



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

Francesca D'Errico\*, Isabella Poggi\*, Licinia Correa\*\*

\*Roma Tre University

Via Manin, 53

+393389943352

poggi@uniroma3.it;

fderrico@uniroma3.it

\*\*University of Belo Horizonte

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### ABSTRACT

The paper presents the first results of a comparative research on the interaction of teenagers with school in Italy and Brazil, and the formation of their identity as students. Three focus groups with students of 3 high schools in the province of Rome were analyzed through quali-quantitative techniques of textual analysis. Results, compared to the parallel Brazilian study, show striking differences between Italy and Brazil as to the students' expectations about school, but also some similarities in their school experience and for 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 adolescents 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 the Marie-Curie 237487 European Project we run a study on



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how teenagers in Italy and Brazil view school, and what they think is its role in their future life. This paper presents some results of this study concerning the view of teenagers in some Italian secondary schools.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The main aim of our study was to investigate how young people interact with school and what are their expectations and hopes about their future after secondary school, how they construct their self-image as students and build their networks of sociability. We also wanted to detect possible differences in the way Italian vs. Brazilian adolescents position themselves towards school and their original social and cultural milieu.

This paper illustrates the results of three focus groups run in Italy, and finally compares them with corresponding results of the research in Brazil.

### **METHOD**

The research, still in progress, included a first stage to tune up the research questions through focus groups, and a second stage to test the first findings by a survey study. This paper presents the first results of some focus groups in Italy.

#### **3.1. The focus group**

To tune up the focus group questions we first run 2 pilot focus groups in Italy: one in Rome, with a group of middle class teenagers attending two humanity high schools, 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. Based on the analysis of these pilot focus groups, we finalized a focus group outline which questions tackled 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)
- Relationship with adults and models to imitate (question 8)
- Youth (question 9)
- Life project (questions 10 – 14)
- Identity and values (questions 16 – 19)

#### **Participants**

Here we present the results of three focus groups run in Italy: 1. at Liceo Classico Manara (a high school on humanities), a quite central school of Rome attended by middle class students; 2. Liceo Scientifico Talotta Gullace (science), in a suburb of Rome; Istituto Tecnico (technology), at Monterotondo, a big village in the province of Rome.

29 students (balanced by gender, 16 females and 13 males), chosen randomly, volunteered to participate. The interviewer roughly explained the purpose of the research.

#### **3.3. Focus group analysis**

The focus groups were audio-recorded and their transcription were submitted to lexical and textual analysis.

We run a textual analysis through "Lexico 3", a free software of lexical and textual analysis built by Sorbonne nouvelle - Paris 3 (<http://www.tal.univ-paris3.fr/lexico/manuelsL3/L3-usermanual.pdf>).



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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 20%, which represents the limit value to consider a corpus interpretable).

An automatic quanti-qualitative analysis was performed on the subjects' answers through a lexicometric approach. "Textual statistics" (Lebart and Salem, 1988), an application of statistical principles to textual corpora, aims to extract semantic information from a text starting from the list of words obtained.

The lexical analysis includes some descriptive information, particularly interesting to understand what participants think about the different areas discussed during the focus group, coming from the theme words, the most frequent words out of all occurrences.

Moreover, 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.

Let us start from the theme words.

### 3.3.1. Social relationships

From the most frequent theme words, a relational aspect emerges as central for the teenagers in the corpus. The following words are the most frequently used: *first*, *persone* (persons, 105), *persona* (person, 101), *professori* (teachers, 63), *professore* (teacher, 67), and then *amici* (friends, 54), *rapporto* (relationship, 45), *famiglia* (family, 39), *padre* (father, 22), *genitori* (parents, 19), *gruppo* (group, 15).

In particular, the term *persone* (persons) is used to express the curiosity and richness that the teenagers see in a relationship, from which later in time to build an interaction and a reference point, that they clearly desire.

*La scuola ti aiuta anche a conoscere persone che secondo me ti porterai poi tutta la vita.*

School also helps you to know persons that in my opinion you'll take along with you all life long

### 3.3.2 Family and friends

Different from expected, the family, even in its structural complexity, and primarily defined as an affective pole, represented by the maternal function of care, and as an ethical pole, represented by the normative function of the father (Scabini, 2003), is defined by the teenagers in our research as a resource you can tackle from in you problematic moments; the students constantly refer to it, on the basis of a profound gratitude towards its members. The extinction of association forms vicarious of the family confirms its basic role in the evolution toward the so-called phase of the "young adult" (Scabini, 2003).

*Più che altro che le opinioni di cui tengo più conto è la mia famiglia . Particolarmente a loro va il novanta per cento di opinioni più importanti. Poi problema serio, io mi rivolgo sempre, faccio sempre questo passaggio, famiglia e amici.*

Most of all, the opinions I take into account the most is my family. Particularly, 90% of my opinions goes to them. Then for a serious problem I always address, I always pass through, family and friends.

Being the family so central also during "adult" formation (Scabini, 2003), the participants' words seem to imply that this model will be replicated through transmission of the same values across generations. Different from the nineteen seventy youth generation, which strongly opposed their family values and through this family itself, dreaming of a radical change of values, in these young boys and girls family is a safe place to go back when in trouble; but also, the values of family, and the need for making a family of their own are very firm in these students. Though being quite vague as to their life project as far as job or future activity is concerned, as to having a family they have very clear ideas:



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Certo mi piacerebbe avere una famiglia di sicuro e un lavoro che non so neanche quale.

Of course, I would like to have a family, for sure, and a job, I do not even know which one.

Però sono sogni impossibili, quindi non lo so. Però una famiglia sicuro mi piacerebbe averla.

But they are impossible dreams, therefore I don't know. But for sure I would like to have a family

In this phase of life, the peer group is generally very determinant for the self-concept (Palmonari e Rubini, 2006), but it is often opposed to family, as a way to create new values. Notwithstanding this, only secondarily do our participants refer to friends, mainly i vecchi amici (the old friends), quelli che conosco da più temp (those I have known for longer), quelli con cui sono cresciuto (those I grew up with), i più cari (the dearest ones), i migliori amici (the best friends); there is a tendency to share interests and passions with both family and friends, along with a desire to refer to these persons when in trouble.

Un problema serio, io mi rivolgo sempre, faccio sempre questo passaggio, famiglia e amici.”

A serious problem, I always turn to, I always shift to those, family and friends.

### 3.3.3 Normativity

A theme tackled in our focus were the teenagers' values. Among the most frequent words a semantic category of “normativity” emerges, including very frequent deontic verbs in various morphological forms: devi (you must, 24), devo (I must, 24), dovrebbe (it should, 19). Strangely enough, the verb *dovere* (must) in the third person is generally associated to study and school tasks, while the first person generally applies to verbs like *fare* (do, make) *viaggiare* (travel), *partire* (leave), *comunicare* (communicate).

Within this “normative” semantic category a central role is played by the normative dimension of *rispetto* (respect, 26), a relational and social rather than an individual value, that results prevailing in the students of the urban suburb school. Respect firstly seems to be that towards people of different opinions.

Libertà di pensiero . . . cioè io rispetto qualsiasi persona che abbia una propria opinione.

Freedom of thought... that is, I respect any person that has an opinion of one's own.

Il rispetto il rispetto di civiltà verso chiunque eh il saper accettare quelle che sono le idee le opinioni di una persona.

Respect, respect as civilization towards anyone, well, being able to accept those that are the ideas the opinions of a person.

Respect is somehow seen as a minimal unit of contact with the other, beyond social norms and values. But sometimes it is more something you pretend from others, without which no human relation can exist:

Proprio la mia immagine è sul rispetto quella è la prima cosa cioè io se una persona me porta rispetto io do il massimo per quella persona . . . magari anche per stare male io . . .”

Really my image is about respect, that is the first thing, I mean, I, if a person respects me I give the most for that person... even to the extent of suffering myself...

Però al momento in cui la persona non risponde di rispetto per me sei nulla . . . anzi ti vengo proprio contro . . .

But when the person does not respond with respect for me, you are nothing... rather, I really oppose you.

### 3.3.4. Life project

In talking about their life project, the students reveal a high level of vagueness and somewhat a flight from thinking of their future.

Io penso più al presente che al futuro, cioè non ci penso tanto. Non riesco ad immaginarmi.



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I think more of the present than of the future, that is, I do not think of it so much. I cannot imagine myself.

E' io diciamo che m'accontenterei anche de continua' su questa via cioè la previsione del futuro è più o meno quella che abbiamo detto tutti . . poi c'è il sogno quello ideale sta a casa non fa niente

It is that, let's say, I would be contented also to go on in this route, that is, my forecast about future is more or less one we all said... then there is the dream, the ideal one, stay home not doing nothing.

If in the case above the word sogno (dream) is used in an ironic way, to state how impossible would be to afford a luxurious life without a hard work, in other fragments, the dimension of "dream" as opposed to "reality" emerges, but, strangely enough, mainly in the school in the province of Rome (11), while it is almost absent in Rome city (only one context).

Bah guarda ho abbastanza le idee no confuse . . sono senza idee proprio vabbè dici il sogno e la realtà eh il sogno vabbè il sogno che c'avevo fin da ragazzino . . che comunque ho realizzato è giocò a pallone sinceramente

Well, oh, I have my ideas quite confused... I am without ideas in fact well you say dream and reality, well the dream ok the dream that I had as a little boy... that anyway I realized is to play football, sincerely

Però ad esempio la famiglia può servire come appoggio . . per dirti se vai appresso a sto sogno  
But for example your family can be a support... for example, if you go after this dream

Mainly, however, the word sogno (dream) is used to contrast it to something it is possible to do. This reveals a sense of pessimism that is recurrent in low class students.

Ho dei miei progetti, comunque dopo la scuola. Cercare di entrare in Accademia, queste cose qua. Anche se so che comunque sarà molto difficile però spero di arrivarci. Anche se comunque come sta andando il mondo tramite raccomandazioni e robe del genere, non è che c'è tanta, non è che ci sono tante aspettative.

I have my own projects, anyway after school. Try to go to the Academy, stuff like this. Although I know that anyway it will be very difficult , but I hope I can get there, Even if anyway how the world is going through recommendations and stuff like that, it is not that there is so much, so many expectations.

A significant number of the students' statements clearly show mistrust in the possibility of finding a job without support from the family, or powerful people.

### 3.3.5. The characteristic lexicon of Italian teenagers

A second step in lexicographic analysis is the analysis of specificities, aimed at by comparing different sub-parts of text to find the characteristic lexicon of a corpus: the words that are most frequent in sub-texts distinguished according to given variables. To find the characteristic lexicon you divide the 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 overrepresented or underrepresented with respect to a normal distribution [Bolasco et al., 1999; Lebart and Salem, 1988].

In this study we chose three main variables, type of school (humanities / scientific / technical), area (city center / suburb / province), gender (male / female), and thematic area of the focus (school and teachers, models, identity-values and personal projects).

Crossing the variables type of school x area, the semantic categories found in the thematic analysis are detailed through analysis of specificities. As to the relational aspects, in the suburb scientific high school the group dimension is stronger, participants more frequently use noi (we), nostro



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(our), gruppi (groups), while in the province technical school, institutional words are preferred, like professore (professor), classe (class), laurea (degree), scuola (school), dovere (must): something like a more awesome attitude in the school that is less prestigious for both type and area.

### 3.3.6. School

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

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.

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.

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

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 davanti a quelli che sono gli eventi che poi ti capitano.

In my opinion, the true importance of high school is not knowledge of history or chemical reaction by itself, but being able to take up one's responsibilities before 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 cultural contents side, school actually does not give you all that it should give you, even if this partly depends on the fact that the Italian State does not care school enough.

As to what they expect from school, some students think school should be useful to learn thing, but they attribute other students a more utilitarian view of school: they think that for others school is mainly attended to obtain a formal certificate, and in turn to find a job. Yet, mainly in the scientific suburb school of Rome, they are quite pessimistic about the possibility of finding a work without a recommendation from powerful people.

### 3.3.7. Teachers

While talking of school, its adequacy and usefulness, students, even if not solicited by the interviewer, typically come to talk about teachers; they seem to be looking for some reference points. Though subject to criticism, teachers are a central figure, for good and bad, in the representation of Italian teenagers.

In general student have clear ideas about what's a good teacher and what's a bad one. What a teacher mainly 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.

A good teacher must transmit desire, passion and let's say must strive for letting the pupil like the schoolmatter, not simply tell him those three notions that are on the book and throw them there.

If the teacher cannot motivate students (they "are clerks"!), 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 achievement of any pupil also depends on a teacher

Non ti viene più a piacere la materia.. a me piaceva tanto la matematica..

You come to dislike the schoolmatter... I used to like math so much...



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A teacher must show the beauty of the matter (Poggi et al., 2004). Students not only describe the results on themselves of the Teachers' strategies, but in some case also describe their methods, their specific didactic strategies.

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...

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...

Beside 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.

But there is an important relation between your esteem for a teacher and his/her didactic skill.

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 tight bond, that they are those you see they like their work and they believe in it.

Yet for some students, and more so in the suburb school than the central one, that a teacher has a "human" face may not be always a good thing, because it may imply sympathy for some people but not for others. Students in this case are highly aware of the Teacher's prejudice (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), and often remind personal cases in which a teacher always tended to have the same idea about them, also despite repeated disconfirmations of their previous ideas. Moreover, they are influenced by their personal preferences.

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

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

Dovrebbero concentrarsi soltanto sull'aspetto formativo

They should concentrate only on the educational issue.

## DISCUSSION

The picture resulting from the Italian high school students' opinions and feelings about school and life, if compared to a parallel analysis on Brazilian students (Correa et al., forth.) highlights some similarities but also important differences.

### School

Knowledge transmitted by school is generally felt as relevant, though some statements may be biased by social desirability. However participants seem to view school not only in its cultural role, but as a way to learn to live with others: an important place for meeting, conviviality, socialization.



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### **Family**

Family looks very important: our students seem to have gone back to a more familistic culture than one of the economical boom of the nineteen sixties and seventies. Family seems to be now a refuge from the uncertainty they feel about their future.

### **Expectations and hopes**

Social mobility is a recurrent theme in the expectations about the role of education. But in our focus groups, compared to the corresponding Brazilian ones (Correa et al., forth.), there are 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 a strong feeling of decline and decadence of the Italian social, cultural and economic reality. The opposite happens with the young Brazilians, who, though 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, whereas Italian students strongly feel the impact of recent cuts and crisis in educational policies, and of the ambiguous and inefficient management of issues such as multiculturalism, religious heterogeneity and marginalization linked to the strong migratory fluxes of the last decades.

## **CONCLUSION**

As found by Dubet (1994) and Bourdieu (2001) in a French context, also in Italy students have a feeling of decadence and failure of the educational system and of the life project linked to it. Many teenagers in our focus groups declared that social mobility is not linked to school and education; economic stability is possible only thanks to 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 become famous in sport or music.

This sense of impotence, this mistrust in one's internal power of determining one's future, especially felt in the low class suburb and province schools, calls for a deep rethinking on

the image of school, knowledge, and their relation with life that has been given in the last decades in Italy.

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