PREVENTION OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

Italian National Report

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PREVENTION OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

REPORT ON THE NATIONAL SITUATION

ITALY

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Abstract

This report starts with an introduction to the Italian education system.
The second chapter identifies the main national trends as far as early school leaving is concerned. The percentage of Italian students who did not complete their five year upper education courses was 11,4 in 2004/5 (source Ministry of Education).
The third chapter takes into account the reasons and causes for leaving education in Italy. The first factor is linked to economic development. Home environment is considered as the second risk factor. The third factor playing a role in the high dropout rate is the perception of the crisis of the school which is amplified by the media. There is also a general agreement that one of the main causes of early school leaving originates in the "malfunctions, stickiness, hostile factors" that operate inside the school system. There are also personal factors to be taken into account such as lack of motivation, low self-esteem, difficulties in relationships with peers etc.
The fourth and the fifth chapters provide an overview of the main national bodies in charge and policies implemented to reduce the dropout rate.
The sixth chapter describes the strategies developed at national and local level to prevent early school leaving. Many of them are integrated projects, introduced with the 2003 agreement between Regions and the Ministry of Education, others have been financed by ESF, project period 2000 - 2006, on the specific measure C2, devoted to prevent early school leaving. Successful strategies adopted are based on: active listening, small group work, problem solving, practical activities, cooperative learning etc. Actions carried out with the counsellors from Job Centres also appeared to be quite significant.
The seventh chapter identified examples of training events carried out to help teachers to prevent students from dropping out.
The eight chapter identifies best examples of strategies to prevent early school leaving and the ninth chapter provides description of case studies.
The final part of this report provides recommendations for all the actors involved in early school leaving.

1. Introduction to the national situation

Article 34 of our 1948 Constitution says that school is open to everybody and 8 years of school are compulsory and free. In recent years we have had a gradual extension of compulsory education in spite of the many changes due to the of policies of different governments until the Financial Act 2007 (Act 296/2006) made school attendance compulsory for 10 years and access to work postponed to 16 years of age. Students are expected to get a qualification by 18. The same law introduced measures to reduce dropout rates inviting the Ministry of Education and the Regional Authorities to work together to reform and integrate curricula in order to allow students to obtain successful results. The Act encouraged the creation of individualized curricula to prevent early school leaving.

In the Italian system of education the state has the exclusive legislative power over general rules while the Regions had it on vocational education and training until a Constitutional Act in 2001 made them acquire responsibility for planning the whole regional school system, including Adults' education and Lifelong Learning. They should take into account the needs of local, social, economic situations, promote and run projects of integration between state school and regional vocational agencies curricula. In fact for young people older than 16 a parallel system of vocational education is run by the Regions with a great deal of autonomy and large differences from one region to another. According to the different local needs the courses vary in contents and hours and the Regions entrust them to accredited educational agencies which can be directly controlled by the Regions or connected with Trade Unions, Employers' Associations or even private ones. At the end of the courses students are provided with vocational training certificates on the basis of professional qualifications as defined by each Regions.

The state system consists of
5 year primary school - ISCED 1 (from 6 to 11 years of age)
3 year lower secondary school – (from 11 to 14 years of age)
2 year upper secondary school – ISCED 2
3 year upper secondary school – ISCED 3

The upper level is made up by general education schools. (Licei) characterized by mainly theoretical learning contents preparing students to University courses and by Technical and Vocational Institutes aiming at offering a good preparation to work. Actually the curricula of the latter have been gradually modified in order to enhance academic subjects and contents thus diminishing the differences between general and vocational education.
At the moment we are writing the first two years of the upper secondary education represent the initial years of each different kind of school, so the students must make their choice at a very early age among five "Licei", classical, scientific, linguistic, socio-pedagogical and artistic and a great many kinds of Technical and Vocational Institutes which range from the most common "Business and Accountancy" to the "Nautical" ones.
The system is inflexible and highly fragmented at the same time For students who want to change their school after the first year, it is very difficult to pass to another kind of school even if the system allows it.
School hours range from 26 hours per week (33 teaching weeks) in general upper education to 36 hours in vocational education and the minimum number of subjects per class is ten.
Students' assessment takes place twice a year and progress is expressed using a decimal score system with positive marks from 6 to 10. Assessment criteria are defined in the yearly educational planning (POF) of each school but national standards of competences for each level have recently been introduced by the Ministry of Education. To be promoted to higher classes students must obtain an assessment of 6 out of 10 in each subject but promotion can be "suspended", if failing in one or more subjects is not serious and does not limit global education. In this case students should be offered extra support activities "to pay their debts", that is to be able to reach a positive assessment and be admitted to the next year.
At the end of the upper secondary education students take their final examination (esame di stato). The examination board is made up of external and internal members which assess all the tests, even the two written ones, coming directly from the Ministry of Education, are not centrally examined. The exam has a multidisciplinary approach and takes into account the student's career in a system of credits. A final mark in hundredths is assigned to each student and all students can attend any University course after passing the final examination. In 2007 the percentage of students who passed their exams in general education is 99% and in technical and vocational education 96,3%.
Private schools are part of the national education system provided they have obtained legal recognition and equality once they have met the standards required.
Old methodological approaches are still widely adopted though schools have been provided with autonomy, which has promoted a high number of experimental projects, The most interesting innovations are to be found in Technical and Vocational Institutes which had to face problems and challenges of more difficult social and cultural situations.

2. Main national trends

Lisbon Conference identified the reduction in dropout raytes as one of the 5 targets to be achieved by 2010. In the indicator 6.1 (level of youth participation in education) *early school leavers* are defined as the *"proportion of young people (students from 18 to 24 years of age) who have achieved a qualification at most ISCED2 and do not participate in any education / training activities "*.
Students in Italian schools reach the International Standard Classification of Education 2 at the end of the second year of the upper secondary schools.

In calculating the drop out rate as per the Lisbon indicator we have a problem. Italian data on drop out rates come only from the Ministry of Education [1], thus referring to state schools without taking into account the young people who get their qualifications in the system of regional vocational courses and should actually be included in the figures.

In 2005 the average dropout rate of the 25 countries of the European Union was 14.9 % (Source Eurostat, years 2000-2005). Finland had the best results with 8.7% and Portugal the worst ones with 38.6%.Italy was far above the average with 21.9% while British, German and Greek rates were in a much better position, being respectively 14%, 12.1% and 13.3%.

The percentage of students who did not complete their five year upper education courses was 11,4 in 2004/5 (source Ministry of Education). In first classes we have 18,1 % failures which mark the passage from lower to upper education when students are not always able to choose the most suitable kind of school among the many different possibilities.

Another reasons why a high percentage of students are leaving at the beginning of their upper education courses may come from the frequent changes in legislation on compulsory education.
In January 1999 the first year of the upper secondary school became compulsory (Act No 9/99). In May of the same year Act No 144/99, art. 68 made school or vocational training attendance obligatory up to 18 years of age.
Then the government changed and the law was abrogated and substituted in 2003 with a new one (ACT 53/03) which brought back compulsory school attendance to 8 years but confirmed the right to attend school or vocational training for 12 years and get a qualification by 18 years of age.
Again the government changed and with the Bill 76/2005 and the Financial Act 2007 (Act 296/2006) made school attendance compulsory for 10 years. Such continuous changes have not helped parents and students to feel the beginning of upper education as obligatory.
Other interesting figures are those related to students who have been held back to repeat their classes, which is a sign of potential early leaving as nearly half the students who fail are not repeating their classes. The percentage of all upper education is 6.9% which compares with 8.6% for Technical Institutes and 10,1% for Vocational Institutes.

The dropout rates per region, as calculated by the Italian Institute of Statistics in 2006, show that Campania (25%), Apulia (27.7%), Sardinia (29.7%) and Sicily (30.4%) are well above national 20.6% while such regions as Basilicata(12.6%), Lazio (13.6), Tuscany (13.7) are better than the European average.

Again the picture is not complete as data from the regional systems of vocational training courses are lacking, while they should mark much better performances for such regions as Piedmont, Veneto, Lombardy, Emilia where the systems are widely spread and successful.

The graph shows the levels of early school leaving in the first year of upper education per region. The high level indicates more than 3%, the medium one for rates between 1,5% and 3% and the low one for figures under 1.5%

If we examine early school leaving in different kinds of schools we see that figures show great differences between general education and technical and vocational ones where the drop out rates are double and three times as much respectively.

	TOTAL	FIRST YEAR
ITALY	3.7	6.0
LICEI - CLASSICAL, SCIENTIFIC, LINGUISTIC UPPER EDUCATION	1.1	1.6
LICEI - SOCIO-PSYCHO-PEDAGOGICAL UPPER EDUCATION	2.4	4.4
TECHNICAL INSTITUTES	4.2	6.5
VOCATIONAL INSTITUTES	7.2	11.6
ARTS INSTITUTES	4.2	6.8

(Data processing from Ministry of Education, year 2004/5.)

Types of dropout rates (age, gender, ethnicity, social situations)
We see in the table above that the first year of upper education, compared with the total in each five year course, shows an higher level of drop out rates in any school. The problem is particularly serious in the first year of Vocational Institutes with 11.6% drop out rate which compares with an irrelevant 1.6% in general education schools (Licei).

The following table compares how many students out of one hundred reach the fifth course to sit for their final examination (esame di stato) and shows how girls have better performances than boys.

	BOYS	GIRLS
ITALY	67.1	78.1
LICEI - CLASSICAL, SCIENTIFIC, LINGUISTIC UPPER EDUCATION	84.7	86.3
LICEI - SOCIO-PSYCHO-PEDAGOGICAL UPPER EDUCATION	87.5	81.5
TECHNICAL INSTITUTES	74.5	87.6
VOCATIONAL INSTITUTES	41.5	56.5
ARTS INSTITUTES	56.7	66.0

(Data processing from Ministry of Education, year 2004/5.)

The particularly bad figures for Vocational Institutes may derive from their two tier system, which provides the students with a first qualification at the end of the third year which may mark the transition from school to work, as well as from the concentration of students going through difficult, unpleasant conditions and discomfort.
The number of students who are not Italian citizens is increasing progressively, in school year 2004/5 it amounted to 4% of the total number of attending students. Failures for non-Italian citizens reach 28% while the unsuccessful Italian ones are 13.6%. In Vocational Institutes, where their attendance is most probable, only 2 students out of 3 have not experienced failures.

The research done by the 7th Parliamentary Commission in 2000 [2] considered the social, economic background as the main cause of high dropout rates. Students from underdeveloped areas in the South, from the large islands, and from poor, deprived, urban areas appeared as the most likely to drop out of school.
In a country where it's extremely difficult to move up the ladder to better jobs, poor families do not believe in education and offer few opportunities, and help if needed, to their youth.

The Italian dropout rate decreased from 25.3% in 2000 to 21.9% in 2005 , which is 3% in five years. Though in 2006 we saw a further, better decrease to 20.6%, which represents a yearly 1.3% the 10% Lisbon target by 2010 still appears very far.

3. Main reasons and causes for leaving education

A large number of Italian studies and researches, which are confirmed by the interviews to policy makers, indicate that students fail to complete high school owing to such external, internal or personal causes as the ones we briefly summarize:

External causes
 The first factor to be examined is how much early school leaving may be linked to economic development. In such a country as Italy, characterized by the divide between highly industrialized and underdeveloped areas, the worst dropout rates come from regions with few industries and a low standard of living (mainly the Southern regions and the large islands) or from the deprived metropolitan districts of rich regions where immigrant communities are concentrated [1].

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Home environment is considered as the second risk factor. In Italy the dynamics of economic, social change are more static than in the rest of Europe. In poor families the value of education is underestimated and the access to information and educational events is limited. In such environments school is no longer felt as an instrument of social change and its prestige is even lower than in the general public, whose opinions they reflect.

The third factor playing a role in the high dropout rate is the perception of the crisis of the school which is amplified by the media. For a decade school, in spite of all policy makers' speeches, has neither been a political priority nor a question to be solved both at national and regional level. Images and articles in the media have made it appear as a run-down service, which has not helped initiatives to prevent early school leaving and has reinforced poor families' attitudes.

While the first and the second causes need a long process to be stopped, solutions to the third one could be found by policy makers at national and regional levels.

Internal causes
There is general agreement that one of the main causes of early school leaving originates in the "malfunctions, stickiness, hostile factors" that operate inside the school system (Source: 7th Parliamentary Commission, 2000) [2].

In Italy failures at school are much more widespread than in the rest of Europe and they start in the first two years of upper secondary schools with absenteeism and repeating classes, both signs of potential school leaving. Many students at risk find the help they need inside their families or their communities, which provide them with initiatives and instruments aiming at keeping them at school [3]. Others who cannot take advantage of such supportive activities, and that is the case of many young people attending Vocational Institutes, soon become marginal students, social misfits until they drop out of school and enter a world of hardships, discomforts and black economy. All that happens in the most delicate period of their lives, the first two years of upper secondary education, which corresponds to full adolescence, from 14 to 16 years of age.

Lower secondary education has a very low dropout rate, but a student's maladjustment has its roots there. Upper education schools take responsibility for these youngsters but have to cope with such difficult situations as weak leadership, limited by institutional ties (teaching body), conditioned in the use of human resources by contractual obligations and by the frequent, yearly transfers of too many teachers, widespread shortage of facilities (buildings, laboratories, equipment),organizational and financial problems,consolidated tradition to use identical methodological tools with students whose needs are different, inflexible curricula which do not leave much room for new guidance and change, teachers' cultural approach based on traditional, academic, bookish models, far from the youngsters' everyday experiences and insisting on the enhancement of humanities rather than science and technology, teaching approaches centred on knowledge which ignore "problem solving" techniques and competence learning, follow top-down, deductive methods, are unable to transfer passion for learning and are often combined with bureaucratic assessments, which offer the students neither education nor guidance, lack of or poor relationship competence of teachers, who have never been trained, let alone assessed, and consequently experience problems in their relations with difficult students and families, weak and limited co-operation with regional vocational training agencies and Job Centres as well as with community organizations and professionals who could offer the youngsters psychological help and guidance to be successful in their learning activities.

The above weaknesses are generally recognised as such and have attracted the attention of national and regional policy makers, who have issued administrative regulations and important laws in order to assist the new 10 year compulsory education. For a decade policies to prevent early school leaving have been planned and have recently been put into action with a more systematic approach. Though good regulations and

guidelines have been drawn up, governance of the process has been weak and we do not have a general plan providing teachers with training in new teaching methods.

If many regions show positive results in reducing dropout rates, that has happened because Regions and local institutions together with the schools, which are autonomous and sometimes aware of the needs of the local communities, have promoted successful initiatives. Yet, at the core of the majority of Italian schools we find opposition to accept and adopt the lines of new policies.

Personal causes

A student exposed to the danger of dropping out of school may easily come from weaker social, cultural environments, as it is confirmed in all researches. His/her difficulties depend on such closely intertwined causes as

- lack of motivation (he/she is no longer able to make up for the loss of interest in learning or working),
- unwillingness to take responsibilities which are felt as too hard to cope with,
- lack of models and ethic values, often together with a tendency to consider personal impulses as uncontrollable.
- Other personality factors are linked to the above causes, which are common among youngsters, and add to the risk:
- low self-esteem,
- feeling unsuited for the required tasks,
- self-pity,
- difficulties in relationships with school friends and even more with adults,
- behaviours unsuited to the situation.

It is of common knowledge that at the age when the risk of early school leaving is at its highest level (14–16), all youngsters experience a separation process from parents to form their own identity and look for adults to replace them, and fill the void left in their pursuit of autonomy. Trainers, teachers, employers, though often unaware, play an essential role in their personal growth. Anyone whose job involves contacts with teenagers should be trained in order to be fully conscious that he/she is expected to offer helpful, supportive relations. On the other hand Italian researches insist on the difficulties of teacher/students relations (both in state school and in regional vocational training courses) but highlight their importance as an essential function, which cannot be effective if it is carried out in a voluntary, spontaneous , individualized way [3]. Italian teachers, as a matter of fact , have to cope with these problems without being trained to tackle them, as they have been chosen on the exclusive basis of their knowledge of the subjects they will teach.

It is not surprising, after all, that many students at risk, particularly the weakest ones, unable to defend themselves, may join gangs of youths, inside or outside the school and cause trouble or fights against other groups [4]. Disruptive behaviours, bullying, and hooliganism, linked to aberrant ideologies, are emerging problems which cannot be explained in terms of youthful exuberance. Policy makers and local communities should be aware of the depth and dimension of the phenomenon [5] [6] [7] [8].

The fight against early school leaving should not only be felt as a target of Lisbon agenda or a means to make European markets competitive, it should also be a fight for a deeper, social cohesion in national and local communities.

Risk factors are many, intertwined and difficult to prevent and control. Nonetheless there is room for great improvement on external factors, and we should start by removing the deficiencies of Italian general and vocational education systems

4. National bodies in charge of the prevention of the problem

For a decade school reforms have devolved some legislative powers on school systems to local authorities (regions, provinces and town councils), mainly in the field of general and vocational education.

1. National plans and programmes (regulations, guidelines, teachers' training), inspired to European policies are determined by the central government and implemented by the regional and provincial offices of the Ministry of Public Education.
2. Regions must respect government guidelines but hold executive power in carrying out national plans. They draw up application guidelines and, via education councillorships, they propose experimental activities and offer funds, generally from central government, to perform them. They sign agreements on teachers' training and activities with the regional offices of the Ministry of Public Education (teachers are state employees). Regions are autonomous in the field of vocational education and carry out their own policies according to their choices. To make an example Tuscany has not chosen to have a structured system of vocational training centres as many northern regions have, which is not irrelevant in preventing early school leaving.
3. State schools and regional vocational centres. With the extension of compulsory school attendance to 10 years, the government had to face the problem of the different choices made by the regions and had to consider attendance at private vocational centres as equivalent to compulsory education, even though in an experimental way. Tuscany, as a region, has chosen to consider the new law enforced only in state upper education schools – which actually means Vocational Institutes. For both cases however the competences required at the end of 10 years' compulsory education have recently been defined in four areas (linguistic and literary, mathematical, scientific and technological, historical and economic), together with the citizenship key competences as recently agreed at European level.
4. The integration between Vocational Institutes and regional vocational training agencies– two different subjects working together – is unanimously felt as a condition to fight early school leaving successfully. In Tuscany, more than in other regions, professionals from vocational agencies have worked together with teachers in the elaboration of modules to be used and tested in schools.
5. Other institutional organizations are involved in the prevention of early school leaving, such as Job Centres (run by provinces, they can also provide youngsters with counselling), provinces for certain aspects connected with upper education, town councils, district councils in large cities and the drug prevention offices of the National Health Service. The interviews to policy makers, to the regional education Councillor and to the Director of the regional offices of the Ministry of Public Education have all highlighted the importance of the distribution of tasks and of intervention integration.
6. And finally, community services and volunteer associations, which are widespread in the country, are often involved in prevention and rehabilitation projects.

5. National policies implemented to combat early school leaving

Act 144, dated 1999, which gradually rose compulsory education leaving age at 18 (with three options: school, vocational courses, apprenticeship) already proposed "integrated paths between school and regional vocational agencies", a framework of credit assessment and transfer allowing students to pass from one system to the other, and the institution of a regional register of students to control compulsory attendance. The integrated paths include intersection segments between state schools and regional vocational courses, thus representing the link between national and regional policies. Integration, beyond offering solutions to reduce drop out rates, also aims at making offers and demands of higher qualifications meet.

From a historical point of view schools and vocational agencies have always had different teaching methods and educational approaches, the purpose of the former being theoretical knowledge, that of the latter practical

skills; now they have to influence each other in order to promote new learning principles and techniques and reach Lisbon Conference targets which are still very far.

Act 144 also drew up lines which the governments, together with Regions, continued to put into practice until the most recent legislation. (ten years' compulsory education, regulations for the first two years of Upper Secondary Education, qualification either at state schools or in regional vocational courses by 18 years of age)
The yearly recommendations of the Ministry (Atto di indirizzo 2008) have "inclusion" as a main target and propose "educational, teaching strategies taking into account the singleness of each person, his/her complex identity, skills and weaknesses in the different phases of development and putting the student at the centre of educational activities in all cognitive, emotional, relational, physical, ethic, spiritual aspects" "in order to offer real opportunities of guidance and prevention of early school leaving"

In 2003 Tuscany, on the basis of an agreement signed with the government, started a three year experiment of integrated paths between state schools and vocational training agencies. The Tuscan experiment, which included Vocational Institutes, Arts Institutes and general upper secondary schools (Licei), was meant to oppose the reduction of compulsory education and launch an integrated educational plan for 14 year old students. In this framework the first year of upper secondary education compulsory and attendance at regional vocational courses possible only for students who had attended it. State schools can devote the 15% of the taught time to extra, autonomous activities and the modules integrated with the vocational agencies were elaborated to fully exploit this opportunity and make vocational agencies have a role in school curricula. Projects had to be set up together, presented and carried out by the two systems of education, joined in a temporary association whose members should at least be one school and one vocational agency, both accredited by the Region.
Regional Act 32, dated 2002 had already defined education and lifelong learning policies accepting the targets of Lisbon Conference to reduce dropout rate to 10%. The law is still effective and is implemented through general plans (the so called PIGI) which provide for the elaboration of an integrated system of general education, vocational training and work, of new policies giving the same value to different learning experiences and of a regional system of competences and credits. In spite of all these efforts, Lisbon Conference objectives are still far if the Education Regional Councillor had to correct the positive 13,7% drop out rate (2005, Ministry of Education) and declare 17,1% (Commission of Education hearing, Chamber of Deputies, February 2007) [9].
While a publication on the most recent experiences is on the point of being published, up to now data from the evaluations of the Coordination of Tuscan Provinces are not known and the good practices of the three year experiment have not been widespread. Nonetheless, it was on the basis of those experiences that the Region issued the guidelines for school year 2006/7, to be followed in all the first years of Vocational Institutes, if they wanted to carry out projects with accredited vocational agencies and apply for funds.

The guidelines included:
Modules to enhance basic and crosscurricular skills
Modules to stimulate motivation and develop guidance
Experiences of contacts with workplaces as "exploration of the operational dimension of knowledge in order to strengthen basic competences"
Individualized supporting activities
Flexible organization
Qualifications issued by schools
This year a similar project is being carried out. It also involves such subjects as Job Centres (career counselling) and Provinces (projects coordination).

Since 2001 the Region has been implementing a Regional Students' Register (SISR) on the basis of the work done by the so called Provincial School Observatory (OSP). The students' register, which should control compulsory attendance, is considered as the main strategy to prevent early school leaving in the opinion of both

the Director of the regional offices of The Ministry and of the Regional Education Councillor, Mr Simoncini who in the interview declared that dropout maps could allow local institutions to develop their own strategies for dealing with the problem within specific areas and needs. The interviews to Province Counsellors confirmed the importance of controlling tools.

In all our interviews students' absenteeism does not appear as an important sign of potential early leaving (perhaps because there is no official data on the issue). Though in some provinces "studies into specific situations" are being conducted, policy makers have not shown great interest in new researches on the issue.
In our conclusions we should also add that the experiments promoted by the Region have involved only some schools and inside them only some teachers. Furthermore information on the guidelines has not been widely spread and teachers' training has been so rare that opposition to the integration of the two systems, mainly inside schools, forms an obstacle to our objectives.

6. Strategies developed at national and local level to prevent early school leaving

The experiences we have discussed refer to students in the age of compulsory education, including the right/duty to get a qualification by 18 years of age; most of the examples come from Vocational Institutes but there are some from Licei, Socio-pedagogical or Technical Institutes.

Many are integrated projects, introduced with the 2003 agreement between Regions and the Ministry of Education, others have been financed by ESF, project period 2000.2006, on the specific measure C2, devoted to prevent early school leaving.

Most experiences come from Tuscany, others from Sardinia, Veneto and Liguria .

Some activities have covered all the first, and/or second class groups of a school, others have provided students with more individualized interventions. Some school have worked on an autonomous project, others in a network of schools and educational organizations.

Students' project activities integrate with the curricula, cover 20% class timetable (there are a few extra curricular activities), and meet both the cognitive and personal/relational needs:
- enhancement of basic knowledge
- listening centres
- mini placements
- guided visits in the area
- renewed guidance
- laboratory, practical activities
- e-learning

The starting situations showed 20-23% dropout rate, caused by different factors. The areas are often deprived, with larger and larger immigrant communities, juvenile offenders and general discomfort. Such backgrounds make students feel estranged from school and undermine their confidence in school as an instrument to climb the social ladder.

Motivation is low as students do not see a real connection between study and work and have low selfesteem, mainly after repeated failures.

The first signs that a student is at risk are the intolerance of the system of social rules and targets involved in school work, truancy, disruptive class behaviour, evident intolerance of traditional lessons, no power of concentration. The steady increasing number of foreign students makes living together with Italian students problematic, as well as with second generation students. (inclusion and integration problems, families to be reunited, families unable to tackle difficult educational needs)

The experiences aim at supporting the recovery of basic learning and crosscurricular competences [10] [11] [12], at preventing early school leaving, reducing failures, having back to school students who had quitted, and most of all creating a sense of "well-being" at school in a systemic view which includes synergy in actions, which implies a different idea both of the learning/teaching process and of the student/teacher relationship.

Most experiences begin with a phase of teachers' training in order to make them master innovative teaching methods and stressful situations: coaching for teachers to train their relational competences and prevent burnout [13].

The teaching methods used with students at risk are varied, but they generally insist on strategies to make them welcome, on the development of learning-by-doing techniques, on tutoring and mentoring often personalized to the needs of the individual.

Among the favourite methods we see: active listening [14], small group work [15], narrative guidance [16],, problem solving, practical activities, cooperative learning [17], exercises in a context of role play, individual and group support. Particular results were achieved with the method of life skills and peer education. They allow to obtain direct involvement of monitors chosen and supported by teachers/supervisors, which emphasizes the value of peers' relationship in facing difficulties and focuses on the relational dimension together with the deinstitutionalization of learning support [18] [19] [20].

Co-teaching and working with teachers from other class boards is frequent.

In all the experiences we have seen schools cooperating with external institutions, professionals and vocational agencies in order to plan integrated projects.. Actions carried out with the counsellors from Job Centres appeared to be quite significant: as they provided students with services of new guidance to make them attend courses of vocational agencies in order to get a qualification at regional level. Also actions implemented by the local offices of the National Health Service were of great interests with their listening centres run by psychologists. Furthermore some local administrations have often made the educational offer richer and varied by financing such activities as theatre, film clubs, competitions, sports events..)
Employers from the workplace, who can witness the social, economic area where a school is located, have often played an important role and have accepted students' placements, both to make them observe the activities or get trained.

The Provincial Offices of the Ministry of Education, which generally support the fight against early school leaving, favour and coordinate networks of school and project specific teachers' training on intercultural and guidance issues. Teachers' training is also organized in cooperation with University structures with blended methodologies. Certain experiences have planned initiatives to make families fully involved in their kids' recovery process.

The projects examined have shown a high percentage of successful results, an average around 5% decrease in dropout rate, more active participation, lower truancy, increase of selfesteem thanks to the enhancement of personal potentialities, greater awareness of the choices made, stress reduction, new motivation, making a

habit of continuing education, development of crosscurricular, as well as learning, communicative, social, planning skills, together with a greater participation of families in the educational process.

7. Identification of training initiatives in the area

The initiatives of the Ministry of Education against early school leaving are addressed both to students and teachers:

Students:
- "Ben.. Essere dello studente", plan for students' well-being at school
- "Scuole aperte" , " Open Schools" a national project to integrate school autonomous activities and the local districts
- "SOS Studenti" , "An SOS for Students" to help them in "paying educational debts" (See Introduction)

Teachers:
- Most initiatives consist of e- training, run by ANSAS, the National Agency for the Development of School Autonomy
- "FOR Docenti", continuing training for all Italian teachers to develop individualized, flexible professional competences. FOR uses the e-learning platform PuntoEDU
- A new e-learning platform, mainly devoted to inclusion and compulsory education is under construction. It will integrate classroom work and provide mentoring/coaching and online workplaces where to exchange materials and instruments among schools.

Regional initiatives
Constitution of Coordination Groups to develop and assist national initiatives in schools. At the same level even student representatives (Consulte) are coordinated.

Provincial initiatives
Most experiences analysed in Point 6 show the presence of training initiatives which precede and/or develop with the activities of the projects. Some interesting examples may be
common training of state school teachers and professionals from vocational agencies. As we have
already highlighted the two worlds of state schools and accredited regional vocational agencies did not have any channel of communication in the past and used different teaching methods and language. Though the common training does not appear adequate yet to make the two worlds cooperate and build an integrated system of education, nonetheless it is a remarkable achievement of good experiences. The joint actions have been generally promoted by those Provincial Councils which are most involved in the prevention of early school leaving [21] [22]..mentoring by external supervisors. In some situations training activities   continue in conjunction with the whole experience with the prominent objective of innovating teachers' methodological approaches through a long training activity conducted by external experts with a high level of professionalism coaching for teachers to train their relational competences and prevent burnout, a widespread
phenomenon among those Italian teachers who are confronted with early school leaving.

The regional research team have analysed national and local experiences as a whole, starting from the studies in the vast bibliography on the subject. The debate has focused on the professional profile of teachers involved in compulsory education.

The following knowledge, skills, abilities and competences have been identified as essential in teachers' training:

- Sound knowledge of the set of rules and of the wide range of possibilities offered by the legislation
- on school autonomy which actually allows to release schools from the bonds of national curricula much more than most Italian teachers think;
- The ability to understand individual educational needs and cope with them professionally [23] [24] [25];
- The ability to go beyond one's own individual dimension and interact with other internal and external
- resources to start networking teams. The groups will have to follow students at risk with measures to be agreed by the team members even when students pass to other pathways which will allow class teachers' board more effective interventions. At the same time the board will stop being a bureaucratic corporate body to become a professional team [26].
- Guidance competences. They lie at the heart of teaching professionalism [27] [28]. All the teachers have guiding responsibilities and together with their colleagues of the same educational areas have to give their teaching a guiding sense, e.g. combining European citizenship key competences with their subjects. Assessment has to be "formative" too, thus becoming an educational tool. The guiding approach involves active techniques which favours learning by doing, inductive techniques, practical rather than theoretical approaches. It calls for every teacher's skill to recognize dropout risks at an early stage and communicate the problem to all the teachers and external professionals involved. A second, higher level of guidance competences may include small groups of school teachers, teachers in charge of students' guidance, specifically trained, whose task is to support their colleagues, help create individualized pathways and cooperate with external professionals with more specific competences (e.g. guidance services of Job Centres).
- Relationship skills (unlike other European countries, completely irrelevant to the traditional Italian
- view) to work on students and with colleagues and have a good command of communication channels (including the terrible layout of our school buildings) [29]. In the same field we include the skill (also technical, prossemic, etc.) to cope with the critical situations which are frequent in the years of compulsory education.
- Intercultural competences to tackle the increasing number of foreign students [30].
- The skills to identify, assess and certify students' competences [31] [32] [33] [34].

As far as teachers' training is concerned, together with the e-learning platform, the team propose to adopt the study circle methodology (discussing texts or case studies with final, operational synthesis) favouring benchlearning.

8. Identification of best practices

Though the experiences may show relatively modest results, and in certain cases even difficult to be properly read in absence of data, we should take into consideration that:

- the level of failures in the first years of Vocational Institutes is very high, so even 1% less represents a successful result
- a systematic control of dropout prevention strategies is something new in Italian schools. The
- experiences I.T.T. Marco Polo, Florence, I.P.S. Einaudi, Grosseto, and I.P.S.I.A. Gaslini, Genoa, had such excellent results that we should investigate into the good practices which made them possible.

A list of good practices, divided into different areas, includes:
- Internal organization

A school organization able to handle information on students coming from other educational pathways, to promote team work, to innovate teaching methods, to control dropout rates through systematic data tabulation. (All)

- Definition of internal procedures to cope with students at risk and to make better educational offers. (I.P.S.I.A. Gaslini/Integra)
- Integration with the area
- Cooperation with families (All)
- Cooperation in networks made of different subjects, schools, vocational agencies, Social Services and Education Councils, Job Centres, community services, volunteer associations. (All)
- Cooperation with vocational agencies specialized in motivation recovery. (I.P.S. Einaudi, Liceo Scientifico Cornaro, Padua)
- Teaching Tools
- Refinement of both initial and renewed guidance instruments and measures
- Use of supporting effective measures by those who are in charge of mentoring students at risk (All)
- Effective, individualized services (welcome, listening services) (I.P.S.S.A.R. Martini, Montecatini, Cornaro)
- Team work on a project to build well defined, tangible products through practical activities (I.P.S.S.A.R. Martini, ISIP Balducci, Arcidosso, I.P.S.A.R. Enriques, Castelfiorentino), direct experience of manufacturing plants (ISIP Balducci)
- Individualized or small group pathways (I.P.S.S.A.R. Martini, ISI Balducci)
- Guiding approach in teaching, formative assessment, cooperative learning (I.P.S.I.A. Chini, Borgo San Lorenzo) problem solving, peer education. (I.P.S.A.R.Enriques, I.P.S. Einaudi, Cornaro)
- Narrative methodology (I.P.S. Einaudi)
- Training
- Counselling services for teachers (School network, Sardinia)
- Coaching services to help teachers' social competences (I.P.S. Einaudi)
- Exchange of know-how and experiences (I.P.S.I.A. Gaslini)
- Common training of teachers and professionals from vocational agencies (most schools)

9. Case studies

Tamer, son of Egyptian parents, born in Italy, was an unruly student in lower education school. Once in upper education he failed twice and then passed to a regional vocational course where he got a qualification. He was called for a job interview where he understood the importance of learning and decided to go back o school where he is at present.

Lorenzo was not able to choose the right kind of school to meet his needs. After repeated failures he attended a regional vocational course. Then he was in an integrated project (state schools and regional vocational agencies) which made him decide to go back to school where he is working successfully. His family always supported him and cooperated with the school.

Salvo had relational, behavioural difficulties. He lives in a boarding school 50 kms far from the school he attends, his family is a very problematic one and he sometimes abuses alcohol. Cooperation with community services, a psychologist, the boarding school tutors and the family helped improve the situation. At school practical and small group activities have improved his behaviour and his competences.

Andrea had been one of the best students until he started playing truant. He used to say that school was useless and, though still in compulsory education, he disappeared before February interim assessment. In spite

of teachers', community service professionals' and the school psychologist's interventions, the school has lost all trace of him.

Mehdi comes from Morocco and lives with his sister. He speaks Italian and seemed interested in school work. After few months he joined a group of problematic students and started playing truant and working. He refused any individualized activity and help. After two months' absence he came back to school. At present he does not do anything and says he is passing to a regional vocational course as soon as he is 16.

A preliminary note

An overview of the cases takes into consideration some aspects which played a central role in achieving the objectives of our research and of the subsequent identification of the good practices adopted, and to be adopted, as well as of the sectors where future, effective training activities should be developed to combat early school leaving.

The synthesis derives from the reading of the case study reports and the attached interviews and analyzes the following points:

Typology of cases

The types of situations differ from the point of view both of the area where they are located and of their development. Furthermore there are differences in the socio-cultural (two students have immigrant parents) and familiar background. But all the cases share feelings of discomfort and widespread difficulties caused by a standardized, narrow education system and by the lack of an accepted, cooperative system of guidance between lower and upper education schools. At the beginning of upper education courses students seem to be confronted by a wall they are not able to climb. As soon as they start attendance they feel they cannot communicate with teachers, they refuse theoretical subjects and even work in laboratories is not appreciated or felt as adequate to their needs.

The causes of failures, discomfort and delays in their pathway start from the very beginning.

Approach

Schools, particularly Technical and Vocational Institutes have the tools to deal with the issue and are often ready to cope with students at risk, and they actually do, thanks to projects and experiences which have become fundamental in the educational offer, but they lack a systemic dimension in such varied contexts which often require an all-round intervention.

Each student shows the signs of potential early leaving in different moments and ways inside the class group, a merely bureaucratic institution working with rigid timetables, which does not allow an easy, prompt identification of the problem.

From the cases it has become evident that there is a need for the integration of all the people involved in the process of education in the same area or district and that integration is successful when everyone is conscious of his/her own role to meet specific requirements. Roles should not overlap, every professional should do his/her best to coordinate their skills to solve a problem which is educational and socio-economic at the same time. This has been a common point in the cases examined where we have seen integration of activities without role conflicts and mutual mistrust.

For all the cases the starting point has been represented by the project skills of the school itself , not only because integration with other institutions of the area represents the only possible link with the youths, but also because it allows to create new professional roles inside the school, as required by the fight to early school leaving.

Teaching methods

The variety of cases finds a common point in the teaching methods. All students have problems, mainly but not only, with basic subjects when they are presented in the traditional, theoretical way of "lecturing" lessons, where contents explained by a teacher are assessed by oral and written tests, in a cycle which is typical of traditional

methods devoted to follow national curricula strictly. The operational dimension of knowledge appears, in our cases, as a basic, precise request of the students who start attending upper education courses. The teaching approach calls for a new, shared revision involving the project skills each school has to develop in order to succeed in integrating experiences and methods with regional vocational agencies. This is particularly important when students from other cultures are involved with their own needs of literacy and/or intercultural integration. Some cases show the need of individualized methods in a continually developing process, a very personal project to be carried out by all the subjects involved, inside and outside the school.

Individualized intervention highlight the importance of new professionals, sometimes borrowed from vocational agencies and appointed by the school. So mentors, counsellors, psychologists have played a central role which has appeared successful when it has been integrated with the others', mainly class teachers' and families'.

Results and possibilities

The results have been different, some students returned to school, others moved to a vocational agency, others definitely left after attendance attempts. When the results have been positive the role of experienced vocational agencies has been fundamental to carry out individualized projects.

In any case, beyond the results, the common growth of the students was evident in their taking on new responsibilities. They are self-critical when they admit that they are not willing to study and conscious of their discomfort and risks, aware of the steps of their pathway. They , if properly guided, can reopen the question of their previous choices, work on his/her motivations, open a channel of communication with teachers with a different behavioural approach. Though the possibilities may change, depending from their own choices, all of them have real opportunities to be included in a positive, social context where they can study or work, making up the time and overcoming learning and relational difficulties.

Future possibilities may be considered positively even when the students are aware that their choices are not very convincing and the support given by teachers and professionals has not been properly used. They mark a turning point when their relationships become thoughtful and reciprocal, when selfmotivation is recovered with a wish to know, understand and act, when they recognize, with selfassessment, that their commitment meets their needs.

Internal/External professionals

Al the people involved in the cases have institutional roles. The actions are made possible and take place in the framework of specific school projects, which include cooperation with external organizations. The need of specific teachers' training on the issue in order to create a network of opportunities with external professionals, rather than simply indicating the students at risk, is clear. The two systems, state schools and regional vocational centres, have quite rigid structures which sometimes prevent prompt, effective actions. How much the two system know each other and are able to cooperate does not appear clearly in the cases, mainly as far as the school is concerned. The rigid bureaucracies may be responsible for personal choices, which makes specific training an unavoidable choice.

Good practices

If we take the varied cases into account we find some good practices to be followed, even though they should be given further consideration by schools and external organizations:

Shared project skills on the issue of early school leaving in all the phases of the educational process

Direct, active involvement of all the institutions which are in charge of educational success

Integration of the systems and creation of a cooperative network in the area

To concentrate all activities on the student and his life, involve the family in a new life project

To try innovative teaching activities in order to overcome the problems of the traditional approach to national programmes and enhance the practical dimension, also using extracurricular time for the purpose

To plan teachers' training courses on the issue in order to make them able to meet the students' varied needs in an integrated system

To monitor the students and all the activities which carry out the prevention of early school leaving

10. Conclusions

1 – In the latest years government policies have implemented higher levels of education to allow Italian school to achieve Lisbon Targets. Nonetheless the changes have not really affected the traditional structure of the educational system, mainly of Upper Secondary Schools which are still waiting for an organic reform of both general (Licei) and technical and vocational education (Technical and Vocational Institutes). Recent government acts have introduced such bursting elements of innovation as the competences to be acquired by the end of the second year of Upper Education and the related certifications. Unless they are carefully handled they may be accepted but at the same time made ineffective by teachers who have been trained with an academic, traditional approach.

An overall view of the Italian dropout rate still shows high percentages in the southern regions, better ones in the central areas, which get near European targets, and quite satisfactory figures in the North, apart from a few pockets of underdevelopment. Tuscany may not meet the 10% target by 2010, but it will most likely get very near since every effort is being made to offer adequate educational choices.

2 - The most effective actions to prevent the causes of early school leaving are to be found inside the school system. An adequate policy is needed as innovative proposals launched or imposed from the top are not enough. A heavy investment in human resources is needed: systematic training for teachers and other professionals involved, dissemination of good practices, revision of school yearly plans to help them cope with their tasks. All that needs networking between local Councils, Regions and the Ministry of Education.

3 – The improvement of school services is insufficient to combat early school leaving. A social, cultural policy is needed together with the circulation of information and a sense of community to help teachers feel supported in their task. Institutions, local governing bodies, society as a whole, starting from media, should be directly, positively responsible for the value of education as an instrument of social inclusion and cooperate to fight against the implicit mistrust of the school system, widespread in the masses.

4 – The integration between state schools and regional vocational agencies is an unavoidable choice for the country. It compares two systems which can take reciprocal advantage of the cooperation, the former overcoming an old, bookish approach, more and more distant from youth culture, the latter the insufficient dimension of practical activities. A fertile collaboration does not unite the two systems, but makes them play a functional role in the general system of education and in the development of the country. Integration should include local communities and their institutional, social, economic bodies: the best possible results can be achieved only through synergy.

5 – The core of our project is teachers' training. We have identified the key competences to reach our goal. Our knowledge of Italian teachers make us think that the mere dissemination of good practices is ineffective, mainly when they are spread as pre-packaged sets of tools from the top. Bench-learning is much more appreciated, a professional enrichment among peers which allows the exchange and integration of different experiences. Excellent pathways can be fully exploited once they are mediated with one's own experiences and not strictly connected with the particular, complex situations where they developed. That is why the materials proposed should be designed for flexible, rather than prescriptive, use.

6 – Italian teachers' training needs may differ from those of other countries, at least as far as priorities are concerned. To make an example, planning learning pathways with a view to competences is surely a priority for our schools where work has always been based on the contents of "national programmes". Different educational themes may coincide in a European dimension. Comparison with other priorities and practices can make new needs arise, needs we were not conscious of before.

11. Recommendations

The positive experiences, the case studies with the related interviews, together with the considerations of the Research Group clearly suggest the following recommendations to:

Public Education Authorities
They should
- establish a prescriptive framework allowing flexibility in educational offers and pathways,
- favour adjustment to each student's interests and learning pace,
- adopt personnel policies that are consistent with points 1. and 2., increase working hours and introduce career pathways,
- organize work in order to cope with students' needs and under the responsibility of the autonomous education institutions for the area,
- favour and motivate teachers to follow in-job training courses, provide a framework for initial training and a recruitment system consistent with teachers' expected, new professionalism,
- establish a National Assessment System to control learning processes and results (External Agency)
- simplify institutional procedures to allow an effective integration of State Schools, Regional Vocational Centres and Job Centres,
- recognize and smooth the path after compulsory education with guidance activities in a climate of continuing education,
- organize local technical offices to assist school,
- build a modern apprenticeship system.

Headteachers
They should
- make local responsibilities effective both in offering and implementing educational processes,
- introduce structured guidance activities, also in cooperation with external organizations
- establish structured internal procedures for the prevention and control of dropout data,
- avoid the traditional self-righteous feelings that prevent the integration of different educational offers,
- carry out autonomous research plans making school a place devoted to learning/teaching research to develop teachers' skills,
- introduce schools to the principles of self-assessment and make them able to plan and carry out improvement actions,
- insist on training in order to favour the dissemination and the enhancement of teaching competences among teachers and headteachers,
- make formative and laboratory activities grow and have them well documented,
- make all teachers improve their skills to build students' competences, also in the single subjects, and have them assessed and certified
- be open to the educational opportunities offered by the area, mainly in connection with competences related to "active citizenship"
- join or create networks among schools and vocational agencies in order to favour passages and complex pathways with transparent certifications in a climate of long time contacts

Teachers
They should
- master processes and techniques to help students in their learning process,
- overcome the individualistic aspects of the teaching profession,
- be able to observe and listen to students,

- use students' families as a resource, when possible,
- work together with the colleagues of the same subject area on teaching materials and particularly on assessment,
- keep records of any activities,
- integrate their actions with colleagues or external professionals,
- be able to improve their skills in building, assessing and certifying students' competences,
- compare their results with colleagues or other teachers of the network, in order to know "good practices" that can be transferred and improve the quality of their teaching methods,
- help create a working environment where friendly, positive relationships may develop.

Families
They should
- have frequent contacts with the school (teachers in charge, mentors) to have information on students' behaviour,
- cooperate with the school informing teachers of facts or behaviours which make them perplexed,
- share the fundamental choices with teachers and external professionals,
- be cooperative and active in planning individualized pathways,
- avoid opposing the choices of the school without listening to the reasons why they have been made,
- discuss educational doubts with teachers, mentors, counsellors, psychologist,
- show their kids they appreciate formative activities,
- understand what environment, what kind of people they meet when outside the school,
- check absences in a very systematic way,
- adopt a sober awarding system.

Students
They should
- be conscious of their duties and rights as citizens/students,
- declare their own needs and dissatisfaction respecting roles and socially accepted behavioural codes,
- rely on teachers and external professionals as supporting people,
- make one's own future life projects clear and, if needed, let the supporting people help them clear up,
- cooperate in the definition of individualized pathways,
- not feel afraid or ashamed if they need a psychologist's help,
- not disappear without informing teachers in charge or somebody they rely on.

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