

GOBBO, Francesca; SANSOÉ, Rebecca (Enero/Julio 2011). Young immigrants and vocational training: an ethnographic research. *Edusk – Revista Monográfica de Educación Skepsis*, n. 2 – Formación Profesional. Vol. III. La formación profesional desde casos y contextos determinados. São Paulo: skepsis.org. pp. 2294- 2323

url: < <http://www.editorialskepsis.org/site/edusk> > [ISSN 2177-9163]

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### ABSTRACT

The article discusses the choice to attend a course of “initial vocational training” by young immigrants whose learning experience takes place in a vocational training institution in Turin (Italy). After briefly presenting the school system reforms enacted since the beginning of the XXI century, and the changes brought about by migratory flows into the production sectors, schools and society at large in Italy, the reasons are given for carrying out an ethnographic research in a “vocational training” institution. The paragraphs that follow present the school context of the “initial vocational training” course where fieldwork was conducted, and point out the interactional misunderstanding that are at the origin of a choice that however the immigrant students do not define as such. Finally, the meaning of work, as well as the hopes and responsibilities (towards the family members who have remained at home) that are attached to finding and having a job are discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** work, vocational training, immigrant students.

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### RIASSUNTO

L'articolo presenta e discute la scelta di frequentare un corso di “formazione professionale iniziale” da parte di giovani immigrati la cui esperienza di apprendimento si svolge in un istituto per la formazione professionale a Torino (Italia). Dopo aver brevemente illustrato le riforme del sistema scolastico attuate in Italia dall'inizio del XXI secolo, e i cambiamenti nei settori produttivi, nelle scuole e nella società italiana, conseguenti anche ai flussi migratori, le autrici indicano le ragioni a monte di una ricerca etnografica in un istituto per la “formazione professionale”. I paragrafi successivi presentano il contesto scolastico del corso di “formazione professionale iniziale” in cui è stato condotto il lavoro sul campo, e mettono in luce i malintesi interazionali all'origine di tale scelta, che tuttavia non è definita come tale dagli studenti immigrati. Infine, sono discussi il significato di lavoro, come pure le speranze e le responsabilità (verso i membri familiari rimasti nel paese di origine) connessi al trovare e avere un lavoro.

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** lavoro, formazione professionale, studenti immigrati



**YOUNG IMMIGRANTS AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH**

**GIOVANI IMMIGRATI E FORMAZIONE PROFESSIONALE:  
UNA RICERCA ETNOGRAFICA**

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**INTRODUCTION**

When the senior author of this article received the invitation to write for the *Journal Skepsis Education's* special issue on "The vocational training from the perspective of specific cases and contexts", she suggested that the contribution could present and discuss the findings of a recently completed doctoral research in ethnography of education that she had coordinated and that had been carried out by Rebecca Sansoé. So far, it is one of the few qualitative researches concerning what by official definition is known as "initial vocational training".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> SANSOÉ, R. (2011) *Giovani immigrati e formazione professionale. Una ricerca etnografica in pedagogia del lavoro*. Tesi di Dottorato in Scienze dell'Educazione e della Formazione, relatrice Prof. F. Gobbo, a.a. 2010-2011, Università degli Studi di Torino.

“Initial vocational training” consists of two or three year courses that prepare youth for jobs in different work sectors (hairdressing as well as courses for “machine operators”, for instance), and at the same time allows them to complete the compulsory training, as is required since 1999<sup>4</sup>. Though these courses are part of the Italian compulsory schooling architecture – namely they can be chosen after completing lower secondary schooling (age 11-14) –, in most cases they represent an alternative educational track (or the last available option) after students unsuccessfully tried to attend other higher secondary schools belonging to the “high school system”<sup>5</sup>.

Italian educationists’ attention to vocational training courses has recently been renewed by the considerable changes in school population, due to migration to Italy. Such changes have raised concerns about the capability of the Italian school system to provide equality of educational opportunities for the newly arrived students<sup>6</sup>, and to pursue, and hopefully attain the goals indicated by the intercultural education perspective, which was from the beginning of

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<sup>4</sup> Since 2003 compulsory education lasts 10 years. Attending vocational training courses allows students to complete compulsory education.

<sup>5</sup> The system of vocational education and training is alternative to the higher secondary school system and lasts 3 years. At the end of the third year students earn a vocational degree that allows them to work and is recognized at the national level. However, after earning her/his vocational degree, a student can enroll into higher secondary education if she/he wants to have a higher secondary school diploma, and then access to the university. More specifically, vocational training is a school based sector (for which Regions are responsible) that addresses youth who wish to work but do not wish to continue their education long enough to get a high school degree or a university one. Therefore, vocational training is parallel to, but different from state education. As for the “initial vocational training”, it is meant for youth who are seeking a job for the first time. For statistics about vocational education and training for the city of Turin and its province see IRES Piemonte, *Netpaper* 1 and 2, 2010, downloadable at [www.sisfor.piemonte.it](http://www.sisfor.piemonte.it)

<sup>6</sup> GALLONI, F., RICUCCI, R. (2010) *Crescere in Italia*. Milano: Edizioni Unicopli.

the migratory flows subscribed by the Ministry of Education through documents and statements (*circolari, Pronuncie*) that share, and uphold, the educational recommendations issued by the Council of Europe<sup>7</sup>. As is known, intercultural education invites policy makers, educationists, and teachers to understand cultural diversity as a contribution “to cultural vitality” that “can also enhance social and economic performance”<sup>8</sup> as a resource for all students, regardless of whether there are non Italian peers<sup>9</sup> in the classroom<sup>10</sup>, or as the “normal human condition”, as anthropologist Ward H. Goodenough argued a long time ago in an article on multiculturalism (1976).

In Italy, the number of non Italian students has indeed increased with the years, and according to data of the Ministry of Education in school year 2009-2010 they were 673,592, accounting

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<sup>7</sup> GOBBO, F. (2004a). Dal multiculturalismo americano all'intercultura: il contributo del Consiglio d'Europa, in G. Favaro, L. Luatti, a cura di, *L'intercultura dalla A alla Z*. Milano: FrancoAngeli Editore, pp. 38-49. GOBBO, F. (2011). Ethnographic Research in Multicultural Educational Contexts as a Contribution to Intercultural Dialogue, in *Policy Futures in Education*, 9, 1, pp. 35-42.

<sup>8</sup> COUNCIL OF EUROPE (2008) *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: 'living together as equals in dignity'*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper\\_final\\_revised\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/source/white%20paper_final_revised_en.pdf) p. 13

<sup>9</sup> The designation of immigrants' children as non Italian refers to their citizenship status which is that of their parents, and has to be understood as “with non Italian citizenship”. Only when those youth reach the age of 18, and certain conditions have been satisfied they can apply for the Italian citizenship. Yet, because they have usually lived many years in Italy, often share many aspects of Italian culture and can communicate effectively enough in Italian, it would not be appropriate to describe them as “foreigners”, given their familiarity with the host country.

<sup>10</sup> See GOBBO, F. (2000) *Pedagogia interculturale. Il progetto educativo nelle società complesse*. Roma: Carocci. OMODEO, M. (2001) *La scuola multiculturale*. Roma: Carocci. ONGINI, V., NOSENGHI, C. (2009) *Una classe a colori*. Milano: Vallardi. GOBBO, F., Ricucci R. (2011) “Classroom segregation? No, thanks”. Reflections from the Italian case, in Bakker J., Denessen E., Peters D. & Walraven G. eds. (2011) *International perspectives on countering school segregation*. Antwerp: Garant, pp. 205-221.

for 7.5% of the total school population.<sup>11</sup> Those students, who are unevenly distributed across the country, have now become a structural component of the Italian school system. However, their educational career and experience are often impaired by the fact that they are not always enrolled in the school grade corresponding to their age (as the official rule states), that schools are only partially effective in making their learning successful (with the consequent school delay that grows significantly with age, school grade and type of school), and that the number of students who enroll in vocational and technical schools is considerably higher than the number of those who choose to enroll in high school.<sup>12</sup>

It must be pointed out that at about the time Rebecca Sansoé went into the “field”, the world economic crisis erupted so that her findings also testify to the diminishing work opportunities both for Italian and non Italian students, and to the negative impact on those who specifically need a job in order to gain legal immigrant status and a stay permit . Her research on “initial vocational training” should thus be read against the contemporary larger socio-economic and political events, whose impact on the Italian job market has produced a rise in unemployment among young people and adults, both Italian and non Italian workers.

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<sup>11</sup> CARITAS/MIGRANTES (2010) *Immigrazione. Dossier statistico 2010*. Roma: IDOS – Centro Studi e Ricerche.

<sup>12</sup> Id. GOBBO, F., RICUCCI R., 2011, pp. 205-221. MINISTERO DELL'ISTRUZIONE, DELL'UNIVERSITÀ E DELLA RICERCA (2009) *Alunni con cittadinanza non italiana. Scuole statali e non statali anno scolastico 2007/2008*. Roma.

The reasons for enrolling in a vocational course - more precisely in a course of "initial vocational training" - and the meaning that such a choice, together with the school experience, had for non Italian youth were among the research questions that Rebecca Sansoé explored through participant observation, informal conversations and non structured interviews carried out during fieldwork that could give "voice" to students and teachers. From the perspective of anthropology of education, ethnographic research not only represents what has been appropriately dubbed as an "experiment of experience"<sup>13</sup>, but it furthermore becomes an *experiment of intercultural experience*.<sup>14</sup> In fact, through the researcher's participant observation, an intercultural conversation is set in motion between her and her interlocutors along which the cultural beliefs and expectations respectively held by the different social actors (researcher included) are highlighted and brought to their awareness. When *work* is the focus and end goal of a training path, ethnographic research provides the opportunity to learn about what work means for people with different life experiences, as well as how it can answer their human needs, aspirations and rights.

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<sup>13</sup> PIASERE, L. (1997) Etnografia romani ovvero l'etnografia come esperienza, in F. Gobbo, a cura di, *Cultura Intercultura*. Padova: Imprimer Editrice, pp. 35-80.

<sup>14</sup> See GOBBO, F. (2005) Ethnographic Research as a Re/Source of Intercultural Education, in S. Binder, M. Luciak, eds. "Intercultural Education", *Austrian Studies in Anthropology*, Sondernummer 1, pp. 6-17. GOBBO, F. (2007) L'etnografia dell'educazione come processo di apprendimento interculturale, in V. Ongini, a cura di, *Se la scuola incontra il mondo*. Firenze: Idest, pp. 33-42. GOBBO, F. (2008) Learning from others, learning with others: the tense encounter between equality and difference, in *Orbis Scholae*, 2, pp. 55-75. GOBBO, F. (2009) L'educazione alle differenze, l'attenzione alle differenze, in AA. VV. *Identità italiana tra Europa e società multiculturale*. Colle Val d'Elsa (SI): Fondazione Intercultura, pp. 101-125. GALLONI, F. (2007). Etnografia: scelta metodologica e non solo, in F. Gobbo, a cura di, *La ricerca per una scuola che cambia*. Padova: Imprimer Editrice, pp. 21-42.

## 1) REFLECTIONS ON A METHODOLOGICAL CHOICE

The positive recognition of cultural diversity that is supported and disseminated by several *Recommendations* of the Council of Europe, together with dissent about assimilation policies in education and language realms, have required a different approach towards social integration or inclusion – as today we prefer to say – that are the relevant goals to pursue. Because social cohesion is now seen as what can more effectively be attained by learning to understand and respect differences in beliefs and life styles than by stigmatizing them and the people living according to them, education has a fundamental role to play. More specifically, *intercultural and multicultural education represent the main approaches intended to address, and break, the long silence on cultural diversity, and to state the need for a deep understanding of it as it is shared, negotiated or contested within the framework of the cultures of the school and of pupils' educational experience. (...) From an anthropological perspective, the cultural dimensions characterizing multicultural classrooms are what the various actors on the educational scene have to grapple with, or can instead take for granted. Furthermore, such dimensions impact*



*differently on differently enculturated children (and their families) and on their school experience.*<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, qualitative research, and ethnography of education in particular, can significantly contribute to the interpretation of schooling and educational processes since they look at schools, classrooms and out-of-school places as research “fields” characterized by *cultural* ways, meanings and values that in turn shape the educational relation, the contents that are transmitted<sup>16</sup> and the subjects’ expectations. Since the anthropologists’ entrance into the various educational contexts more than forty years ago, the notion of cultural discontinuity has substituted that of socio-cultural disadvantage, or of cultural deprivation, and has highlighted the different meanings that education may have for different social or cultural groups. Though itself thoroughly questioned later on, cultural discontinuity is still heuristically useful when researching education in multicultural contexts, and especially the extent to which the subjects involved in learning and teaching share educational meanings and goals, or, on the contrary, are divided by a history of inequality and socio-educational injustice. Thus, issues such as equality of opportunity, recognition and valorization of diversity, as well as cultural identities have successfully been researched through an

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<sup>15</sup> Id. GOBBO, F. (2011), p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> WOLCOTT, H. F. (2004) *A scuola in un villaggio kwakiutl*. Padova: Imprimerie Editrice (or.ed. 1966, 1989).

ethnographic approach<sup>17</sup>, that always takes into account the wider socio-political fabric, even when fieldwork is carried out at the (micro)level of a classroom or of a youth centre. Furthermore, it is precisely during fieldwork (and sometimes beyond fieldwork, see Galloni<sup>18</sup>) that the subjects of research attain the status of the *interlocutors* of the ethnographer who, while she/he listens, observes and asks, is at the same time available to be observed, listened to, and asked<sup>19</sup>.

An ethnographic approach allows researchers to understand, and interpret the processes of constructing, maintaining or changing meanings (as well as relations and identities, habits and objectives) within the everyday diversity, by highlighting the dialectic rapport individuals – as *members* of socio-cultural groups - entertain with the cultural traditions and histories that make their behaviors, expectations and choices differently meaningful. The cultural intersection of contexts and of individuals<sup>20</sup> requires that the ethnographer gain access into the layers of meanings, and their variability, that qualify a “field”, so as to provide readers (such as

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<sup>17</sup> See GOBBO, F., a cura di (1996) *Antropologia dell'educazione*. Milano: Edizioni Unicopli. GOBBO, F., a cura di (2003) *Etnografia dell'educazione in Europa*. Milano: Edizioni Unicopli. GOBBO, F., a cura di (2007). *Processi educativi nelle società multiculturali*. Roma: CISU. GOBBO, F., a cura di (2007) *La ricerca per una scuola che cambia*. Padova: Imprimerie Editrice. GOBBO, F., a cura di (2008) *L'educazione al tempo dell'intercultura*. Roma: Carocci. And GOBBO, F., Gomes A. M., a cura di (2003) *Etnografia nei contesti educativi*. Roma: CISU.

<sup>18</sup> Id., GALLONI, 2007. pp. 21-42.

<sup>19</sup> Id. GOBBO, 2007, pp. 33-42. Id. GALLONI, 2007, pp. 21-42.

<sup>20</sup> GOBBO, F. (2004b). Cultural Intersections: the life story of a Roma cultural mediator, in *European Educational Research Journal*, 3, 3, pp. 626-641

other researchers, policy makers, teachers and students of education, just to mention a few) with subtle, and always provisional representations of social structures and cultural interactions. In fact, the aim of the ethnographer is *to detect meanings that participants assign to their own behaviors, the way in which they interpret situations and the point of view from which they look at specific issues*<sup>21</sup>, and to pay close attention if the subjects' points of view and statements respond or contest social structures and rules, or may eventually change as result of given spatial and /or temporal events (as will be seen in paragraphs 2, 3, 4).

## 2) THE "INITIAL VOCATIONAL TRAINING" CONTEXT

Official statistics show the choice<sup>22</sup> that non Italian students make after completing the 10 years of compulsory education, yet numbers and percentages tell us little about both the school career and the experiences of those students. Official statistics can alert educationists and policy makers about a trend or a problem concerning the issue of educational and social justice, but cannot account for the processes and motivations guiding the youth's choice. For the reasons above said, it seemed urgent to integrate the numerical data with a qualitative approach better able to offer a

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<sup>21</sup> WOODS, P. (2003) I metodi etnografici nella ricerca sull'insegnamento creativo, in F. Gobbo, a cura di, *Etnografia dell'educazione in Europa*, Milano: Edizioni Unicopli, p. 25.

<sup>22</sup> Ethnographic findings indicate that "choice" and "decision" are less than satisfactory terms to explain the concentration of non Italian students in the technical, professional and vocational sectors of the Italian school system.

wider, complex perspective on learning and teaching (and on projects for the future) that is constructed through the reflective, collaborative dialectics between the students and the ethnographer.

In order to understand the meaning that an “initial vocational training” has for non Italian students, and also to recognize and point out the latter’s agency in relation to the training and to job prospects, between 2008 and 2009, Rebecca Sansoé conducted an 18 month ethnographic research in two classrooms - a first year and a second year course. The students involved were 23, aged 16-19; they were enrolled in the two-year vocational course for “machine operators” and, among them, the non Italian ones were 14: 11 of them were from Morocco, 2 from Senegal, 1 from Peru. Some had immigrated into Italy at an early age with their families, or by themselves<sup>23</sup>, others had been born in Italy from immigrant parents<sup>24</sup>. In the first year classroom, of the 20 students enrolled, only three were non Italian. The balance changed in the second year classroom, where out of 13 students, only two were Italian<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> In this case, they are usually teenagers and officially defined as “unaccompanied minors” whose right to education has been always recognized by immigration legislation - Id., GOBBO, RICUCCI, 2011, pp. 35-42.

<sup>24</sup> According to the current legislation, foreign citizens who were born and reside legally in Italy until they reach 18, acquire Italian citizenship if, before they are nineteen, they declare their intention to become Italian citizens and can document to have resided in Italy for 18 years without interruption. The rule is related to the fact that there is no direct access to Italian citizenship, since it is based on the principle of *jus sanguinis*. Because of this principle, Italian citizenship is instead automatically transmitted to the descendants of Italian citizens who migrated abroad.

<sup>25</sup> With regard to students’ citizenship, and its relevance in non Italian students’ stories, it was decided at the onset of the research that citizenship (or ethnicity, as it is more often incorrectly defined, as students are nationals even when they may belong to an ethnic group) would not be considered a distinctive criterion, unless the narratives stressed its importance.

As already pointed out in the introduction, in Italy “initial vocational training” addresses 14-17 year-old youth who either opt for it either to complete compulsory education through compulsory training, or to continue schooling after lower secondary school, thanks to these short length vocational courses that are offered by accredited training agencies, according to the State-Region Agreement of June 19, 2003. This type of courses provide classes in general cultural education for three days a week, and training in vocational skills for two days a week. In the final year, students attend a “stage” in a factory for three months.

During the 18 months of fieldwork, the ethnographer observed, analyzed and interpreted the daily interactional processes between teacher(s) and learner(s), learner(s) and learner(s), as well as between all of them and the different teaching/learning situations and contexts. The observation was carried out in the classrooms, during training in the school workshop, and, finally, during the apprenticeship in factories. The long term fieldwork also allowed to observe if, and how, the educational and training experiences, together with the students’ awareness of the impending economic crisis, affected their school attendance and their plans and projects for the future. Furthermore, informal conversations and in-depth interviews provided access to the students’ and teachers’ expectations, as well as to unforeseen developments.

The wider urban context, within which the research was carried out, is Turin, in the North-West of Italy, and one of the cities that greatly contributed to realization of the Italian industrial tradition.

Though today the elected representatives of the Piedmont region and the city of Turin make considerable efforts to diversify the production sectors and to develop alternative economic opportunities, Turin is still qualified by, and known for its car industry. Its historical “motor” is FIAT that can in turn avails itself of a network of small and medium factories working for, and dependent on the major organization. Until not long ago, the students trained in the courses for “machine operators” – as the ones whose stories are reported here – were almost immediately hired as skilled workers in factories located in the outskirts of Turin or in the Piedmont region. However, the recent economic crisis has deeply impacted on the car industry and provoked a drastic reduction in the employment of young factory workers. Consequently, the students who are now attending the “initial vocational training” courses, as well as those who just graduated from them, are less likely to find a job position as quickly as before. Thus, even though it is foreseen that the training supported by public funds will continue, youth will probably have fewer possibilities to apply, and be hired for work they are qualified to do.

### **3) VOCATIONAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS, OR “BUT I WANTED TO BE A MECHANIC”**

The stories these students tell about the choice of an “initial vocational training” course indicate how the previous school career is essential for understanding such a choice. Generally, young people’s

enrolment into such a course is not their first option, as all the students, with the exception of one, reported that they had unsuccessfully tried to attend a professional or technical higher secondary school. The students without Italian citizenship, who had first enrolled in higher secondary education, had experienced failure not unlike their Italian peers, although most of them were already a year behind compared to the Italian ones, because of their enrolment in classes below their age group in the primary and lower secondary school courses<sup>26</sup>.

As institutional advice is not always available at the end of lower secondary education, the non Italian students, and their families, usually seek the advice of a teacher, a social worker, or a friend, who are trusted and expected to give some useful orientation.<sup>27</sup> Thus, according to the idea of a “foreign student” held by such “advisors” as well as of their perception of future opportunities open to those students once they graduate from lower secondary schooling, the latter are suggested to choose enrolment into a vocational training path. Ethnographic research conducted in Lombardy, among Sikh youth<sup>28</sup>, also pointed out that, not unlike what happens in the Turin context, this sort of educational channeling

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<sup>26</sup> According to data provided by MIUR (the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research) in the Italian school system, an average 40% of students with no Italian citizenship are older than the regular enrolment age. *Id.* **MINISTERO DELL'ISTRUZIONE, DELL'UNIVERSITÀ E DELLA RICERCA (2009)**.

<sup>27</sup> GALLONI, F. (2008) *Studenti sikh di fronte alla scuola secondaria*, in F. Gobbo, a cura di, *L'educazione al tempo dell'intercultura*. Roma: Carocci, pp. 29-47. GALLONI F. (2009) *Giovani indiani a Cremona. Storie di successo*. Roma: CISU.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*, GALLONI, 2009.

responds to concerns about the non Italian students' limited language skills and their (often assumed) socio-economic disadvantage, in consequence of which the learning contexts are favored that are perceived as "easier" for foreigners, and able to provide a quicker way out of school and into work. Implicitly, or perhaps not so implicitly, such advices reflect a low evaluation of training as education. Furthermore, the perception of training as educationally less demanding than other types of schooling indicates a sort of protective attitude towards non Italian students, owing to the prevailing concern for language proficiency among teacher, that in fact also worried some of the youth. For instance, those who arrived in Italy with their families, and enrolled early in the Italian school system, narrated that they had to cope with a language problem. The school failures that often followed made it difficult for them to imagine a "second chance" as students of a higher secondary institution.

As the two quotes below will illustrate, enrolment into a vocational training course often meant that the young person had to fold up his aspirations and consider his chances for the future within what his "advisor" viewed as a realistic appraisal. Malik<sup>29</sup> came from Senegal with his family when he was 11 and the ethnographer met him when he was in the second year of the course for "machine operators". After completing lower secondary schooling, he had enrolled into the first year of a technical institute for dental

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<sup>29</sup> This name, as all the others, are fictive names to protect the identity of the students.



mechanics, where he had however failed twice. He had then dropped out of that school, and made the decision to attend a short term course, where he could at least get a basic vocational degree and become a skilled machine operator. Yet, in his words, *"I spoke with an educator. I wanted to be a steward, but she advised me to come here, so that I could have more chances"*. Malik would have preferred a job in contact with people, while, contrary to his wishes, becoming a skilled machine operator will not give him many opportunities to communicate with others, though it may secure him a job. Apparently, the person who advised him genuinely believed that a different type of work context would be better for him, and perhaps Malik's blackness played a role when the "advisor" directed him to vocational training.

On his part, Omar - who has lived in Italy with his family from Morocco since he was two - recognized that *"I really did wrong choosing this school, I thought it was for a [car] mechanic, I really don't know how I got there, a teacher told me, I got here and my father told me "keep on going"... This job is getting into my head, but I say, I wanted to work on cars, now I know more about lathe than cars!"*

Like Omar, other students, both Italian and non Italian, sincerely stated that they had enrolled into the courses for turner and milling operator without knowing what those terms meant, thus indicating how the names of the courses had often been misunderstood by them, and that they had chosen the course for "machine operators" thinking they would be trained as "car

mechanic". Though on this occasion the students' whole narratives cannot be presented, it can be said that such narratives highlight how those students allowed other people to channel their aspirations into short length learning tracks because they did not have enough information about what the Italian school system can offer, on the one hand, and on the other because they did not know what the courses they "chose" really entailed for their future.

#### **4) WORK PROSPECTS: HANDLE WITH CARE, OR PLANNING THE FUTURE STEP BY STEP**

The way in which non Italian students foresee their future is well illustrated by how they answer the question "Why did you choose this course?". Although the goal they underline - "to work" - is also pursued by their Italian peers, when both Italian and non Italian youth are more deeply probed we can learn that the same verb refers to two respectively different scenarios. For the Italian students, "to work" (and to work as a skilled worker) represents a rejection of the theoretical and abstract subject matters that they associate with the previous negative learning experiences at school. In their narratives, the choice of a more "practical" course was often described in opposition to the *school* rules and discipline that refused them and that they in turn refuse.

On the contrary, for the non Italian students the answer "to work" is not explained in opposition to their past schooling experience, but instead it signifies both their projection towards the

future, as well as a personal commitment, thanks to which *today* is meaningful and *tomorrow* holds the promise that their post-school plans can be realized. Thus, the pressure that non Italian students mention in relation to the future qualifies their narratives - unlike what happens in the Italians' ones - though the intensity of their feelings can vary according to their life experiences and the different circumstances and motivations for emigration. As all of them are well aware, "work is useful for many things". Both for those who live with their family and for those who chose to come by themselves - the unaccompanied minors -, the pressure they are under is also an effect of the Italian legislation. The latter protects the young immigrants until they are 18, however, after they reach 18, the only way they can stay permanently and legally in Italy is to have a job. The need for a stay permit, the financial uncertainty and the lack of a permanent job are all factors which contribute to pin these students' perspective to a flat horizon and require of them that they take up a premature responsibility for their lives.

The following excerpt from Kamal's life-story provides another telling, albeit concise, example: he had rejoined his father two years before Rebecca Sansoé met him, and was then attending the second year of the course for "machine operators". According to him: "*The things you can do over there, in Morocco, here you can do no longer. There, you forget everything, but since you arrive in Italy, you must either work or study.*"

Emigration forces young people to take up responsibility not only for their lives, but also for those of their families. In fact, had

Kamal stayed in Morocco, he could have attended the university as his father did, but since he emigrated to Italy, he could not continue to study because he had to contribute financially to the support of the family members who had remained at home.

One can detect a similar echo in the words of Omar, the young man from Morocco quoted before, who came to Italy when he was a toddler: *“If I start to work after qualification, and I have to find something to do, I’ll go to evening classes. Most people here do not think to the school, with all the problems they have, some of us are without families, some [have to acknowledge], family claims.”*

When, from the narrator’s point of view, he is *here*, that is not in one’s home country, he learns that his family will become one of his concerns, and justly so “because you cannot think only for yourself”. Kamal’s and Omar’s life-stories were very different, nevertheless by listening closely to them the ethnographer realizes how the differences become less relevant and a similar pattern emerges, namely that imagining one’s future means to have to take into account the expectations and the needs of one’s family members as well as to answer both expectations and needs as effectively as possible, on the one hand. On the other, that non Italian youth, regardless of whether they are first or second generations, follow a short term, step-by-step way of planning for the future, and, finally, that they often had a difficult school experience, not unlike their Italian peers, that could not but influence their view of the future.

## CONCLUSIONS

As was argued in paragraph 1, and documented through the voices of the three non Italian students, an ethnographic research seeks to understand the meanings that actions and beliefs have for the individuals and/or group members, so as to then share them with concerned researchers, teachers, policy makers who are asking themselves questions about their taken-for-granted everyday life or schooling that is now characterized by a heterogeneous school population. The ethnographer's goals is not only to show the educational and intercultural relevance of narratives<sup>30</sup>, but, through those, to also understand if, and how, the narrators' points of views and statements have adapted to, or are contesting social rules and work prospects, as well as the narrators' reasons for legitimizing cultural changes or maintenance. The research and understanding of processes through which behaviors and beliefs, together with their meanings, are transmitted and maintained, or, on the contrary, new ones are acquired and elaborated, call for the long term cooperation that proceeds along fieldwork and an inductive approach. Though both can discourage generalizations, they can certainly promote the exploration of context-specific questions and issue in diverse, though formally similar, situations. It follows that the search for the "external validity" of a qualitative, focused inquiry<sup>31</sup>, is carried out by

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<sup>30</sup> Ethnographic research does not consist of interviews – however long and unstructured they may be - as is often claimed and carried out today, but it always needs the indispensable support of participant observation, thanks to which statements and behaviors can be compared.

<sup>31</sup> WOODS, P. (2003) I metodi etnografici nella ricerca sull'insegnamento creativo, in F. Gobbo, a cura di, *Etnografia dell'educazione in Europa*, Milano: Edizioni Unicopli, pp. 21-50.

considering interpretive breakthroughs or innovative theoretical proposals as heuristic perspectives to be tested by further research. The latter may point out the common cultural and educational features along the schooling experience, underline the critical differences between two schools or classrooms and its social surroundings, or the contradictory conduct of teachers and headmasters who, still today, are facing a big challenge.

Due to reasons of space, in this article only some points have been brought up to the attention of other interested researchers. The aim has all along been that of indicating how the educational interactions between non Italian students, teachers and advisors develop so as to pursue social and educational justice and achieve it. The non Italian students' accounts suggests that, though there are multiple reasons for enrolling into an "initial vocational training" course, two of them may be hypothesized as particularly relevant: on the one hand, the teachers' assessment of, and concern for the limited language proficiency of those students that can – and often does – impair learning in secondary schooling, and, on the other, the idea of migration, and its connection with that of social mobility, held by both teachers and formal and informal advisors. With regard to the first hypothesis, Galloni found that a similar attitude was present among teachers in the Cremona area where she studied the social and educational life of Sikh students<sup>32</sup>, together with the advisors' belief that a job as a skilled worker can satisfactorily answer these

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<sup>32</sup> Id., GALLONI, 2008. And, GALLONI, 2009.

young people's plans for the future. Not unlike what happens in Cremona, in Turin too teachers and advisors seem to view the young immigrants', or the children of immigrants' social mobility as related to jobs as skilled workers. With regard to this, it may further be hypothesized that the invitation issued by concerned Italians to remember that Italians themselves were emigrants, and therefore that they nourish feelings of solidarity and openness towards immigrants to Italy, could also produce the unwanted effect of ignoring the differences between the old Italian emigration and the present immigration flows. Unlike the majority of those who left Italy for the Americas and later on for some European countries, or moved from the Southern Italian regions to the industrial North of Italy, most immigrants of today are educated people, and many of them hold post compulsory education diplomas or university degrees<sup>33</sup>. Furthermore, as Italians learned from the Albanians' arrival in 1991, and are now learning from the participants in the political unrest in Northern Africa and in the Middle East, the media – from television programs in the 1990s to Internet in the XXI century – have played an acculturation role that can hardly be underestimated. Internet, in particular, has not only disseminated new visions of social and political life but has in particular provided an unforeseen opportunity to communicate across national boundaries (e.g., the interviews of

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<sup>33</sup> See Platform for Intercultural Europe & CGIL (2010) *Intercultural Dialogue and the Workplace. Report on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Practice Exchange* (Roma, May 28-29 2010), downloadable at [www.intercultural-europe.org](http://www.intercultural-europe.org)

Egyptian bloggers who explain how they owed to their Serbian peers the politically effective use of the technology), as well as to create networks for action. Thus, it can be hypothesized that the cultural capital of many immigrant families and children of today is possibly greater than the one the Italian immigrants could count on, although it goes too often unrecognized by Italians, who instead focus on language learning, seen as the immigrants' problem. In all probability this latter belief, that persists among many teachers, is also a remnant of the Italians' history of difficulties with, and exclusion from learning the national language.

Is the non Italian youth's choice to enroll in "initial vocational training" to be exclusively attributed to teachers' and advisors' authority? In her study on the secondary schooling of Sikh students in Cremona, Galloni<sup>34</sup> found that the various advisors' favor of a certain local institution of vocational education was in line with the reckoning of work prospects that those young people made. Their pragmatic outlook disregarded the teachers' worries about their knowledge of Italian, but nevertheless chose to invest in a training course that would secure them a job. In Turin, the non Italian students furthermore stress how they will be able to help the family members at home, once they are hired. They envisage themselves as "agents" in a more specific sense – namely as responsible adults who must also take into account the Italian legislation on immigrants – than the one usually employed by anthropologists of education. Not

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<sup>34</sup> Id. GALLONI, 2009.



unlike what happened to generations of immigrants before them, work (and before it, training for skilled work) is seen as what allows them to realize the right to improve their life and, hopefully, life around them. It pertains to teachers, and intercultural educationists, to valorize these attitudes and expectations by highlighting the crucial values that can be learned by giving voice, and respectfully listening to learners.

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