



## DESAFÍO Y PERSPECTIVAS ACTUALES DE LA PSICOLOGÍA EN EL MUNDO DE LA ADOLESCENCIA

### **SCHOOL AND LIFE FOR TEENAGERS. EXPECTATIONS AND HOPES IN ITALY AND BRAZIL**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Within a Marie Curie European Project, a comparative research has been conducted concerning the interaction of teenagers with school in Italy and Brazil, and the formation of their identity as students. Ten focus groups were run with students of 9 high schools in high, medium and low class sections in Roma and Belo Horizonte, and they were analyzed through quali-quantitative techniques of textual analysis. Results show striking differences between Italy and Brazil as to the students' expectations about school, but also some similarities were found in their school experience and concerning the role of school in their life.

Italian students differ from Brazilian ones since the former do not attribute a high value to school as a means for social mobility. The majority of Italian students show impressive levels of pessimism about the possibility of finding a better place in society thanks to education. Many of them express a strong feeling of decline about the Italian social economic and cultural reality. On the contrary the Brazilian students, notwithstanding the dramatic levels of hunger, poverty and violence they live in, show a strong awareness about the ascending trajectory of their country, and a high level of trust in their future and in the role of school in their life project.

**Key-words:** school, Italian and Brazilian teenagers, expectations

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Adolescence in western societies today is a time in which young people prepare for their adult life, and school, at least from an institutional point of view, is devoted to their preparation. But how do they really see this time of their life, and how do they view school, what role do they attribute it in the making of their identity and of their future life?

Does their perspective vary according to the school they attend and to the social class they come from? To answer this question, within a Marie-Curie fellowship Project we underwent a research



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study on how teenagers in Italy and Brazil view school, and what they think to be its role in their future life. In this paper we present some of the results of this research concerning the views of teenagers in some Italian secondary schools.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main aim of the research was to investigate how young people interact with school and what are their expectations and hopes about their future after finishing secondary school. We detected how teenagers construct their self-images as students (how they “make themselves students”), how they build their own networks of sociability and the importance of those in the constitution of young people identity.

Among our research questions were to detect possible differences in the way adolescents position themselves towards school depending on their nation – Italy vs. Brazil – , their original social and cultural milieu, and the school attended.

### METHOD

The research, that is still in progress, included a first stage of an overview on the research questions to be tackled through focus groups, and later, after analysis of the focus groups, a second stage to test if the first findings are confirmed by a wide range survey study through questionnaires. In this paper we overview the first results of some focus groups in Italy.

#### 3.1. The focus group

To tune the focus groups to be run in Italian and Brazilian secondary schools, we first run 2 pilot focus groups in Italy: one in Rome, with a group of teenagers coming from 2 different high schools with emphasis on humanities and belonging to the middle and high class, and one in Scampia (a degraded suburb near Naples), with young people coming from different high schools, participating in a social project of Catholic Church that helps teens in situation of social risk to build their project of life.

Using the data and discussions coming out of these pilot focus groups, we finally attuned a focus group outline including the following questions.

- What does it mean for you to go to school? What sense do you attribute to school?
- Can school give you what you expect?
- How should a good teacher be?
- How did you come to know your friends and how did you build your friendship? Do you have a group of friends within school, or is it outside school?
- What kinds of activities do you perform with your friends, what do you do when you are together?
- Do you have some common interests? Do you have more common interests with your school group or with a group in your home quarter?
- Who does mainly support you when you are in a problem situation? Who do you ask help?
- Do you have models to follow? Whom do you take as an example, whom would you like to imitate?
- In this moment of your life, what does it mean, for you, to be young?
- What kinds of interests do you have? Do you all mean to go to the University?
- What are your projects for your life?
- How do you imagine yourselves in fifteen years?



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What are the necessary means to realize your life project? What resources, capacities, beliefs do you need?

Could school be useful to you in realizing your objectives? If yes, how could it be useful? And if not, why, and what would you would need?

Will you maintain a positive memory of some memorable teacher?

Talking about your identity, how would you describe yourselves?

What are your leading values?

Is there something you are proud you are, and something, on the contrary, you would never want to be?

Would some of you like to take part in a reality shows, like the "Big Brother" or so?

What do you think of the work we did here? Did you like it? What's the opinion you have made of it?

By these questions, our aim was to tackle the following thematic areas:

The students' relationship with school (questions 1 and 2) and with teachers (questions 3 and 15)

Friends and groups (questions 4 – 6) as opposed to the relationship with family (question 7)

Models and the relationship with adults (question 8)

Youth (question 9)

Life project (questions 10 – 14)

Identity and values (questions 16 – 19)

The last question aimed at eliciting an evaluation of the focus by the students.

### PARTICIPANTS

Four focus groups were run in Italy: three in Rome, in high schools with emphasis on sciences (Liceo Scientifico), on humanities (Liceo Classico) and on Education (Istituto Magistrale); and one at Monterotondo, a big village in the province of Rome, in a school with emphasis on technology.

Focus groups were audio recorded and the text wrote down was submitted to lexical and textual analysis.

Participants involved in the discussion group were 29 (balanced by gender, 16 females and 13 males) and they were chosen randomly, explaining them vaguely the purpose of the research.

### 3.3. Focus group analysis

We obtained a corpus which counts 27192 (V) occurrences with 3635 (N) different words and a medium lexical richness index  $[(V/N)*100]$ , equal to 13,36 (under the 20%, which represents the limit value to consider a corpus interpretable).

An automatic quanti-qualitative analysis was performed on the subjects' answers by Lexico3, a software for textual data analysis based on a "lexicometric approach": an application of statistical principles to textual corpora.

The "textual statistics" (Lebart and Salem, 1988) aims to extract the semantic level in a text starting from the list of words obtained by statistical analysis; for example, in the specificities' analysis, the software extracts a list of significant words obtained by a statistical comparison between sub-parts of text according to selected variables.



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### THE CHARACTERISTIC LEXICON OF ITALIAN TEENAGERS

The analysis of specificities aims to identify the characteristic lexicon by comparing different sub-parts of text. The characteristic lexicon is created by dividing a corpus into sub-texts (so called sub-occurrences) according to the different levels of a chosen variable (e.g., to characterize a lexicon by gender, you divide the corpus into male and female subtexts). Then the different sub-texts are compared, by a t-test analysis, to extract a list of words over-represented or underrepresented with respect to a normal distribution [Bolasco et al., 1999; Lebart and Salem, 1988].

In the present study, we chose three main variables, type of school (scientific high school, technical high school and classical high school), school area (rome vs province) sex (male vs female) and thematic area of the focus (school and teachers, models, identity-values and personal projects).

Here are some of the participants' accounts.

### RESULTS

Concerning the question what is school for students, and what does it give them, for teenagers of all three schools, at school, on the one side, you do not only learn cultural contents, but you also learn to stay with other people, to have relationships with them.

A.: principalmente credo che la scuola, l'unica cosa utile della scuola italiana è che dovrebbe in teoria aiutare una persona a formarsi interiormente e insegnare agli studenti a confrontarsi fra di loro.

A.: I mainly think that school, the only useful thing of Italian school is that it should help a person to form oneself internally and teach students to confront between themselves.

G.: l'ambiente scolastico mi piace, mi diverto e perché penso che comunque si impara, mentre si cresce, si impara pure a stare in una sotto forma di società.

G.: I like school environment, I enjoy myself and because I think that in any case you learn, while you're growing up, you even learn to stay in a sub-form of society

Moreover, school is important because it teaches you to take up your own responsibilities.

G. Secondo me l'importanza vera della scuola superiore non è la conoscenza in sé dato che storia o la reazione di chimica, ma sapersi prendere le proprie responsabilità d'avanti a quelli che sono gli eventi che poi ti capitano.

G. In my opinion, the true importance of High School is not knowledge by itself of history or chemistry reaction, but being able to take up one's responsibilities in front of events that will happen to you.

While at Grammar school you are somehow always "playing", at High School, if you studied for next day class, ok, but if you went out and did not study, it's your fault; so you learn to be responsible for your actions. On the other hand, on the cultural contents side, school actually does not give you all that it should give you. This partly depends on the fact that the Italian State does not care school enough.

A. vabbè ma non è un fatto de scola.. è proprio un fatto de:: de stato.. no de scola

M. è de stato si-si.. che non funziona la cosa più importante su cui se dovrebbe puntà

A. sul futuro

A. well, but, it is not a matter of school... it is right a matter of State, not of school

M. a matter of State, yes... that the most important thing one should aim at does not work

A. the future.....

As to what they expect from school, the students seem to say that, in their own opinion school should really be useful to learn things, but on the other side they attribute other students a more utilitarian view of school: they think that for others school is mainly attended in order to a final formal certificate, to be used in turn to find a job.



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While talking of school, its adequacy and usefulness, students, sometimes spontaneously sometimes induced by the interviewer's questions, typically come to talk about teachers.

In general they have quite clear ideas about what's a good teacher and what's a bad teacher. First, the main thing a teacher should do is to "stimulate" students.

"Un bravo insegnante deve trasmettere la voglia, la passione e diciamo deve cercare di far piacere all'alunno la materia, non deve soltanto dirgli quelle tre nozioni che stanno sul libro e buttarle là,

...

cioè una persona in generale una cosa la fa perché piace farla e quando tu vai a trasmetterla agli altri devi trasmettere questa passione che tu hai per questa cosa. Molti professori non lo fanno al giorno d'oggi. Pochi professori riescono al giorno d'oggi a farlo. Pochi professori sono degni di avere il titolo di professori."

G. sono arrivata ad esempio da una buonissima formazione precedente sia alle elementari che medie, con professori che mi avevano trasmesso l'amore, cioè anche la passione per alcune materie, magari non per tutte, però proprio il concetto di passione per una materia passione per un argomento, no?

G.: I came from a very good previous formation both at primary and grammar school, with teachers that had transmitted me love, that is, even passion for some school topics; maybe not for all of them, but right the concept of passion for a school matter, for a topic

On the contrary, if the teacher cannot motivate students, they make him/her responsible for their own poor performance:

io penso che comunque l'andamento didattico di un qualsiasi alunno dipenda anche da un professore

*I think that in any case school success of any pupil depends also on a teacher*

ci sono pure degli insegnanti, tra virgolette piatti, che non ti comunicano niente, che si attengono al libro

*There are also teachers, hipphens, flat, who do not communicate anything, that only stay with the book*

M.: senza stimoli non si va lontano

M.: Without stimuli you do not go that far

G. (Insegnanti) che non mi stimolavano da nessun punto di vista, che erano impiegati

G.: (Teachers) that did not stimulate me from many point of view, that were clerks

G.: nel senso non ti viene più a piacere la materia.. a me piaceva tanto la matematica..

G.: that is... you come to dislike the schoolmatter... I used to like math so much...

To stimulate means that the first thing a teacher must do is to show the beauty of the matter (Poggi & Violini, 2004)

G.: C'ho tutti professori tipo la professoressa Caputo che ragionano così che ti dicono "guarda com'è bella la materia...". Tu l'hai sentita una lezione di storia della Caputo, è interessante e ti viene da prendere appunti

G.: I have all teachers like Professor Caputo who reason like this who tell you "see how beautiful is this matter...". Tu have heard a history class by Caputo, it is interesting and you start wanting to take notes.

Students not only describe the results on themselves of the Teachers' strategies, but in some case also describe their methods, their specific didactic strategies.

G.: Io alle elementari... c'avevo una maestra che non ha mai comprato il sussidiario, mai, non sapeva nemmeno che cosa fosse e invece facevamo tutte cose creative e quindi diceva "adesso scrivi un tema" e....



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G.: I, at the primary school, had a teacher who has never bought a textbook, never, she would neither know what it was, and instead we used to do all creative things and then she would say: "now write an essay" and...

But beside the cultural competence and communication skill, students highly care about the teachers' capacity to have a human relationship with students. A teacher, for example, should comprehend the students' relational problems.

F.: i professori della mia sezione sono abbastanza...cioè, ti comprendono, altri invece ti dicono quelle tre cose, studiate e basta. Per esempio tu c'hai un problema qui in classe, nella convivenza della classe, cioè non gli interessa.

F.: The teacher in my class are enough... I mean, they comprehend you, others instead tell you those three things, studied, and that's all. For example you have a problem here in your class, in class social life, I mean, they don't care.

Yet, there is an important relation between your esteem for a teacher and his/her skill from the didactic point of view.

I rapporti migliori che hai con i professori sono con i professori che in realtà ti danno qualcosa anche molto professionalmente anche dal punto di vista didattico. Cioè professori che in realtà si vede che si impegnano di più, si preparano le lezioni, fanno le lezioni con passione, con tutto. E quindi anche se alla fine sono più severi, ti pressano alle interrogazioni, cioè comunque...che poi alle fine finisci per avere un rapporto più stretto, che sono quelli che si vede che ci tengono al proprio lavoro e ci credono cioè...

The best relationships you have with teachers are with those that actually give you something also from a professional point of view. That is, teachers that you see are more committed, they prepare their lectures, they lecture with passion, with everything. And hence, even if in the end they are more strict, they press you at oral testing, that is... that in any case you end up having a more strict relationship, that they are those you see they like their work and they believe in it.

Yet, for some students, and more so for Talotta school than for Manara, that a teacher has a "human" face may not be always a good thing, mainly because it may imply too risky social emotions, like sympathy for some people but not for others. Students in this case are very much aware of the Teacher's prejudice, and often remind personal cases in which a teacher always tended to have the same idea about them, also despite numerous disconfirmation of their previous ideas.

Alessandra: molto spesso...i professori anche nel rapportarsi con gli alunni sono influenzati

A.: Very often... teachers also while relating to pupils are influenced...

They mean, influenced by their personal preferences.

R.: Cioè i professori hanno delle preferenze e delle simpatie e delle antipatie e secondo me non dovrebbe essere così.

Ro.: That is, teachers have preferences and sympathies and antipathies, and in my opinion it should not be like this.

Ri.: È quasi impossibile avere lo stesso rapporto di simpatia e di antipatia con tutte le persone. Però dovrebbero lasciar perdere questo rapporto ed essere più imparziali, ma è difficile

Ri.: It is almost impossibile to have the same relation of sympathy or antipathy with everybody. But they should leave this relation and be more impartial, but it is difficult.

E secondo me non dovrebbe essere così perché i professori dovrebbero diciamo...dovrebbero concentrarsi soltanto sull'aspetto formativo

And in my opinion it should not be like that because the teachers should... let's say... should concentrate only on the educational issue.



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### **a) Expectations and hopes**

Social mobility is an old and recurrent theme in the expectations about the role of education, and contributes to the modes of “making-oneself student” and living the school. We detected some relevant, partially unexpected, differences between Italy and Brazil. While after the Second World War, in Italy, great social mobility was achieved through mass education and economic growth, today, a major fraction of young students show impressive levels of pessimism and disbelief about the possibilities of social ascension via education and schooling. They express, even while living in a country member of G7, a strong feeling of decline and decadence of the Italian social, cultural and economic reality. The opposite happens with the young Brazilians, who, living in a country marked by tragic levels of violence, poverty, hunger, seem to be aware of the quickly ascending trajectory of this emerging giant in the world scenario, and show themselves extremely confident with their future and with the role the school may have in their construction of a life project. Brazilian economic growth, and the aggressive governmental policies to combat hunger and illiteracy and to create new markets and jobs, seem to have a role here, while, in the Italian case, it seems the young people felt strongly the impact of recent cuts and crisis in the educational policies, as well as the very serious societal problems (strongly felt in the school environment) linked to the ambiguous and inefficient Italian management of issues such as multiculturalism, religious heterogeneity and marginalization linked to the strong migratory fluxes of the last decades. As already stressed out by Bourdieu and Dubet, in a French context, Italian students have a feeling of decadence and of failure of the educational system and of the project linked to it. Many of them declared that social mobility is not linked to school and education. Economic stability is possible if you achieve your parents’ career (social capital and family inheritance). Social mobility is achieved, in their dreams, thanks to cultural industry and show-business: if you are lucky, or if you manage to participate in a reality show, or becoming a famous person in sport or music.

Brazilian students, instead, felt an ascending movement, a growth in their chances thanks to, between other factors, recent policies in both basic and higher education, opening the access to school to social groups that were historically excluded from high schools and universities. Brazil is still marked by “coronelism”, violence, corruption, nepotism. Being so, the real, concrete chances of social ascension for poor people are still minimal. For a teen living in a “favela”, even while studying in a school, drugs, prostitution and violence are a more likely future than university or a good job. Even so, most Brazilian students, both coming from poor or middle-class families, are much more optimist than their peer living in a much richer country, such as Italy. Brazilians see school both as a tool for social mobility and an important locus for their own socialization and formation as persons.

### **b) School experience in different social and cultural contexts**

The perceived quality of schooling experience is extremely different (both in Italy and Brazil) between different social groups. In fact, some schools show the capacity to make the difference in the life trajectory of their young students. The choice of one school or another impact effectively on the constitution of projects of life, with differences both on a macro level (type of school: humanities, science, technological education, professional etc.) and on a micro level (organization and management of curriculum, peer groups, teachers, social capital, etc). In both countries, the “crisis of school” do not only depend on policies, but also on organizational aspects, formation of teachers, school culture, as well as on social conditions influencing teenagers’ choices and their possibility of access to different kinds of schools/curricula. Unequal access to school and so called “segregative expansion” of education contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities.



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### c) Role played by high school in life

One aspect is that young people live a tension between choosing a school based either on an instrumental logic (what is best for my future, for social ascension), or on a logic of individuality (to do what I like more, to follow my dreams and desires). They feel that school is very important to orientate or re-orientate their professional and personal choices. The knowledge and the culture transmitted by school are usually felt as important and relevant, but they believe that different school environments, relationships with teachers and their own initial cultural capital can affect strongly the results of the educational experience.

Another aspect of this dimension is the relationship of young people with family and school. In both countries, the young people showed the strong presence that they attribute to both this institutions in their life. Transmission of values, confrontation with other values and cultures are two aspects in which family and school turn out to be relevant for the construction of identity.

### d) Forms of interaction of peer groups with school

Collectives, groups and nets are a very important place of demarcation of identities, for young people, and of equality in the difference. In their relationships, young persons affirm their identities, establish frontiers between the individual and the collective life and give a meaning to gender, ethnic, age and socioeconomic realities.

Participation in teams and communities, leisure-time, fashion, different modes of communication, construct different groups and define different forms of appropriation of the school experience, too. School is an important place for meeting, for conviviality and socialization.

## DISCUSSION

We consider that this project had an innovating character, both from the academic point of view (because of the novel interdisciplinary approach conjugating classical techniques in social research with tools and concepts coming from cognitive sciences), and from the point of view of its potential to contribute to social actions and policy-making. Our data may be useful to a better understanding of differences and convergent aspects of social degradation in great urban areas in the North and South of the world, and to look for novel social technologies or educational methodologies that can be suitable in this new scenario. Street education and other pedagogic approaches well established in Brazil may turn out to be very useful in the new European context, marked by multiculturalism and social inclusion issues. On the other side, knowledge transfer from Roma 3 University and from areas as different as psychology and cognitive science, may improve research methods and educational practices with young people in Latin America.

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