Continuity and Discontinuity of the Educational Context: Early Leavers' in-Between Life Stories

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Introduction

This is a report from the no-man's land. The study focuses on a specific condition of some late adolescents, who have left compulsory education in Italy at age 16 and are not yet in the job market. This particular limbo condition of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET; Bynner and Parsons 2002) implies a discontinuity in the process of development usually guided by culture. Six young people's narratives are presented and discussed in order to stress the relationship between expectations and disappointment, continuity, and discontinuity, as well as individuals and context in the difficult process of identity construction. The study was carried out in the Italian province of Sassari, an area in the north of Sardinia, an Italian region characterized by several years of economic slump due to de-industrialization, poor agriculture, and little development of a tertiary economy, mainly based on seasonal tourism activities. Interviews occurred within a larger study of the Observatory on Education, Training, and Jobs at the University of Sassari in 2010.

The participants are young people between 18 and 19 years, who left compulsory education at age 16 and are not yet integrated in the job market. They account for a different temporal and evolutionary dimension, reconstructing but also forgetting the passages of a trajectory between two different points of their identity construction. These young people share the experience of a nonnormative psychosocial transition, with different levels of drama, and they must cope with the need to reconstruct their own life space.

Their narratives show that this task implies "leaving beliefs, redefining the, transforming the way of understanding the others, acquiring new skills, modifying the styles of conduct, discovering original solutions to problems of different complexity arising in the new situation" (Sarchielli 1998, p. 21). Such an endeavor

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takes place in a critical phase of development, representing a transition, a limbo, in which our participants express a condition of marginality and moratorium (Lewin 1947; Marcia 1966), with the need to overcome the present state of ambiguity and insecurity as soon as possible.

When experiencing the separation and de-socialization that occur after dropping out of school, implying the unlearning of the familiar way of thinking and solving problems, young people must overcome the difficulty and the inertia in reconstructing new ways of thinking, new relationships, and negotiating new expectations and reference points. During the end of adolescence, our young participants, who are living a crisis that preludes the process of entering adult life, should be supported in their active exploration of the self and the world (Erikson 1968). In the narratives gathered, this preparatory phase is somehow unfinished and not supported by any socialization agency but the family. This phenomenon will be interpreted through the idea of continuity and discontinuity in the educational process, drawing from the lived background of the young boys and girls that must cope with early school-leaving. Through its function in the construction of the self, the educational system guides the development of the individual trajectory, helping the individual to elaborate the relationship between the sense of self and potential development pathways, the system of expectations and social constraints, and the symbolic resources to cope with one's points of strength and weakness (Iannaccone et al. 2012; Rogoff 2003). This is also the field of the dialectics between continuity and discontinuity, promotion of social mobility, and reproduction of the social inequalities taking place in educational contexts (Boudon 1974; Marsico and Iannaccone 2012; Schizzerotto 2002).

Guided Development: Autopoiesis, Anastylosis, and Deviance

The analysis of the NEET narratives can be framed within a more general reflection about the role of culture in guiding individual development. Human beings developed a specific form of autopoietic organization, with several layers of structural organization, from biological to psychological and cultural (Arnoldi 2006; Ford and Lerner 1992; Maturana and Varela 1998; Rogoff 2003; Valsiner 1998). The interaction with the environment and other systems affects the actualization of developmental potential at all layers, which change the life span through an interdependence of structural levels. Different developmental theories in psychology (e.g., Piaget, Baldwin, Erickson) have stressed this dialectic between different layers of structure and functions in development (Arnoldi 2006; Verhofstadt-Denéve 2000).

Autopoietic systems have the capability of guiding their own development process as far as the change in structure is determined by both the functional organization and the structural features at a given time. However, humans are the

Fig. 1 An example of value-guided development, the young gymnast Ella Yastrebova. *Source* http://ellayastrebova.forumfree.it/

only living organisms that also developed the capability of building institutions that are specifically delegated to guide development, such as education and religion. This is the evolutionary solution to ensure continuity of cultural communities (Tateo and Iannaccone 2011). The institutions delegated to an individual's development act through setting specific protected environments that guide the person's expression of potentialities, by offering a set of constraints and affordances that are value-driven. In other words, the characteristic feature of human development is to be value-guided, at all levels of the structure.

The girl in Fig. 1, the young gymnast Ella Yastrebova, is experiencing changes in bodily and psychological layers by participating in a calisthenics educational activity. The culture establishes the kind of acceptable outcomes on the basis of the value-set developmental objectives. These kinds of values can be either aesthetical, ethical, religious, or technical, but their common feature is that they must be instantiated in a given institution to be put into practice and interrelate with the self-regulated development. The ethical dilemma faced by educational institutions is the tension between guiding and following development.

Educational institutions have the specific purpose of instantiating the system of values of a given cultural community by creating an environment that sets the acceptable range of developmental pathways, including the age steps and the transition processes, that the individual can follow to become a legitimated member of the community (Rogoff 2003). Establishing this appropriate range also implies co-creating the boundaries of deviance. The school thus behaves like a near-equilibrium open system, in which the system organization and functioning define at the same time the range of acceptable structural indeterminacy and the boundaries of the system itself with respect to the environment (Sawada and Caley 1985). For instance, the school is able to manage a given process of innovation by swinging like a pendulum around a point of equilibrium. This is also the way school sets the condition for the management of students' deviant behavior:

> Certain sorts of deviant behavior are highly valuable, others are not. The former is usually called creative and is supported (in normal times) as long as it remains within bounds; the latter is called destructive. If we assume that the highest educational priority is placed on creativity, then special environments within which to pursue creativity must be constructed (recognized as open systems); otherwise the stabilizing forces of "normal" schooling will "normalize" (destroy) emerging creativity. (Sawada and Caley 1985, p. 17)

This near-equilibrium organization also defines the boundaries with respect to the families or the other social stakeholders, as well as between what is schooling, working, or leisure. Nevertheless, it is extremely relevant to point out that the open system can recognize only "according to its own structure" (Arnoldi 2006, p. 117). Setting the boundaries determines what is "schooling" and what is "not schooling", but does not necessarily define "not schooling" as something else, such as "job." Thus, when a student drops out the realm of schooling, he or she does not enter automagically into the new realm of the job market; rather, this person passes through the "no man's land" of what is "not schooling" or what is "not a job."

The student's self under construction is taking part in guided activities and being confronted with a set of different definitions produced by adults (teachers, parents, etc.), which provide a range of value-guided potential development trajectories (Iannaccone et al. 2012). The student must negotiate between different definitions of the self as it is, will be, should be, or should not be. Students are thus required to keep this self-construction process within acceptable boundaries, such as by fulfilling performance standards or age steps. The general values underlying this process are continuity and consistency with respect to the cultural community. It has often been claimed that contemporary societies are characterized by a dramatic change with respect to these values. Life trajectories are today less stable and more fragmented, increasing the level of uncertainty and the need for adaptation to rapid changes. Nevertheless, even if some elements of system structure are changed, such as the length, complexity, and linearity of transitions, the organization of the school–job transition is still based upon the values of continuity and consistency (Bradley and Devadason 2008). The question is thus what happens when this trajectory is definitely broken for some years at a critical point of adolescence, as in the case of the early school-leavers interviewed?

"Anastylosis" is an architectural technique that aims at rebuilding, from as much of the original materials that are left after usually thousands of years of abuse, fallen into ruined architectural monuments, by placing scattered components back into their original positions. The situation of suspended transition of these young people can be compared to a long period of neglect. With respect to guided development, these persons are outside the institutions delegated to guide both development and normative transitions. Often, they can lean only on their families. One cannot speak of interrupted development because the individuals went on with the construction of their identities; however, in this case, the process is taking place outside the educational and training institutions, and this is not without consequences.

The identity definitions, life plans, and work choices of the students, as well as the meaning attributed to their own successes and failures, are constructed through social interactions (Iannaccone et al. 2012; Schizzerotto 2002). The outcomes of students' educational trajectories result from a complex interaction between students themselves, teachers, institution, families, and counselors. Everyone is bearer of a system of beliefs, values, justifications, and representations about the meaning of schooling, being in the job market, the life goals worth pursuing, and the positive or negative outcomes of such a search (Marsico and Iannaccone 2012). The actors are involved in a constant process of negotiation and friction, which sets the ground for building a life project, whether is successful or not in respect to personal goals (Fig. 2).

Such a system dynamic becomes evident when it takes place in boundary interactions, such as school–family meetings, orientation interviews, and teacher/ counselor training—formal or informal situations in which the different systems
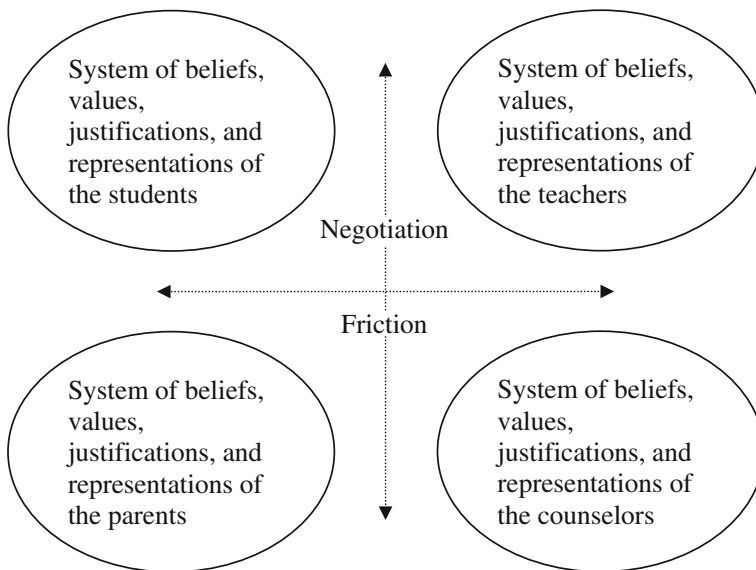

Fig. 2 Negotiation and friction between different systems

enter directly and are forced to negotiate and confront on a very meaningful outcome: a young person's future (Coulon 2005; Iannaccone et al. 2012; Marsico and Iannaccone 2012). In this situation, for instance, teachers are more likely to use students' deficit model, explaining failure and school-leaving in terms of the incapability of fitting into the educational system (Thomas 2006). Students, as reported in the interviews, are more likely to provide complex accounts that combine dispositional dimensions with the school's ineffectiveness to retain them and contextual dimensions, such as the difficult link between school and the job market.

Autopoietic systems are subject to irreversible change, in the sense that once they reach a far-from-equilibrium state, a turbulence that requires a change in the structure, they cannot simply restore the previous situation (Sawada and Caley 1985). The individual reaches a so-called bifurcation point—a moment of choice that will actualize a new trajectory among the available options set by social constraints. In other words, it develops. In this sense, human beings are not just autopoietic systems but also "auto-actualizers"—that is, they "extend themselves into an actualization of the unknown by choosing one path of pursuit over another, thus opening more domains of Being through Becoming at each bifurcation (decision) point" (Sawada and Caley 1985, p. 18).

However, the metaphor of the bifurcation point is questioned by early leavers' trajectories, as dropping out of school does not imply becoming something else. This event puts the person into an area beyond the bifurcation that defines what the young person is not, or no longer is, without defining what the person will be. It thus triggers a sort of anastylosis of the self, challenging the young person to reconstruct a structure of the self by reassembling the scattered pieces of the neglected identity. The narratives of the young people interviewed two or three years after compulsory school-leaving show how this process can take a long time to be achieved, especially because it happens in the no-man's land between the border of the education and job environments, with a lack of social guidance.

Six Case Studies

The participants in these case studies were selected from a larger survey carried out by the Observatory on Education, Training, and Jobs. The survey analyzed longitudinal data about students' careers and school/job transitions among the early school-leavers' population in the province of Sassari. According to some relevant theoretical dimensions stressed by the survey, a set micro-context was selected (e.g. towns and schools with specific socio-demographic features). Drawing from the schools' lists, six students who dropped out in the first two years of secondary school were recruited for a in-depth narrative interview that focused on the retrospective account and self-assessment of the educational experience, the turning points, the systems of values and beliefs, the meaning attributed to the school

failure, the social and family background, and the current situation (Coulon 2005; Demazière and Dubar 1997; Glaser and Strauss 1967).

The general dimensions emerging from the interviews are that the outcome of educational trajectories are interpreted by aspects related both to context (family background, income, mobility, etc.) and to the individual (the subjective value of education, expectations, interests, previous experiences, etc.). The different mix of these elements characterizes the more or less happy individual trajectories. The six stories include both boys and girls (names are fictitious) who experienced different modalities and outcomes from a troubled relationship with the school. Table 1 presents an overview of the participants' profiles and their family background.

The interviews took place some years after school-leaving. Therefore, there was some room for the elaboration of the identity and the experience lived during the phase of moratorium between school-leaving and the job situation to come. Also, the school-leaving did not occur only in situations of extreme distress. The young interviewees come from middle-low income and educational levels, and not particularly large families. Participants themselves defined their own families as relatively "ordinary". This remark triggers some questions about the determination of psycho-social risk factors with respect to early school-leaving. This phenomenon does not characterize only multi-problematic micro-contexts, but it takes place also under conditions of relative family stability. Alhough the relationship between social inequalities and school failure is widely documented (Boudon 1974; Schizzerotto 2002), the fact that early school-leaving and a long moratorium between education and employment, in some social contexts, affects young people coming from a wide range of family backgrounds is worthy of attention.

The six cases present the different ways in which young people account for their experience of school leaving, without any generalizations. Nevertheless, by jointly reading their narratives, it is possible to identify some common themes that represent a starting point for further reflection.

Gianna: A Silent Leaving

Gianna is almost 18 and lives in the small seaside town of Alghero. She left the commercial school when she was 17, seemingly without a specific reason. She always attended schools near her home. She never failed classes and claims that she willingly choose her secondary school because she loves math. Nevertheless, she decided to leave just two months before the end of the school year because she was afraid of failing her grade. She lives in a middle-class family that is not well-off but does not show any economic problems, even if Gianna does not love to talk about her "private sphere". Her interview gives an image of a united and ordinary family who never questioned her choices.

Gianna seems to have poor expectations about school, while she believes that a job is the most important thing. In her own words, the school "is just for personal education, is not worth for job"—to find a job, you need above all a

Table 1 Profile of participants

	Gianna	Lucia	Tito	Emiliano	Giorgio	Marco
Age	18	19	19	18	19	18
Family (besides the participant)	Parents + elder brother	Parents + 2 elder brothers	Parents + elder sister	Parents + elder brother	Parents + 2 elder brothers and 1 elder sister	Separated mother + young brother
Father's/mother's job(s)	Plumber/housewife	Land surveyor/housewife	Mason/housewife, occasional work	Electrotechnician/housewife	Retired/chambermaid	Unknown/Housewife
Age of school leaving	17	16	16	16	17	17
Last school	Technical vocational school	Commerce school	Scientific high school	Geometer school	Technical vocational school	Technical vocational school

recommendation. Gianna has several micro-experiences of "crappy jobs" for short periods, always under the table jobs, and she was never able to improve her skills or economic conditions. She has been a clerk and bartender; at the time of the interview, she was in the midst of an unsuccessful job search. Gianna brings her curriculum around to bars, restaurants, and night clubs, where, she says, "They tell you we will call you back, but nobody does." Gianna does not believe she will find a job this way—"in Alghero, there are no opportunities"—so she uses her own social network, which helped her to find a job in the past.

This young woman seems to view the world of employment as two conflicting dimensions. On one hand, there is the dull aspect of a job as a necessary instrument of survival, which does not require great expectations because there is nothing between being a clerk or a waitress; education or improving the curriculum is useless because it is only necessary to have "the right connections". On the other hand, there is the realm of aspirations that are doomed to be thwarted at their very origin. Gianna says she would like to be a hair stylist but it is very difficult— nobody will hire you if you are not skillful and she is not competent because nobody is patient with teaching her. She wanted to attend a beautician course, but it was too expensive. Her discourse has a very negative view of institutions, such as schools, job centers, etc. that are worth nothing: she does not look for them and they do not look for her in return.

Gianna's trajectory could be labeled as a "silent leaving"—a young girl living in an apparently ordinary context, who does not report any particular episode of school failure. At the same time, she seems to have passed through the educational system in a quite aseptic way, without bearing in mind any meaningful memory. Gianna did not build the meaning of her school experience, its usefulness with respect to a life plan; in return, the educational system did not seem to be able to motivate or involve her. The school seems unable to provide her with psychological resources to cope with endeavors, but also unable interpret her silent distress.

Lucia: School "Nomadism" and Life Trajectory

Lucia is 19 and lives in a very small village, which is built around a main square with a bar and a church. Her school trajectory has been quite confused, attending three different secondary schools and finally landing in a vocational training course. Nevertheless, Lucia shows initiative and tenacity; she actually had to wait some time for available places in the schools she wanted to attend. She passed from the technical school to the touristic school; after one year of the vocational training course, she enrolled in a commerce school. Despite the commitment to pursuing her choices, Lucia has never been able to stay in the same school for more than a year.

The other relevant element in her story is the role of her family in building her adult identity and her life trajectory. Other young participants in the interviews came with a parent, who usually remained a silent, even awkward, guest. In this case, Lucia came with the mother and the interview turned into a "trialogue".

Rather than answering the interviewer's questions, Lucia and her mother, showing a great mutual understanding, jointly reconstructed the story of the family over recent years. Their account shows that the construction of Lucia's choices is strictly related to the family context. In her own words: "you get your points of reference from the people around you so in this case your parents, your family".

Although her parents seem to set Lucia free to make her own educational choices, such choices are built over time through several family practices— everyday and work routines of the family members, the need to manage family mobility, having to attend schools in other towns, etc. Also in this second interview, a scattered trajectory of school leaving and restarting took place on the background of a family context described as ordinary and stable.

Lucia seems neither to have lived moments of particular conflict with the school context nor to have been a particularly brilliant or troubled student. Indeed, she said: "Yes, I wasn't bad at school… the behavior but… I wasn't bad". She does not come from a troubled family with particular risk.

Lucia attributes a great importance to the problem of moving from her living place for every kind of activity, such as school or sport, which makes her dependent on her parents: "I couldn't even tell my parents… because they didn't want but… my father woke up at a given hour my mother if she wants to go working she is awkward because of my care that she must come to pick up me no… it was not… I think it was not worth [it]."

Lucia had short regular job experiences as a waitress, bartender, and chambermaid, which she considers useful but hardly compatible with school. Her account seems to draw a kind of "nomadism" in the school trajectory. Actually, she carries out in a fragmented and aleatory way a sort of school–training–job alternation. At the time of the interview she was back to school and she has been successfully achieving a diploma. In her case, the representation of school as an instrument for qualification leads her to choose professional schools: "I always liked tourism school let's say that… I chose tourism school to achieve another qualification… to have something more… in the curriculum… no matter how if you go to the tourism school you find a job… they send you to work already from the school… it is something more."

Tito: In Search of Identity

Tito is 19 and lives in a small village near Sassari. He left the second year of the "Liceo" specializing in scientific studies at 16, after repeating the first year twice. Then, he started to work in first-aid and ambulance transport for local voluntary organizations. He worked for three different organizations, sometimes getting out of ambiguous and barley legal situations that he did not tolerate but tried to report. At the same time, for Tito the volunteer experience is a place of commitment and personal growth. He carries out this activity with more motivation than school, even if he gains neither money nor qualifications.

Tito spoke of the enriching experience of working on the ambulance, in which he found personal satisfaction and maturation: "I liked to go out with friends. At the very beginning… when I served on the ambulance… I couldn't wait to leave the service to go out with friends then some evenings it happened that… after the service… it happened that I missed the last bus… and I had to wait for something to bring me home by car… and with that excuse we went out until late… then they used to bring me home and I equally had fun then… keeping the adults company… that is you work with adults… you go out with adults… you do a job that… somehow makes you mature… because it makes you understand many things."

Tito lives in a troubled area, but the experience as a volunteer represented a factor of protection from the psycho-social risk: "Yes… maybe at the beginning… before knowing the world of voluntary service… I used to enjoy going out… … doing craps… trying to smoke something… scattering you know… before knowing voluntary service…. Then I came back here… then I hardly got out of that because I was almost convinced, eh! We went down here [*points to his left, out the window, to the vegetation surrounding the school building*]…. We got some strange drugs…. From that moment on I walked away… I never looked for them again."

The school experience was very disappointing: "I left because for me… as a repeating student… you're wasting time… go home… save your parents' money…. I was not actually inclined for studying…. I was always unlucky with teachers I met."

During his middle school years, Tito accumulated low marks in the main school subjects of language, math, history, because of the quality of teaching, he reported. Despite these evident deficiencies, shared with all his schoolmates, Tito is placed in the Liceo specializing in scientific studies. Immediately, his knowledge gap becomes an insuperable barrier.

Tito received some support at school: "However, someone tried to recover us… even if teachers couldn't care less, eh! But a teacher of Latin took care of filling my gaps…. She helped me in math…. She used to bring me… during the religion lessons, she canceled me from that course…. She told me then… 'Cancel by yourself or I will do and we go to the library trying to recover what you couldn't get through before'…. So she helped me…. We were two students… one from the middle school… and they supervised us in math [which] wasn't her subject…. However, she helped us to understand how to do that… the procedure to do that."

Finally, Tito decided to leave because he did not feel able to attend the school. He believes that is not worth studying without outcome and impacting his family's budget. He didn't share the decision making with his parents, who were informed only at the end: "I told them for me going on is wasting time… money… too many expenses."

After that, Tito tried some low-paying jobs, along with his father, some training courses, and he failed to join the army. Tito's actual interest is different: "to attend English courses… learning a foreign language and going abroad with job qualifications… because out there staff receives a salary… voluntary service does not exist…. First aid rescuers [are] not a volunteer but a professional." Indeed, Tito started to look abroad for job opportunities as a rescuer, contacting organizations in

Europe and the United States. Very soon, he discovered that he needs the very qualification he did not achieve, because the first aid voluntary organizations he worked for were not willing or able to provide it.

Listening to Tito's account, a striking contrast emerges between two different images of the self. On one hand, there is a mature, motivated, and active adolescent, trying to build his own potential pathway, exploring and making choices, and deciding to be a rescuer. He clearly defines the constraints and affordances of his context, recognizing the reference of an adult network supporting him in the passage to maturity. On the other hand, there is the image of the self related to the school experience (Iannaccone et al. 2012), a person who is not able to achieve some goals, weak with respect to school activities, attributing failure to intra-individual factors: "I used to study [but] compared to others… let's say I use to talk in a different way…. I was quite hopeless [but] teachers accepted me as I am…. They understood how I am… what I had clear in mind [and] what I was talking about…. They gave me high grades… one two three times…. [But] it wasn't enough to have a good assessment at the end of the year…. Because you [may] get a high mark there [but] a low mark at the other subject… and you go, 'Tito, nothing can change… Here we go again!' [It] is always the same… and you don't know how to get out of it."

Tito's trajectory can be labeled as being "in search of an identity." The contexts of informal learning, such as the voluntary services, can be more useful and meaningful than the formal educational context. This narrative represents a fundamental challenge for every educational context—recognizing, valorizing, and keeping alive the skills, expectations, and motivations that manifest themselves mainly under a non-institutionalized form, thus requiring personalized answers.

Emiliano: Losing Aspirations at 18

The fourth case is Emiliano, an 18-year-old who spent his life in the historical center of Alghero. Emiliano's family includes his father, an electrical technician, his mother, a housewife, and an elder brother who is an artisan. Only his father finished school and went to the university for one year; the other members of the family just finished middle school. Emiliano describes the economic situation of his family as not dramatic but worsening.

After finishing middle school, Emiliano enrolled at the technical secondary school, which he left once and for all after only two months. The choice of the secondary school seemed to be made without conviction, but rather with the awareness of making a disastrous decision and having totally different interests: "Yes, at the beginning I chose [the school] not because I liked it… Let's say [it was] because I didn't want to study…. After that, I didn't like that school…. Indeed, I should have chose another school…. I should have gone to the tourism school."

Since leaving the school, Emiliano has been working for two years as a pizza chef. Also in this case, he does not report any particular motivation: "If you are a pizza chef, [it] is a job…. But staying at school doing nothing… you don't learn anything." He registered at the employment center but always found a job through his friends. Later, he left the job to become a paperhanger and occasionally a masonry laborer. He had only under the table jobs, without social security or insurance. Tito is working now and then, while seeking a new job without particular enthusiasm: "Comes what may…. I can make shift anyway… any work is a job."

Some elements more frequently emerge from Emiliano's narrative. First of all, his life story seems to be characterized by an involutional trajectory in respect to his father: "My father [went to] the university [and] he attended the technical secondary school…. Then… he got qualifications [such as] aerial fitter… electrician… all that stuff." This is a very relevant aspect; in Western countries, the progressive increasing of the educational level along generations was a common belief. Achieving a higher level of education for the family's children was understood as a very important goal—an instrument of social mobility and an index of status improvement—related to the set of expectations for a better future.

Emiliano, like other early school-leavers, depicts the school experience as not actually meaningful: "With the teachers, yes… I was quite good [but with] studying [I received] pass marks… nothing more than this." Emiliano and his brother achieved a lower educational level than the father, together with unsteady and low-qualified jobs. Emiliano does not attach too much value to education, just as a distant opportunity to get a slightly better job: "When I use to go to school maybe I could get a better future… a piece of paper that perhaps could be worth [it] for the job."

This relationship with education is linked to the system of values and expectations and to the representation of a job that Emiliano shares with other people interviewed. Work is definitely more valued than education. In addition, a job (and earning money) is frequently opposed to education (wasted time without earning): "Yes I thought [that] I need… money [so] it was impossible to keep attending school."

Despite his age, Emiliano is surprisingly not able to construct a system of expectations with anything but very low-level goals. Despite being at an age that is supposed to be oriented ahead, full of planning, building even ambitious expectations, from his words instead emerges a disenchantment with a dimming of sadness. In the excerpt below, it is possible to see the narrow psychological horizon and the kind of expectations in Emiliano's life:

Interviewer: Are you seeking a particular job now?
Emiliano: No no… comes what may well I can make shift anyway. Any working is a job. If they give you the possibility to choose between different, you mean jobs?
I: Job opportunities… what would you prefer?
E: If they make me choose [between] office work or hodman, definitely I choose office work. Understand? Because [it] is less tiring.

I: Yes.
E: I am pleased with anything [that] is not that.
I: What you would like to do?
E: [*Does not respond*]
I: Did you ever think about that?
E: I would like… what everybody likes… Doing nothing… with money in your pocket, no?
I: Yes. [*both smile*]
E: But well… you must work to live, isn't it? Thus, what comes… I mean… I am not that kind that leaves… what I see… that I get… don't have preferences…. It's normal to have preferences…. Like if they must put me… in an office or doing the hodman [then] I prefer the office…. With the hodman, you break your back.
I: Yeah.
E: Eh… nothing that's it.

What kind of experiences would Emiliano need to construct a system of expectations, values, and motivations that lead to a better life perspective? He has self-esteem and talks about himself as a skillful and adaptive person, willing to work: "The paperhanger… I like it…. [It is] a good job [and] demanding." He is conscious of not loving study, and if he goes to school it is just for facilitating the job seeking. Nevertheless, he accounts for a meaningless school experience, as well as a job experience that provides him neither with economic means nor the opportunity to fulfill himself. Finally, he accounts for a progressive worsening of the family's economic conditions and for a local context almost exclusively based on tourism. In the light of these experiences and lacking different coping strategies (e.g., the idea of migrating in a social context with more affordances), it is very difficult to build a life project with ambitious goals or perspectives of improving one's own social and economic conditions.

Giorgio: A Feeling of Injustice

At the time of the interview, Giorgio is 19. He was born and grew up in the village of Sorso, where he still lives. He officially left a technical secondary school at 18, after only four days. In his account, the school failure originates in the two previous years, when he was attending the teachers' training school specializing in language teaching. He attended four years, but the last two years were characterized by withdrawals: "The first two years were all right… without school credit, debts, nothing. [In] the third year I found a female teacher who took [from] me the will to study." Immediately, Giorgio introduces this *coup de théâtre* into the narrative of his school leaving:

Giorgio: I chose the normal one, the simple linguistic specializing. I like languages. The first two years were all right, without school credit, debts, nothing. The third year I found a female teacher who took [from] me the will to study. Then I tried the

year after… but I lost the will to do it… also for personal troubles. I lost the will to study. Now I regret to not have finished the studies. Maybe later I will restart when I will be able to pay by myself, without weighing [on]…

Interviewer: [On] your parents?

G: On my parents. Yes.

I: I understand. But what did that teacher, what [did] she used to teach?

G: Latin, history, and Italian.

I: And in what sense [did] she [take] your will?

G: She used to offend… not just personal insults but also my family. She used to have favorite students and didn't consider the others.

I: I understand. And you think she picked on you?

G: Well… there's a story behind [it]. She confessed… that she has it in for students from Sorso [*a small suburb near Sassari*].

I: Ah, it's actually a matter of origin?

G: Yes, yes.

I: Why [does] she [have] it in for them?

G: Well… she taught some years at the elementary school in Sorso and then she was transferred to the teachers' training school… and meanwhile her husband met a woman from Sorso and he left her for a woman from Sorso, she said very clearly.

I: Ah, that's it… it was about a personal event?

G: Yes, indeed. Also in Osilo they call her—she is from Osilo [*a small village near Sassari*]—and they consider her [to be] insane.

I: I understand… and so this person made you desist?

G: Yes.

I: I understand.

G: I even tried with the school psychological counselor to try to go ahead… but it didn't [help].

I: But when [was] this? It happened when you had personal troubles or when you had troubles with the teacher?

G: When I had troubles with the teacher.

I: I understand. And when the personal troubles occurred?

G: They came the following summer… after and… almost at the end of the following school year.

I: But what kind of problems? If I may… do you want to talk about that?

G: No.

I: [Are they] problems concerning you and your family or concerning only you?

G: More about me… because my family had to stay out of this.

I: I understand. So because of these things [then] you met the counselor for these problems?

G: For this personal problem?

I: Yes.

G: Mostly the social workers but they left me.

   Giorgio's narrative of school experiences actually rotates on this episode. Naturally, it left its mark on his educational trajectory in a moment of his life

probably characterized by other events (his "personal troubles" when he "lost the will to study"). Giorgio definitely did not want to talk about this second episode involving social services. The story of the teacher ends with the account of the school principal's behavior, who decided to not intervene once informed of the event. At this point, Giorgio decides to change school and transfer to a vocational school, where he stays only four days. He found himself in a different context ("the teachers' training school was all right… definitely all right… vocational school[s] are totally different"), more problematic ("nobody cared if a student smoked a joint in the courtyard… or something like this"), to which he could not adapt:

> "I just did four school days… I kept the distances more or less with everyone because… I didn't mean to mess with things not concerning of mine. I didn't know them yet. But also teachers were not… like those of the teachers' training school."

The psychological distance ("I didn't mean to mess with things not concerning of mine") and disappointment ("but also teachers were not… like those of the teachers' training school") characterizing the narrative of the last, very short school experience is striking. What kind of background is accounted in the first part of the interview?

The reader could feel a sense of injustice and disquiet because of the narration of these negative experiences, which take place over three years and lead to the school-leaving, without any real intervention when the student's distress occurs. Although the account is one-sided and thus not impartial, what is relevant in the analysis of Giorgio's narrative is the expression of his subjective background in the educational context. Nevertheless, a person's resilience allows at least a partial recovery, and Giorgio is able to identify some positive aspects of his school experience:

G: Yes there was something positive…. I loved languages even more… and history… despite the above mentioned teacher. I liked it.
I: Yes, in spite of the teacher you liked the subjects?
G: Yes yes. But now with the English… I can't speak [it] but I can understand it. Thus also a small job… I could be a cut above for a job even if I don't have it on paper.

In the second part of the interview, Giorgio talks about his short job experiences. Small seasonal under the table jobs and an internship, obtained by the employment center and interrupted after two months. Again, there is the problem of mobility, as in other interviews:

I: But like summer seasons… you never worked before?
G: No. A shopping mall was a six-month stage but I only made two [months].
I: Why?
G: I had thirty-eight working hours per week. My daily salary was fifteen euros and… Without travel costs it would be good… but I had travel costs…. I used to knock off at nine in the evening [and] my father had to pick me up. Thus, the fuel… the food… because I had to eat…. I got the warmest months in the year…. I used to

start at two thirty in the afternoon…. I had to leave from my house at noon then catch again the train and the trolley and with the heat I also got sick…. I mean, it was not an experience rather a pain.

Like other narratives, the mobility problems, the dependence on parents, and the difficulty in reconciling the youth's needs with the family's needs are experienced as barriers to the job or the training. On a practical level, they do not seem to be insuperable problems, but they seem to strongly affect adolescents' background during the construction and reconstruction of their identity ("it was not an experience rather a pain").

The participants are late adolescents who are facing a moratorium after the crisis of school-leaving. During this phase, they must cope with the desocialization from the school context and the construction of their new identities oriented to the job market. Such an identity reconstruction implies the comparison with the system of beliefs, values, and norms shared by their community, resulting in the emergence of a vocational orientation (Marcia 1966). In the case of Giorgio's interview, this process is clearly illustrated by the moment in which he compares the present situation of job seeking with the reconstruction of his former aspirations:

I: Ok, so you don't know [about the] other employment centers, even in Sorso?
G: I heard about that but… I say that's [for a] crisis. Fathers don't find a job, they must take care of their own family and I find it that perhaps…. Thus I am a little blocked also because of that. If I find a small job… just what I need to get by… that's good, but…. I met boys that before becoming economically independent did two years of internship…. That's what still restrains me.
I: Yeah, but when you enrolled at the teachers' school, you had a goal. I mean, besides [that] you liked languages, you had a job in mind for the future?
G: Of course… after the school… the university.
I: To do what?
G: Maybe law. [I] don't know.
I: Then not languages, but…?
G: After a degree and then trying… [I] don't know. The police… a pathway like this… academy, because I really love the army.

In the excerpt, Giorgio describes his present stand-by anchoring to his beliefs about the situation of his context of reference ("fathers don't find a job, they must take care of their own family and I find it that perhaps…. Thus I am a little blocked also because of that") and about the peer group ("I met boys that before becoming economically independent did two years of internship…. That's what still restrains me"). Conversely, Giorgio talks about his system of expectations and vocational orientation.

The process of construction of the self, with still open and uncertain outcomes, emerges from Giorgio's difficulty in defining his uniqueness, his points of strength and weakness with respect to a generic vocational project (Iannaccone et al. 2012; Marcia 1966). Like in the other narratives, there is a distance between the past-self-at-school, the future-self-at-work and the present-self-in-moratorium,

which generates tension and block. The process of mending the "tear" in the life trajectory is only managed by individual resilience resources, sometimes supported by the family network. The effective atmosphere evoked by these kind of narratives is that of solitude and distance of a wider social network support, which could and should help the adolescent in his own transition. That is the general feeling of "injustice" emerging from the narratives, despite the participants' individual differences.

Marco: A Suspended Life

The last narrative is from Marco, an 18-year-old who grew up in the city center of Sassari. The peculiarity of this interview is that it is a "trialogue" between the interviewer, Marco, and his mother, who joined him at the meeting. Despite that the researcher could have done the interview without the mother, he understood the interest of this specific interaction, obtaining some very interesting data. Apart from the lack of "canonicity" and the clear interference of the mother in Marco's answers, this interview provides a quite interesting perspective from the theoretical point of view. Marco's family is composed of the divorced mother and a younger brother (10 years old). The divorce happened when Marco was only 2 years old, and he actually never lived with the father, meeting him occasionally.

Marco repeated once the third year of the middle school; then, he enrolled at the technical secondary school ("for two reasons... one was informatics and the other... because... a group of friends we all went there"). He repeated three times the first year of secondary school without succeeding. The mother enrolled him for the fourth time, discovering the first school day that Marco could not enroll in the same school after three failures. After that, Marco's (and his mother's) life narrative is "suspended": there is no "after" but vagueness.

The interview is characterized by Marco's short answers and the continual intervention of the mother—about 60 times during the interview, integrating, constraining, or often contradicting the son's answers. In the following excerpt, the researcher asks Marco the reason for his secondary school failure:

Interviewer: [Why did you repeat] three times the first year of secondary school?
Marco: Eh... no will to do it.
I: According to you**?**
M: I didn't study. No will to study, also because... they didn't make me want it.
I: Didn't [you] think to change school[s]?
M: Yes [*without conviction*].
Mother: But he didn't want [to].
I: What kind of school [could you] have done?
M: (2.0) Mh:: or the tourism school (1.0) or the vocational.
Mother: He regrets not having studied... he got it.
I: Why didn't you do it**?** You were likely to enroll in these schools but...

M: Eh… don't know. [I] don't know how to answer to such questions.
I: When did you leave the school?
M: Last year.
I: Last year?
Mother: No. I enrolled him this year.
M: Yes, but I didn't go… so last year
Mother: You attended the first day.

Marco's answers are short and don't go deeply into decision making, while the mother's interventions counterpoint and justify. This dynamic recurs in the interview. The mother justifies both the son and herself as the only person of reference, like in the following excerpt, in which the interviewer asks Marco what actions he has been taking to find a job after leaving school:

Interviewer: During the month you were not attending the school, did you ever think of writing a curriculum? Did you write a curriculum of your own?
Mother: Yeah, I [told] him [to].
I: Going around and asking for a job… in restaurants… did you try something to start?
Marco: Mh::
Mother: He's shy so… he wouldn't go [on] his own.
I: Yes?
Mother: But you should write something in the curriculum… what he did and what… No? I mean we never did.
M: Yeah, ok, but you start from something in the curriculum, there are those parts you write into…

In this excerpt, the mother seems to play the role of sole interaction partner of the interviewer, even coming to use the first plural person ("I mean we never did"). The son limits himself to a single utterance in the final turn, partially converging on mother's claims. This element is interesting not just because of the particular dynamics between Marco and his mother. This interviews brings also a different perspective with respect to the other cases. The family is often the only support network and point of reference for youth coping with the difficult transition after early school-leaving. This role is played not only at the level of material support, but also with respect to the system of norms and values, such as the job ethics, the relationship with the others, and value of independence (Rogoff 2003). In this case, instead, the family looks like a "decompression chamber"—a waiting place into which Marco is suspended, also considering the father's absence.

After leaving school, the narrative goes on with the account of the few attempts to start a new pathway. Marco thinks of joining the army, but "forgets" to apply. He does not look for a job and registers with the employment service only because of mother's pressure. The interview ends with a question about the reflection upon the whole school trajectory:

Interviewer: Last question. What was wrong with your path?
Marco: School path?

Mother: No, ok. I always fed him… by pampering he never did.
M: Maybe that.
Mother: Thus is not.
M: Let's say I am all right with that… so…
Mother: He has no problems.
**I**: Yes, but he said he's bored.
M: Yes.

Also in this excerpt, the mother's answers prevail. Marco does not look to be reflecting upon the events. A kind of dependence-nursing relationship emerges, based on a form of alliance in which Marco is not in a hurry to grow up ("Let's say I am all right with that"), and the mother does not look like pushing for a change of the situation ("He has no problems").

Conclusions

One of the recurring issues in the public debate is the difficult relationship between the educational system, perpetually going through crisis, and the job market, with special respect to the situation of young people. Criticalities strongly emerge in areas, like the Sardinia region, that are structurally weaker from an economic point of view (Schizzerotto 2002). Nevertheless, one should never forget that behind the macro-systemic analyses, the voices of young citizens, who have the constitutional right to work, are sometimes hidden. At the end of this short inspection in the no-man's land of young NEET individuals, it is possible to suggest some further reflection. Through six case studies, I tried to understand the systems of beliefs, representations, values, and justifications of students, as well as the psychosocial dynamics contributing to school failure and early leaving. Through the participants' own words, I have tried to stress the relationship between individual personal experience and micro-social contexts (school family, local communities).

From the theoretical point of view, I discussed the idea of an autopoietic development of the individual guided by delegated social institutions, such as school, that set the condition for the person's potentialities to express and contribute to the system organization. At the same time, this guidance is value-driven and defines the range of objectives, boundaries, and deviance that define an acceptable developmental outcome for the community. In the educational trajectory of the individual, this process takes place through the participation in socially organized activities and the internalization of adult definitions of the student's self (Rogoff 2003; Iannaccone et al. 2012). Nevertheless, the educational system can operate within the range of the individual's own structural features (Sawada and Caley 1985). It can operate on what is considered schooling and defining the boundaries of what is "not schooling", being unable to guide towards a new definition of the person. Thus, once a student drops out of the educational system without entering another system, such as the job market, a dramatic situation emerge.
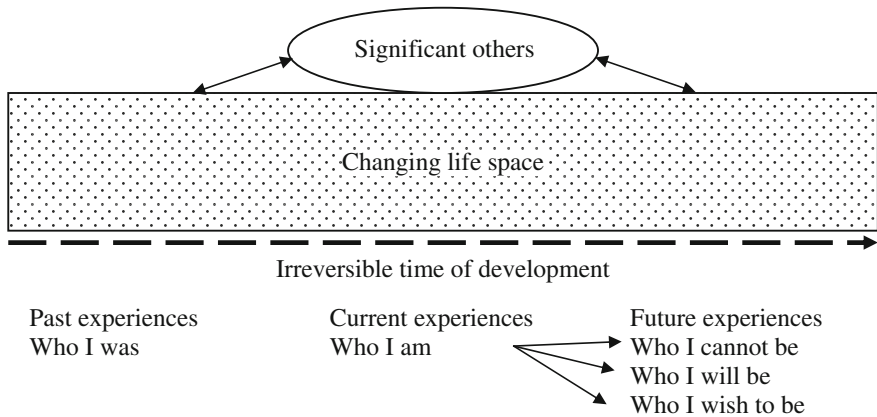
Fig. 3 Articulation of trajectories

It is worthwhile to summarize the different dimensions stressed during the analysis of the cases. The first element is that the meaning of educational experiences is constructed in function of an identity consistency and a life trajectory. In this process, the individual refers to his or her own social network and the cultural micro-context. The outcome of educational trajectories and the meaning attributed to the education are interpreted through contextual dimensions (mobility, family context, income, local job culture, etc.), and individual dimensions (expectations, interests, previous experiences, etc.). The different mix of these elements draws different life trajectories, both in spatial and temporal dimensions (Fig. 3).

There is something "before" concerning the past experiences in the micro-contexts of school, family, and peer-group. It helps to define a repertoire of identity options, representations, preferences, beliefs, and expectations about one's future. In this way, we learn that not everything is possible, but also that there are some things we can aspire to. We also learn to modulate ourselves in response to others' behavior and the cultural context.

Tito's narrative is a good example of how spaces, identity conceptions, and the way to relate to peers and adults change over the course of time. There is also a current time, in which we make our choices and act in a specific situated social context. Finally, there is a "after" of one's own trajectory in the future time, which is only supposable among a range of culturally defined options. This developmental dynamic takes place in different physical and cultural spaces, which contribute to the modification of the outcomes. An example is the change in the way of experiencing spaces represented by the transition from a school grade to another.

In a territory like the province of Sassari, the passage to the secondary school probably implies a reorganization of the life space by moving to a different town. The articulation between the temporal dimension, the affordances and constraints represented by significant others (parents, teachers, peers, etc.) and spaces (mobility, home, public places, schools, etc.) defines the set of future possibilities.

This suggests a range of potential futures and identities that the individual must negotiate in order to draw one's own life trajectory. This process is characterized by a structural tension between actualized and not-actualized possibilities in the elaboration of the self (Tateo and Marsico 2013). Often, the near-equilibrium features of educational and training institutions just narrow the range of young people choices between "who I cannot be" and "who I must be", as in Emiliano's case. This is the easy part of educational institutions' role, guiding the development to narrowing the trajectories, but it is also the easy way to the reproduction of social inequalities. More challenging is the task of following development, which is related to the capability of widening the range of opportunities and removing the cultural and material barriers to development. This would allow young people to choose between "who I wish to be" and "who I will be", according to their own aspirations and capabilities.

Another relevant element is the role of the family network in the construction of adult identity and life trajectory. The family actually is the bearer of a specific "culture of work" that plays a fundamental role in education and job choices. Such a culture establishes the hierarchy of values and the range of alternatives—for example, if it is more relevant, qualifying, or dignified to get a school qualification or to have a job; or if education is comparable to a work activity; at which age to study or to work, etc. Marco's case, for instance, is a clear example that the role of parents is fundamental in education or job choices, also from the material point of view concerning the weight of education on family budget or the dependence for mobility. The majority of participants' families are composed of a father who is a craftsman, a housewife, and a few brothers. No one, among the youth interviewed, claimed to be in a situation of poverty, even if the families were not well-off. Drop-out is thus not limited to multi-problematic families; risk factors are rather more subtle and not limited to poverty.

It appears quite clear from these young people's narratives that their representation of the role of institutions is quite negative: they are useless—young people do not look for them and they are not looked for in return. Participants' trajectories can be defined a "search for identity," in which informal learning contexts often acquire more relevance than school. The six cases represent an endeavor for educational institutions, that of recognizing, valorizing, and nurturing capabilities, expectations, and motivations that manifest in "not-institutionalized" forms, requiring personalized answers. The first enemy of education is the perception of its inutility. The idea of school as a time-wasting alternative to real job—just a way to obtain a piece of paper—are all elements recurring in participants' narratives. The same happens with employment services. The perception of non-utility may be derived from different sources: direct experience, accounts of significant others, common sense, etc. These are the same informal channels of information about job opportunities used to form an impression guiding the choices. At the individual level, there are preferences, beliefs, and expectations guiding the sense making of the educational experience. At the social level, there are social representations about the meaning of school and work, social mobility, and hierarchies in a job, etc.

Approaching the problem of education, training, and insertion in the job market, even when it is claimed that the person constructs himself or herself in the everyday interaction with the contexts, the activities, and the significant others, the change is expected "only" by the individual. It would be worth also considering the opposite situation. Is it possible to consider also the changes that the developing individual generates beside himself or herself? In other words, what are the observable changes that the developing individual operates on the environment? The educational system set its mission to guide the learning and socialization process of the individual, in order to prepare him or her to enter the community. Little attention is thus devoted to the person as agent of change and active resource (Sawada and Caley 1985). Going back to the case studies discussed, the young boys seem to embody this sense of impotence by never reflecting about how their own actions can modify the reality around them.

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