy. Compared to EU averages, Italy has, in fact, high percentages of early school leavers (22.3% for Italy vs 15.4% for all of Europe in 2004). Moreover, this problem seems to involve more males than females. Several international studies have pointed out that females had higher levels of educational aspirations, greater engagement in school, and stronger motivation to study (Schoon et al., 2006; Vallerand, 1997; Buzzi et al., 2002). In addition, the European average rate of dropping out of school for males was 18.8% (vs 13.3% for females in 2004), while in Italy it reached 26.2% (vs 18.4% for females in 2004). Taking these aspects into consideration, although females were not completely excluded from an early at risk transition to work, we consider this phenomenon as more typical of males and for this reason we chose to undertake a study on a male sample.

#### **Early transition to work in relation to the structural and institutional characteristics of the context: the Italian situation.**

As several authors emphasise (Vondracek et al., 1986; Reitzle et al., 1998; Blustein et al., 1997; Silbereisen et al., 2005; Heinz, 2002a; Rudd, 1997; Silbereisen et al., 1997; Evans and Heinz, 1994), the timing of a transition to work must be examined in relation to the characteristics of the context in which it occurs. A comparative study of the German and the English systems, for example, shows how Germany, at an institutional level, supports the process of job placement by guaranteeing excellent training to those who are oriented early on towards vocational paths (Evans and Heinz, 1994). As Reitzle and colleagues (1998) underlined, these conditions put the non-college-bound youth in Germany in a more privileged position than most American or English ones, who have been labelled the “forgotten half” in the United States (William T. Grant Foundation, 1988) or the “left behind” in Great Britain (Chisholm and Hurrelmann, 1995). In a comparison of East and West Germany, the same authors (Reitzle et al., 1998) pointed out, moreover, that the more standardised and institutionalised Eastern system offered greater guarantees to young people involved in early transitions, especially in terms of the institutional support it provided. In particular, in predicting the timing of financial self-supporting they “found no significant risk ratios for the Eastern sample, neither related to individual factors nor related to preceding events in the school-to-work transition” (Reitzle et al., 1998, p. 24), whereas in West Germany the age of becoming self-supporting was dependent upon several variables, such as timing of completion of school, timing of initial vocational choice, value orientations and planfulness.

As for the Italian system, we can observe that the vast majority of youth obtain a high school qualification at the age of 19 (72%, 2001-2002) and most Italian young adults continue their studies at university (72% 2003-2004) (ISTAT, 2002). Thus, the timing of the school-to-work transition in Italy is longer than in other European Countries: eleven years compared with the European average

of seven years (Bottani and Tomei, 2004; Buzzi et al., 2002)<sup>1</sup> (1). These aspects place those who enter the world of work before age 19 in a strong minority position, taking on, more so than in other countries, the potential role of subjects involved in an “off time shift” (Hendry and Kloep, 2002). Furthermore, the Italian context is characterised by the presence of two paths for high school (technical-vocational high school and lyceum), to be chosen at age 14, and by a low degree of permeability (Hamilton, 1994) between these two educational trajectories. Those who choose technical-vocational paths, in fact, hardly ever transfer to lyceums and it is unlikely, although possible, that they opt for university after receiving their diploma. Therefore, the choice of the technical-vocational high school is connected with immediate job placement after the diploma, and those who fail in these paths have few alternatives except for an even earlier confrontation with the world of work. In this framework, an interesting educational opportunity for those who drop out of school is represented in Italy by vocational training, which nevertheless enjoys little recognition by the regular school system. Local administrative bodies provide one- or two-year vocational training courses characterised by a high degree of vocational orientation. Adolescents attending these courses are mainly drop-outs from regular school, especially from technical-vocational high schools. Although experimental forms of integration between regular high schools and vocational training have been attempted in recent years, the skills and qualifications acquired in the latter paths do not seem to have been recognised as yet by the schools. Moreover, even if these professional-learning projects have been widely acknowledged as important from a pedagogical point of view (e.g. Luciano, 1999), few studies have examined them and they have rarely been investigated in a developmental perspective.

In light of the aspects discussed thus far, the possibilities of recovery for anyone coming from trajectories of school failure appear complex and above all difficult to document, also because research has rarely considered learning paths that take place after dropping out of school early. In relation to the identity formation of a competent self, success or failure in learning is often defined in limited terms, considering almost exclusively the moments of choice (type of school) or the final outcomes (marks), and focusing mainly on inter-individual comparisons among groups of subjects, without examining the perceived quality of the *scholastic experience* and the process of constructing and modifying one's own aspirations. Moreover, learning opportunities offered at the mesosystem level in alternative to the regular school (such as Vocational Training in Italy) are rarely considered and school failure is mainly studied in the same context in which failure took place (Bonica, 2007, 2008).

## METHODOLOGY

The present study is part of a broader longitudinal research project started in 2000, dealing with risk and protective factors in the early school-to-work transition (Bonica, 2005; 2007; 2008). A group of 800 adolescents and young people have been involved until now in this project, but in this paper the sample was constituted by the group of males earliest oriented to work, whose transitional paths from school to work were characterized by two relevant micro-transitions. Firstly, after having dropped out of high school in adolescence (at the age of 15-17), in 2000 they had the opportunity to experience success in learning while attending excellent two-year vocational training courses closely associated with a large metal-mechanic company in Turin<sup>2</sup>. This first micro-transition,

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<sup>1</sup> Bottani considers *timing of school- to-work transition* as the distance in time between: 1) the age of the cohort in which the percentage of youths attending school full-time became less than 75%; 2) the age of the same cohort when more than 50% of the youths have a job and are out of regular school.

<sup>2</sup> The longitudinal research project started in 2000 (Scientific Referent: Prof. Laura Bonica, Department of Psychology, University of Turin). Starting in 2005, it is also part of a multidisciplinary research on biographical transitions co-financed by Italian Ministry of University and Research (Biographical Transitions: A comparison between objects and models. Scientific Referent: Prof. Mario Cardano, Department of Social Science, University of Turin).

discussed in depth in other publications (Bonica, 2007, 2005; Bonica and Sappa, 2006, 2008, 2003), consisted in the passage these youths experience when going from *experiences of school failure* (80% failed at least once; 63% dropped out; 71.4% obtained a middle school diploma with the lowest mark), mainly attributed to their own incapability to learn, to *success in terms of the mark* (80% passed with an average of 77 out of 100) and *a sense of self-efficacy and a broadening of educational aspirations* (64% state that they want to return to school, 15% go back before the end of the course).

In addition, although the strong tie that this particular vocational training centre had with the large metal-mechanic company initially offered the prospect of certain job placement, the crisis that struck the company in 2002 exposed these youth to a strong discontinuity, leaving them with the prospect of having to find work on their own. This situation took the form of a second important micro-transition that further tested the potentially protective effect of the experience of success they had just been through.

Theoretical and methodological advantages derived from these conditions, which constitute what Bronfenbrenner (1979) called an “Experiment by Nature”. First, considering the position of vocational training in the Italian educational system, the transitional path of these youths gave us the opportunity to evaluate the impact of a positive learning chance offered at the mesosystem level and rarely considered in Italian educational research. Second, an intra-individual change perspective was valorised. Rather than compare different groups of people involved in different transitional paths in order to determine what makes at risk school-to-work transition more probable (e.g. social background, school failure, personal beliefs), here we aimed to focus on the possible areas of change for youths who had already been involved in early work-oriented at risk trajectories.

Previous publications were focused more on the first micro-transition, discussing in depth the quality of the successful learning experience, whereas here we took into consideration the second passage, analysing the transitional outcomes of these people one year after qualification.

### **Characteristics of the sample**

The sample of this study consists of 122 males from working class families, who earned the qualification of “specialised worker” in the metal-mechanic field in April 2002 at the vocational centred mentioned above, and who were involved in the two micro-transitions of interest to us. At the moment of qualification, 40% of the sample were 17, 40% 18, and 20% 19 years old (Average age=17.8; d.s.=.74). As mentioned above all these people dropped out of Italian regular high school as adolescents, enrolling in the two-year vocational training course when they were 15-17 years old.

### **Objective**

Our objective is to explore the transitional outcomes for these youths, at one year from the qualification, in relation to both *age of qualification* and the *experiences of failure and success in the learning paths undertaken*.

On the basis of the literature presented, we consider a positive outcome of a school-to-work transition not only the assumption of a working role vs. a state of unemployment, but also the quality of the role assumed in relation to the degree to which it favours self-realisation, educational growth or, on the contrary, it is the fruit of a negative compromise.

Regarding the age of qualification, 17-19 years old is an interesting age range because it involves the institutional and normative passage to the age of majority. In Italy, in fact, the age of legal adulthood is reached at 18. Minors can enter the world of work, but this requires companies to take greater responsibility and set more restrictions: the presence of a tutor and stricter health and safety regulations at work (attachment I of legislative decree n. 345/1999). Moreover, 18-19 years old is the “normative” age when a regular high school qualification is gained, making these subjects, in terms of age, comparable to those who continue their studies until the diploma.

With regard to the experiences of failure or success in the learning paths undertaken, we feel it is interesting to distinguish the prior experience in the schools within the institutional channel, from

the subsequent experience in vocational training, in order to investigate whether they contribute in a differential way to the transition outcomes.

## **Procedure**

A structured phone interview was used to gather data in April 2003, one year after the subjects had received the vocational qualification. The administration of this interview is part of the follow-up survey by the Piedmont Region on the outcomes of job placement of qualified youths within the vocational training system (Piedmont vocational training follow-up 2003). The interviews of the sample considered here were conducted by us directly and by our research collaborators.

Narrative material was also gathered on a sub-sample of seven subjects, who were interviewed sixteen and twenty-four months after earning the qualification. These youths were selected on the base of their own willingness to be interviewed<sup>3</sup>. These in-depth interviews were carried out according to the biographical procedure (Bonica and Cardano, 2008; Demaziere and Dubar, 1997; Bruner, 1994) by trained researchers and by part of the broader research group. However, the material from these interviews is used here only as examples to provide support for some of the interpretive lines.

## **Measures**

### ***Transitional outcomes***

#### *Status outcomes*

Data regarding occupational-educational status one year after the qualification has been organised and labelled as follows: a) people who decided to attend school again, labelled as Student Commitment; b) people who had been working for at least 6 months in April 2003, labelled as Worker Commitment; c) people who had changed one or more jobs (lasting less than 6 months each) without achieving a relatively stable position, labelled as Experimentation; d) people who had not found any occupation and who had not enrolled at any school, labelled as Lack of Commitment.

#### *Variables of the status quality*

We consider personal activation in the job search as an indicator of *agency*.

This is a dichotomizing variable derived from the direct question “Did you actively look for work after earning the qualification?”, which was followed by a description of the strategies used (area employment services, direct contact with companies, use of the informal network).

Those who used one or more strategies to look for work were considered “active”.

While the protective implications of the student commitment are quite clear (the widening and raising of aspirations connected to the return to school), the fact of having a stable job could be the expression of a satisfactory fit between personal aspirations, capability and contextual demands, or the result of a negative compromise that moved youths to accept the first job they found. We analyse the negative compromise, considering a coherence indicator between perceived continuity and actual continuity in terms of the qualification obtained (specialised worker) and the professional level assumed (specialised or qualified worker vs. unskilled worker).

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<sup>3</sup> The narrative material was studied systematically in other phases of the research, bringing to light different trajectories of transitions to work. The subjects considered are all male. Two of them received their professional qualification at age 17, two at age 18, and three at age 19. Using a model to interpret the outcomes of transition inspired by the life-span perspective, several different types of outcomes were identified as a result of adding or draining resources (Hendry & Kloep, 2002): development, stagnation, and decay. The excerpts included to support the discussion of our results were drawn from interviews with: Simone (pseudonym), 19 years old, example of development outcome based on a competent self; Ivan (pseudonym), 19 years old, example of stagnation outcome based on the definition of a competent self; Mario, (pseudonym), 19 years old, example of stagnation outcome based on negative compromise; Luca (pseudonym), 17 years old, at risk for a decay outcome; Andrea, (pseudonym), 17 years old, who react to a stagnation period by actively facing a change (Sappa, 2005; Bonica, Sappa, 2008).

Perceived continuity was investigated through the question: “Do you believe the work you perform is adequate for the qualification obtained?” (yes/no).

Actual continuity was inferred from the professional level the subjects stated they had been hired at. The coherence index was only applied for subjects hired as labourers, given the difficulty of determining an effective correspondence for other professional sectors. Those subjects who declared a perceived but not actual continuity are considered at risk of negative compromise.

### ***Independent variables: age, success in the school path, success in vocational training***

#### *Age*

As defined below the age of qualification ranged from 17 to 19. The overall average was 17.8 (s.d.=.75) and the median was 18.

#### *Success in the school path*

Success in the school path refers to the learning paths preceding vocational training. Here we considered the mark earned on the last qualification. For all subjects this corresponded to the middle school diploma, which in the Italian school system is acquired upon completion of the 8th grade.

We consider as index of success the evaluation obtained at the end of this school, which ranged between 6 (sufficient) to 10 (excellent). The overall average was 6.69 (s.d.=1.03) and the median was 6.

#### *Success in Vocational Training*

Success in vocational training was evaluated by considering the mark on the qualification obtained in 2002. The evaluations ranged from 60 to 100. The overall average was 77.59 (s.d. = 7.05) and the median was 77.

### **Analyses**

Association between status outcomes (Student Commitment, Worker Commitment, Experimentation, and Lack of Commitment) and agency (personal activation in job research) was first analysed using a  $\chi^2$ -test (applying the Monte Carlo exact test). Binary Logistic Regressions applying enter procedure were then performed to assess whether age, school achievement and vocational training achievement could predict status outcomes and status quality (negative compromise vs positive coherence). Data were analysed using SPSS for Windows (version 12.0) statistical software.

## **RESULTS**

### **Transitional outcomes**

One year after receiving the skilled worker qualification, 8.2% of subjects had returned to school (Student Commitment, N=10), 63.1% had found a relatively stable position in the job market (Worker Commitment, N=77), 7.4% had changed jobs several times without achieving stability (Experimentation, N=9), and 21.3% had not managed either to find any occupation or to return to school (Lack of Commitment, N=26).

With regard to the job search process, 105 participants out of 122 claimed to have been actively involved. This behaviour, which denotes agency, is significantly associated with the worker commitment and experimentation statuses, but also with the lack of commitment status (table1), while young people who returned to school appeared not to have been actively searching for a job.



**Table 1**

Cross-table and Chi-Square analysis occupational status \* agency

Agency	Status outcomes				Total
	Student commitment	Worker commitment	Lack of commitment	Experimentation	
Personal activation in job research	3 30%	71 92.2%	24 92.3%	7 77.8%	105 82.3%
No activation	7 70%	6 7.6%	2 7.7%	2 22.2%	17 17.7%
Total	10 100%	77 100%	26 100%	9 100%	122 100%

*Note:*  $\chi^2 = 29.993$ ;  $df = 3$ ; Sig. Monte Carlo < .001 (two-tailed tests).

Turning to the effective and perceived continuity between the level of qualification obtained and the professional level achieved, we found that 37% of subjects feel that their position is adequate (45 subjects). However, only 31% of these had been hired as qualified or specialised workers, while 69% were unskilled workers and thus in a condition of potential negative compromise.

### **Relationships between outcomes and dependent variables**

Binary logistic regressions were used to analyse whether age, school achievement and vocational training achievement could predict the status outcomes (Table2).

The results show interesting associational tendencies that specifically regard the transitional outcomes of Student Commitment, Worker Commitment and Experimentation, while the status of Lack of Commitment did not present any relevant association. The probability of having a Student Commitment (vs. all other statuses) depended both on age and school success. The older these youths were, the less probable it was that they had returned to school. Moreover, the higher their final mark in middle school, the less probable it was that they had returned to school, but this relationship should be considered also as a tendency ( $p=.095$ ). Thus, after one year from the qualification, the probability of being engaged in a further school trajectory was higher for the youngest and for those with more critical school experiences. This condition did not depend, instead, on the marks obtained in the vocational training.

The probability of having a “worker commitment” (vs. all other statuses) was greater for people who obtained the vocational qualification with higher marks. This condition did not appear to be age-related and did not depend on previous school success.

The probability of changing jobs several times without achieving a relatively stable position, Experimentation (vs. all other statuses) was higher for the older subjects, while no relation was found between this status and school or vocational success.

**Table 2**  
Adjusted Odds of Status outcomes

Predictor variable	Student commitment vs. all other status					Worker commitment vs. all other status					Experimentation vs. all other status				
	$\beta$	SE	OR	p	95% IC	$\beta$	SE	OR	p	95% IC	$\beta$	SE	OR	p	95% IC
Age (range 17-19)	-1.756	.695	.173	.012	(0.04-0.67)	.373	.272	1.451	.170	(0.85-2.47)	1.173	.526	3.231	.026	(1.15-9.06)
School achievement (range 6-10)	-.974	.583	.378	.095	(0.12-1.18)	-.038	.192	.962	.841	(0.66-1.40)	-.029	.364	.971	.936	(0.48-1.98)
Vocational achievement (range 60-100)	-.070	.047	.933	.139	(0.85-1.02)	.056	.027	1.057	.042	(1.66-1.85)	1.225	.853	3.404	.151	(0.64-18.12)
Negelkerke R Square															
N	118					118					118				

*Note:*  
SE = standard error  
OR = odds ratio, Exp ( $\beta$ )  
p= two-tailed tests  
95% IC= OR 95% Confidence Interval

A further binary regressive logistic analysis was applied in order to analyse the association among the independent variables and the status quality (negative compromise vs positive coherence).

**Table. 3**  
Adjusted Odds of Status quality

Predictor variable	Negative compromise vs Positive coherence				
	$\beta$	SE	OR	p	95% IC
<b>Age</b> (range 17-19)	-1.220	.526	.295	.021	(0.11-0.83)
<b>School achievement</b> (range 6-10)	.261	.369	1.299	.475	(0.63-2.68)
<b>Vocational achievement</b> (range 60-100)	-.038	.060	.521	.962	(0.86-1.08)
Negelkerke R Square			.249		
N			45		

*Note:*

SE = standard error

OR = odds ratio, Exp ( $\beta$ )

p= two-tailed tests

95% IC= OR 95% Confidence Interval

As we can observe in Table 3 the probability of being in a position of compromise was greater for younger people whereas no association was identified between this status and school or vocational success.

## DISCUSSION

### General outcomes

Our findings confirm, first of all, the multi-faceted nature of an early transition to work. The outcomes reported in this study appear varied and their implications with regard to risk and protection are traceable to individual factors, whether developmental (e.g. age) or experiential (e.g. scholastic-training success), which must be interpreted in light of broader contextual opportunities and constraints.

On the whole we see that the young people in our survey have taken an active approach to the transitional challenge they faced, notwithstanding the discontinuity generated by the labour market crisis. Nearly all of the subjects, in fact, were personally active in seeking work and many of them have successfully undertaken a relatively stable work or educational commitment.

The percentage of those who have found work corresponds to the employment rate for a representative sample of 15- to 18-year-olds who, in the same region of Italy, obtained a professional qualification in 2001, the year preceding the one that we considered (Piemonte Lavoro, 2005). While on one hand this result would seem to indicate that our sample is in line with the broader situation in this region, on the other hand it must be remembered that the young people

involved in our study were exposed to severe discontinuity linked to the crisis in the metal-mechanic sector and, more specifically, in the company promoting the course. In fact, only 16.5% of our group found work through the professional training agency, as opposed to 80% of the reference sample. Hence our subjects seem to have been capable of meeting the challenge of finding work despite having to act with greater autonomy. However some risk trajectories do emerge. Among the young people who have found work, we must consider the large percentage who are in a position of potential compromise. Moreover, the proportion of young people who have instead resumed their studies appears to be lower than the figure found by the Region's survey (7.9% compared to 26% of the representative sample). This data is not consistent with the results of the previous research phase, which showed 64% of subjects motivated to return to school and 15% who had already begun (Bonica, 2007; Bonica and Sappa, 2006). However, we note that the majority of the subjects involved in a student commitment had not actively searched for a job. Thus we can hypothesise that the choice to return to school, even if followed by only a minority of the sample, was part of a clear project developed during the vocational training and just subsequent to it. The personal activation present in the job search characterises the other statuses as well. On one hand, this data leads us to interpret frequent job changes (experimentation) as the fruit of active choice processes. On the other hand, it reveals that even those who fail to assume any commitment (lack of commitment) appear active on the whole. While risk margins remain in terms of potential diffusion and avoidance, this condition does not appear to be the result of a totally passive attitude. At any rate, the risk or protective connotation of this position appears, even more than the others, to be assessable only in a wider temporal perspective which we have not investigated here.

### **The potentially protective role of successful learning experiences**

Turning to the variables that can affect outcomes, we find first of all a positive effect of success in the vocational training path in leading to work placement (Worker Commitment). The positive learning experience seems to have represented an educational resource, at least for some of these young people. Moreover, it is interesting to observe how the positive effect of success in vocational training appears independent of previous scholastic outcomes. This result supports a view of these trajectories, potentially at risk, as openings to continuous redefinition of self based on opportunities encountered. The positive continuity between the learning experience of the training course and entry in the labour market is confirmed by the testimony of several of the young people interviewed. The criteria used by the subjects to evaluate their new employment experiences can be traced to various aspects of the recently completed learning experience. The greater degree of satisfaction is narrated as recognition that the skills acquired guaranteed good continuity between training and employment.

#### **Extract 1**

*When I started working in this factory...I really knew a lot...the director and the foreman were surprised too. (They said) "You attended a really good school"...and in fact I can see it too... Now, after one and a half years, I feel like I'm in control of my life...*

*School laid the foundations and now, with work, I'm laying the bricks.*  
(Simone, 19 years old when qualification received)

#### **Extract 2**

*The first days they already told me "you're hired - right away!"*

#### **Why is that?**

*[...] Because, like, I knew things, whereas usually if you take young people that go there, they don't know anything.*

*Because he (the employer) saw my qualification and he said, "So you know this stuff, don't you?" I said yes, and he said, "Well come and show me." I went to work and he said, "Come back on Monday, you're hired."*  
(Ivan, 19 years old when qualification received)

As extracts 1 and 2 illustrate, there is social recognition (e.g. *the director and the foreman*) as well as individual recognition (e.g. *I can see it too*) that support the sense of agency, autonomy,

responsibility and positive attitudes to planning that are recognised in the literature as being the basis for a rewarding and protective job in terms of personal well-being (Nurmi et al., 2002; Clausen, 1991; Bandura, 1995; Cross and Markus, 1994; Schoon et al., 2006)

Thus this sense of satisfaction appears to be strongly linked to the possibility of seeing oneself as equipped with a body of skills that are effectively recognised in the job market, which these young people feel they have acquired through the vocational training process.

A further positive effect of vocational training may regard the return to school. We have in fact seen how the probability of re-investing in school (Student Commitment) is higher for those who had shown greater weakness in scholastic careers preceding vocational training. Even if this effect should be considered only as a tendency, we consider it quite interesting. For these young people, who could be considered as being most at risk initially, the experience of success seems to have activated a process of broadening of aspirations and perceived educational opportunity. In developmental terms, it may represent an important turning point because of the possibility it offers to escape from a risk trajectory. Although the absence of a control sample makes it impossible to scientifically evaluate the effect of the training experience on this process, we can make assumptions based on the results of previous research on the same sample. We have, in fact, observed a process of reconciliation with learning and with the perception of being able to cope with the challenge posed by learning activities (Bonica, 2005; Bonica and Sappa, 2006), which could quite conceivably have led to a reassessment of the possibility of returning to previously abandoned scholastic careers. Moreover, the fact that those choosing to return to school declared that they hadn't actively looked for work, indicates that this decision matured during vocational training and was immediately put into action as an alternative to employment. This data is consistent with the findings of authors regarding the protective role that positive learning experiences can assume even within risk trajectories.

However, while all that we have discussed until this point offers a positive picture of transition outcomes, we must also examine the low percentage of subjects that go back to school. This data should be interpreted partly in light of specific social and institutional constraints. It must be remembered that in the Italian public education system it is not easy to change from one type of school to another, and this constraint is even stronger for vocational training that is not recognised by state institutions. For these young people, therefore, returning to school means going back to the first year of high school, where most of the students are 15 years old. The lower probability that the older had returned to school could support the relevance of these contextual constraints. In some of their narrative accounts, in fact, there were interesting comments about feeling "in time" to face job uncertainty, but "too late" to go back to school. An example of this is the account of Mario, a young man hired as an unskilled worker.

#### **Extract 3**

*I've always worked in the electronics field but I only do manual labour[...] here the work is at the level of an unskilled worker who just puts the components together and moves his hands like playing with Lego.*

*[...]*

*I'm satisfied [...] I'm quite sure they'll hire me permanently [...]*

*Nowadays job uncertainty is a new kind of slavery... I'm 19 years old and that's good... but somebody with a family? I'm 19 years old and, later perhaps they'll hire you.*

*(Mario, 19 years old when qualification received)*

#### **Extract 4**

*It's a question of image (to get a university degree) because it's one thing to say, "Good morning, I'm a doctor (Italian title for persons with a degree)" and another to say, "Good morning I'm Mario and I'm a labourer"... because I see how society works... you need to be "somebody", you need to become "somebody".*

#### **Are you thinking of returning to school?**

*No, now I can't... If I could go back, perhaps I would work harder in school, but now... I would have to attend for 5 years and I would be more than 30 years old (when I got my high school qualification).*

*(Mario, 19 years old when qualification received)*

Mario wants to face the problem of job uncertainty “in time”; in other words he feels that at his age he can afford to invest a few years in work that may not become permanent. To do this he thinks it is necessary to work for a long time in the same place on short-term contracts, hoping every year that the contract will be renewed and showing that he is willing to accept the work constraints. At the same time, Mario seems to feel a sort of regret that he did not continue his studies and he perceives returning to school as impossible. The choice to enter the labour market is thus perceived not only as irreversible, but also as completely alternative to a further school path. All the interviewees, independently of the degree of their actual personal satisfaction, described poor opportunities of “learning on the job”, confirming the critical position of Italy regarding a lifelong learning perspective: compared to EU averages, Italy has low levels of training participation (only 6.1 % of Italians were involved in post-academic work training in 2006).

Returning to Mario’s statement, it is also interesting to note how he articulates an “ideal” vision of himself as “educated” and contrasts it to an actual condition of lower prestige, defining an experience very similar to the one theorised by Dumora (1990) and Dubar (1992) as a negative compromise.

The feeling that it is too late to go back to school also assumes a fundamental role in defining the youngest boys’ condition of compromise, which was found to be the most frequent. The return to school is seen, also by some of the 17-yearolds, as “starting all over again” with little chance of capitalising on what had been accomplished up until that point. The price to be paid for this re-investment in education seems too high, a sentiment confirmed by the narratives, such as the following extract:

**Extract 5**

*I can't go back to school now that I'm almost 18 years old. ... I would have to do 4 years... by now I'm finished with school.*

(Luca, 17 years old when qualification received)

All of this data points to the protective role represented by the opportunity to acquire skills that are in demand on the job market, especially in cases of early school-to-work transitions. Experiencing self-realisation in work appears to be possible even in these trajectories, provided the subject can count on his abilities being recognised. At an operational level, this means that a synergy must be created between skills needed in the labour market and educational curricula. If these conditions are not satisfied, the risks inherent in early school-to-work transition seem to increase with the perceived irreversibility of the transition. As has been observed in comparative research on the German and English systems (Evans and Heinz, 1994), some protection would be afforded by continuing training paths that respond more flexibly to changes in the job market.

### **The critical position of the minor**

As introduced above, the position of the youngest subjects in our sample who are experiencing the school-to-work transition appears rather complex. On one hand they are more likely to return to school; on the other hand those who opt for work have a higher risk of negative compromise. The fragile position of the youngest can be interpreted in two ways. From an individualistic and developmental standpoint, we can speculate that these young people feel a greater need for experimentation and exploration, which is typical in adolescence. It is therefore possible that they feel less ready to take on a work commitment, and this could also be compatible with their greater orientation towards returning to school. At the same time, we must consider their position as minors, which has two implications. In Italy it is possible to hire a minor, but the employer has greater responsibilities towards the employee and is subject to a series of contractual obligations. Moreover, in terms of timing, these subjects are in a more obvious condition of precocity, as the normal age for leaving school is 18-19 years.

The qualitative material shows how these two factors should be considered in relation to each other.

The 17-year-olds seem to suffer more from the poor opportunity to learn on the job. Their narratives express, in fact, a real *need to learn*, which is articulated differently by the various subjects but rarely recognised in any work context. In the following extracts we see two examples of this: one is a boy seeking the opportunity to learn through the work itself, and the other is a boy contemplating the possibility of combining school and work.

**Extract 6**

*I went to work only a day and a half, then I quit... I had not been working for one and a half years so I needed to start from the beginning... instead he (the employer) arrived and asked me to work immediately ...*  
(a colleague whom I asked for help told me) *“If they hired you, it’s because you can do the job and you know how to work ... so you should just go there and do your work”* (without any help)  
(Luca, 17 years old when qualification received)

**Extract 7**

*I said to myself, “It’s up to me... if I want to improve myself I can” and I enrolled in school... but my employer told me, “I need someone who works 8 hours, so you can go to school or come here,” because, he said, “You made a choice .. you came to work.. why do you want to go to school now?”*  
(Andrea, 17 years old when qualification received)

In both extracts, the need for further learning seems to be ignored or dismissed in the work context. Employers generally see a worker as someone who applies skills he should have already learned. Moreover, where there is a plan for self-improvement outside of the job, school and work are defined as incompatible, the choice to become a worker is considered as irreversible, and the desire to combine study and work is seen as absurd or incongruous. Thus the job market is risky and unacceptable for these young people, because it does not allow opportunities for improving their skills, since this function is attributed exclusively to school. This argument finds support among those authors who see an early school-to-work transition as risky, inasmuch as it restricts the space for exploration and experimentation of young people who already have a more limited scholastic experience. However, the risk could be attenuated if work contexts would adopt, at a practical level, the perspective of lifelong learning, recognised by the literature as essential to meet the demands of today’s labour market.

Another problem is that the status of minors is often simply not recognised. In the following extract, for example, the same boy talks about how he was asked to drive a car, which in Italy is illegal before the age of 18.

**Extract 8**

*So then I started to move the cars. (argumentative tone)*  
*So I, who didn’t have a driving license, who couldn’t really drive because I’d never driven before...what happens if I damage a car? Who pays for the damage, you or me?*  
(Luca, 17 years old when qualification received)

These accounts show that early school-to-work transitions encounter a job market which doesn’t allow room for this transition to be legitimised. The real risk is that adolescents entering the job market will be treated like true adults. Consequently, early transition becomes dangerous not in and of itself, but rather because its specific implications are not recognised. Moreover the risk is that minors resign themselves more quickly to accepting a negative compromise, perceiving themselves as progressively weaker and more inadequate. Although the older youths were not completely excluded from this risk, our findings suggested a higher readiness to change in them: one year after the qualification they had, in fact, more probability of being in the status of Experimentation, while the youngest ones, if not at school, were more likely to be in a negative compromise condition.

## CONCLUSION

While the aim of the present study is mainly exploratory, it enables us to observe several dynamics at work between developmental and experiential factors that define conditions of risk or protection during early school-to-work transitions.

The group of young people involved in our study show an active attitude to the challenge of transition to work, and many of them assume relatively stable work or educational commitments. The narratives also demonstrate that being a labourer – an occupation that does not require a large investment of time in school – is not inconsistent with a positive sense of realisation founded on a personal and social perception of competence. In addition, the possibility of experiencing learning success can support a widening in educational aspirations, favouring the subjects' return to paths that had been abandoned. It appears to be a question of "allowing oneself" new opportunities, and it is interesting to note how this mainly involves those who had previously experienced the least success. Nevertheless, our findings highlight various risk margins, above all with regard to conditions of compromise.

The risk and protection factors observed and discussed lead us to stress the need for greater flexibility between school and work, which must be achieved, at least in Italy, above all at institutional level (Resnick, 1987; Pontecorvo et al., 1995; Bonica 2007). The possibility to create a professional commitment founded on competence depends on the opportunity for successful experiences in learning that can be used and recognised in the work context as well. From the subjective standpoint, there must be recognition of the compatibility between early work transition and creation of a positive self-image. From the institutional standpoint, it is necessary to activate social policies favouring not only forms of quality vocational learning for young people leaving school early, but also ways of integrating school and work that facilitate re-entry in the scholastic circuit. This flexibility is very important in the present labour market, which requires everyone, regardless of when they start working, to show greater willingness to come to terms with job uncertainty, and capacity to integrate work commitments with openness towards new learning and exploration.

This flexibility appears even more important for minors preparing to enter the job market, who risk being trapped in a sort of limbo in which they feel that it is too late for school but too early for work.

The critical role of scholastic failure, already recognised in the literature, confirms the need for further study of these phenomena also outside of the specific contexts in which failure took place. Following school drop-outs in an alternative learning path enabled us to observe these young people in a context that values and develops their potential. This perspective can offer an important contribution to the study of scholastic failure, leading to a better understanding of how to combat the school drop-out phenomenon.

Finally, we are aware of the limits of this study; the small size of our sample and the fact that they are all male does not allow us to generalise from our findings. Moreover, the R-square values found suggest the presence of other determining factors not considered here. In particular we believe that it would have been useful to enrich the analyses with other variables, addressing not only outcomes but also the personal experiences linked to learning, as in some of our previous studies (Sappa, 2005; Bonica, 2005, Bonica e Sappa, 2008). Future analyses may involve a more systematic integration between narrative and quantitative analyses, and a widening of the sample to the female population to investigate gender differences.



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