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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ALTERNATING SCHOOL-WORK PATHWAYS IN ITALY Some Remarks on the “Competence Society”

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ABSTRACT: Since the mid-nineties, the European Union and UNESCO have promoted a new form of didactics aimed at developing competences. These “key competences”, subsequently identified by the Council and the European Parliament, are considered as fundamental for Europe’s response to globalisation. Their close link with a neoliberal perspective of the working world - as can also be deduced from the non-random choice of the term “competence” - is evident. In particular, the competence related to the sense of initiative and entrepreneurship has assumed a strategic role within the “Lifelong Learning Programme” and the “Europe 2020” programme, fostering the spread of a new labour market model no longer based on the prevailing paid employment. Recent Italian legislation on educational institutions, and Law 107/2015 in particular, have acknowledged the European Union guidelines regarding promotion of the key competences, and more specifically of alternating school-work pathways. Although it is too early to make an overall evaluation of the effects these laws have produced, the actions promoted so far do not seem to overcome the existing inequality in Italy’s educational and employment opportunities. Furthermore, the objective of promoting competences that can be directly used on the labour market, to the detriment of broader cultural preparation deemed useless for this purpose, risks impoverishing the education of the most disadvantaged, those people who have the fewest chances of acquiring knowledge and critical thinking outside the school context. The transformations taking place in the educational field appear to proclaim the advent of a “Competence Society”, the last metamorphosis of an epiphenomenon with its roots in the globalised capitalist system which is leaving social reproduction mechanisms unchanged.

KEYWORDS: alternating school-work pathways, competences, educational inequality, Italian school, neo-liberalism.

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1. Foreword

The language used in defining educational models has changed considerably over time. The apparently natural evolution of the specific lexicon is part of the transformation of the discourse adopted by institutions to define the emerging paradigm in which there is an observable consistency of references between objects, concepts and statements.

Analysing the origin of certain expressions is an interesting exercise because language is never neutral but rather represents a form of power which orientates people's viewpoints (Foucault 1966). Above all, it is possible to find evidence of profound social changes in some statements that modify the meaning of a term or introduce another that better defines a swing at the semantic level.

This is the case with the term "knowledge" within international documents on education, and its progressive shift of sense from a theoretical dimension to an applicative one associated with the increasing spread of the word "competence". This latter concept is a complex and polysemic construct (Ajello 2002, 2011; Benadusi and Molina, Eds., 2018)¹. Many pedagogical theories, such as Dewey's one, for instance, consider developing competences instead of pursuing knowledge for its own sake, as the main goal of the education process. However, it is primarily in the field of management sciences and human resources that the term has been used in a specific sense, demonstrating its connection with the labour market (Mc Clelland 1973).

Especially after the "great recession" which began in 2007, competences assumed a key role in overcoming the imbalance between labour supply and demand (skills mismatch) and consequently in the processes of economic growth (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2008). It is for this very reason that competency-based learning, also acquired through non-formal and informal training, is becoming increasingly vital within education systems.

In order to assess and promote practical learning, some international organisations such as OECD carry out surveys on students' and adults' competences on a regular basis². The growing role played by these tests is symptomatic of the function that standardisation and measurability of knowledge seem to have assumed, especially in the light of their usefulness within the labour market. This educational model, focused on compe-

¹ A common denominator of the multiple definitions of competence is the reference to all the resources and devices that are acquired through practice, by immersing oneself in real settings within family, educational and professional processes of socialisation, and that promote actions and the formation of individual and social identities (Viteritti 2018).

² Since the beginning of the new millennium, in particular, the OECD has carried out various research to assess adolescents' and adults' competences by administering standardised tests to a large sample, representing numerous States within the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). In Italy, the National Institute for the Evaluation of the Educational and Training system (INVALSI) administers similar tests to students to evaluate their preparation at different stages of their studies.

tences intended as individual performance according to a perspective of clear neoliberal origin, tends to marginalise those forms of culture that cannot be reduced to pre-established items.

This study, starting from Bourdieu's reflections on the growth of neoliberalism in education systems (Bourdieu, Éd., 1993), aims to analyse how, in current years, a model of teaching based on competences, meant as job requirements instead of life requirements, has become dominant. Through a methodology based on the so-called "clue paradigm" (Ginzburg 1986, 1^a ed. 1979), European guidelines and Italian legislation as the main sources were examined in order to interpret and "unveil" their ideological roots³. By referring to these texts, in the following paragraphs it is attempted to demonstrate how the *Knowledge Society* could be better described as a *Competence Society*, being the expression of globalised capitalism which has also shaped the educational processes itself, by transforming cultural aims into strategic market objectives, and social agents into system tools.

2. The European Union competence frameworks

The educational model which has spread through the Western world has long been based almost exclusively on measuring acquired theoretical "knowledge".

However, in the absence of adequate equalisation measures, the emphasis placed on knowledge has produced exclusion mechanisms, especially within education systems that are segmented at an early age, making the role of families' socio-economic and cultural capital decisive as regards the results achieved, and as regards students' educational opportunities.

Since the 1960s, as a result of social transformations resulting in mass schooling, educational institutions have begun to rethink education methodology in terms of inclusion, by introducing progressive learning objectives and "skills" to be evaluated on the basis of Anglo-Saxon models borrowed from Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom et al. 1956, Krathwohl, Bloom and Masia 1964). The redefinition of educational aims based on students' cognitive potential has subsequently produced new didactic forms aimed at acquiring minimum objectives. These have, on the one hand, produced inclusion in lower levels of training but they have, on the other hand, maintained the social reproduction mechanisms in the higher levels of study pathways substantially unchanged. This was observed by Pierre Bourdieu in research carried out on selection processes in educational institutions in France (Bourdieu 1966a, 1966b, 1967, Éd., 1993, 1994; Bourdieu and Boltanski

³ Furthermore, documents and publications from other international organisations such as UNESCO and OECD were analysed, as well as a survey carried out by the Students Union, informal interviews and some newspapers (*la Repubblica, Corriere della sera*).

1975, 1976; Bourdieu e Isambert-Jamati, Éd.s., 1967; Bourdieu and Passeron 1964, 1970; Bourdieu, Passeron and de Saint-Martin 1967).

Later, as a consequence of the spread of neoliberal policies as a result of the crisis in the welfare state (Chomsky 2017; Hobsbawm 1994), the main bureaucratic organisation, the “right hand” of the state in Bourdieu’s language, gradually withdrew from civil society, leaving the “left hand”, that is the group of government employees working in the social field (educators, teachers, medical personnel, etc.), in the lurch (Bourdieu 1998). This situation has led to a crisis in education systems because of the difficulties which arise from the need to reconcile the public sphere’s solidarity function with the logic of productivity and competitiveness which is typical of the changed social reality (Bourdieu, Éd., 1993).

In fact, the growing diffusion of globalisation processes⁴ has caused the breakdown of national customs barriers, with consequent company relocations and a restructuring of the labour market. This flexibility of goods and people flows, combined with an acceleration in the circulation of information, has led to the birth of the “New/Net/Knowledge Economy”⁵, a new “liquid” configuration of capitalism (Bauman 2000) which has ushered in the era of “informationalism” (Castells 1996).

In this ever-changing context, the formation of “human capital” (Becker 1964; Schultz 1971; Stehr 1994, 2001) has assumed a central role within what has increasingly been defined as a “Knowledge Society” (Boutang 2011; Drucker 1957, 1969, 1993, 1994; Fumagalli 2011; Gorz 2003; Kumar 1995; Lane 1966; Pastore 2015; Vercellone 2006).

Paradoxically, however, in spite of the name given to the emerging society’s paradigm, knowledge seems to have progressively lost its theoretical dimension to become almost exclusively a labour market tool, a commodity aimed at increasing economic prosperity. The new role assumed by the capitalist production model has produced an emerging educational model based on efficient forms of standardisation of practices with the aim of a utilitarian allocation of human resources (Bourdieu, Éd., 1993, Bourdieu 1998).

It is no coincidence that since the 1990s, some international organisations, such as the European Union and UNESCO, have started to define competency-based learning precisely to highlight the applicative aspect of knowledge as a new educational methodology. The term “competence” - used in the *White Paper on Education and Training* (Cres-

⁴ Globalisation is a complex phenomenon which includes not only an economic dimension (the interdependence of national economies) but also cultural, social and political aspects. In order to compare the main theoretical perspectives on the processes of globalisation, it is useful to read the following fundamental texts: Beck 1997; Bauman 1998; Habermas 1998; Giddens 1999; Martell 2010; Ritzer e Dean 2015.

⁵ The expression “New Economy” was created in the nineties to highlight its difference from the so-called “Old Economy”, or traditional industry-based economy, in order to indicate those companies in the tertiary sector which provide services without the need for a specific physical space. From a lexical point of view, it is more appropriate to use the term “Net Economy”, or other substantially equivalent wording (“Digital Economy”, “Internet Economy”, “Web Economy”), when connection to the Internet is fundamental in the service supply processes. The expression “Knowledge Economy” underlines instead the importance of human capital as an intellectual resource which can implement economic processes by using the web (Rullani 2004).

son and Flynn, Eds. 1995) and in the UNESCO commission's report coordinated by Jacques Delors - explicitly refers to the work culture, from which it originates, and indicates the desire to place the development of expendable attitudes in the work field in the foreground. This "competence" is *de facto* defined as "a mix, specific to each individual, of skill in the strict sense of the term, acquired through technical and vocational training, of social behaviour, of an aptitude for teamwork, and of initiative and a readiness to take risks" (Delors et al. 1996: 89).

It is interesting to observe that this definition is anything but neutral and reveals a clear neoliberal origin, since it places the emphasis on the individual and his/her ability to take "risks" without reference to any public social safety nets.

The European Union's interest in identifying new training objectives which are more aligned with the demand for increasingly flexible working positions is one of the cornerstones of the Lisbon strategy (European Council 2000). As part of the "Lifelong Learning Programme", the European Union has explicitly recognised the need to define new basic competences, as an essential response to the transformations which have taken place in society. In particular, the recommendations of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 list the following "key competences": communication in the mother tongue, communication in foreign languages, mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, digital competence, learning to learn, social and civic competences, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression (European Council 2006)⁶.

Although most of these competences and other civic competences indicated in current documents (European Council 2018b) fall within a highly shared sphere of values and represent an attempt to make operational some of the principles contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the main objective of the European Parliament and Council's recommendations seems to urge member states to adapt their educational policies to the new demands of the labour market with its flexible workforce requirements. Indeed, the document's introduction recalls that:

In the context of improving the Community's employment performance, the European Councils of Brussels (March 2003 and December 2003) stressed the need to develop lifelong learning, with a particular focus on active and preventive measures for the unemployed and inactive persons. This built on the report of the Employment Taskforce, which emphasised the need for people to be able to adapt to change, the importance of integrating people into the labour market, and the key role of lifelong learning (European Council 2006).

⁶ A more extensive breakdown of these eight "key competences" can be found in the sixteen "21st-Century Skills" indicated by the World Economic Forum 2015: six "Foundational Literacies" (literary, numeracy, scientific literacy, ICT literacy, financial literacy, cultural and civic literacy), four "Competences" (critical thinking / problem-solving, creativity, communication, collaboration) and six "Character Qualities" (curiosity, initiative, persistence / grit, adaptability, leadership, social and cultural awareness) (World Economic Forum 2015). The European Council has also recently updated and reviewed the "key competences" on the basis of the changing needs of contemporary society (European Council 2018a).

Above all, competitiveness, which is a foundation of neoliberal economic policy, is considered a primary objective to be achieved through the “key competences”:

The Framework of Actions for the Lifelong Development of Competences and Qualifications, adopted by the European social partners in March 2002, stresses the need for businesses to adapt their structures more and more quickly in order to remain competitive. Increased team-work, flattening of hierarchies, devolved responsibilities and a greater need for multi-tasking are leading to the development of learning organisations. In this context, the ability of organisations to identify competences, to mobilise and recognise them and to encourage their development for all employees represent the basis for new competitive strategies (European Council 2006).

The European Union has also promoted global, market-oriented educational policies, superseding traditional qualifications with the introduction of the “European Qualifications Framework” (EQF) (European Council 2008; 2017), a new system expressed as “knowledge” (i.e. useful contents), “skills” and “competences”. This framework has been created in order to compare the levels of training achieved by European citizens. The indication of “competence” in this context seems to be aimed at highlighting educational actions which go beyond the development of simple instrument skills. However, it is clear that autonomy in the work field is almost exclusively about skills and higher EQF levels, whilst the focus on the professionalising dimension of training is increasingly being emphasised.

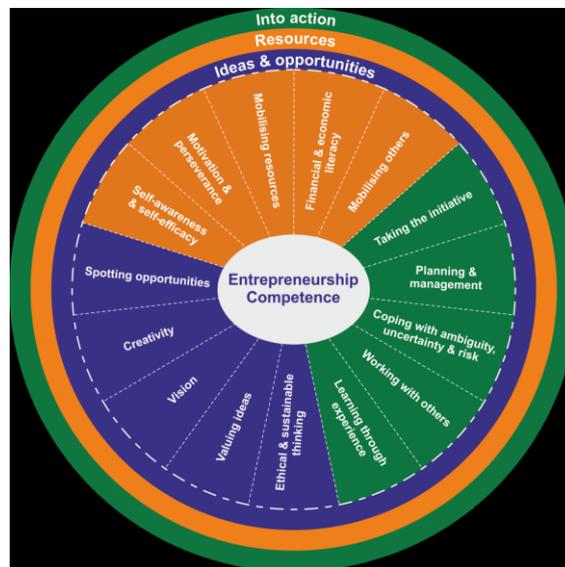
Subsequently, in accordance with the “Europe 2020” strategy (European Commission 2010), the need to raise levels of learning to support young people’s integration into the labour market was reaffirmed and, as a consequence, the European Commission encouraged a rethink of education towards training which included traineeships and periods of apprenticeship (European Commission 2012, 2013b). Proposals to facilitate the transition from school to work and to extend the practice of a dual (school/work) system can be found in the recommendations of the European Council’s “Youth Guarantee” (European Commission 2013a) and in the *European Alliance for Apprenticeship* project (European Council 2013).

Through an even more pragmatic and purposeful approach than that recommended by the European Union, the OECD has started the so-called “Skills Strategy” (OECD 2017), to promote reforms which aim to implement the skills necessary for social cohesion and economic development. To achieve these aims, educational models that are not immediately translatable into an economic dimension and competitive advantages for countries do not seem to be contemplated, and governments are invited to align educational objectives with the labour market.

When workers have the mix of skills that is well aligned with the needs of the most technologically advanced industries, and when qualifications reliably reflect what workers can do, countries can develop a comparative advantage by specialising in these industries (OECD 2017: 3).

Furthermore, the European Union has underlined the strategic role which competence related to a sense of initiative and entrepreneurship should have within training processes (“sense of initiative and entrepreneurship”, European Council 2006), in order to promote a new labour market model no longer based on the prevailing dependent employment. Communications from the European Commission expressly invite a rethink of educational models to strengthen the skills of “human capital” and increase competitiveness (European Commission 2012, 2016).

Above all, it is within the European *EntreComp framework: The Entrepreneurship Competence Framework* (Bacigalupo et al. 2016) that entrepreneurial competence seems to assume a central role in training processes, becoming a meta-competence which should focus all the other competences. Entrepreneurial competence includes fifteen interdependent sub-competences which can be assessed on the basis of eight-level objectives (Bacigalupo et al. 2016: 23-35). Even ethical ideas and values are denoted as sub-competences that contribute to the development of entrepreneurial competence, and the graphic representation of the proposed model also clearly indicates the centrality of the latter in relation to the other elements placed around the primary objective.



Source: Bacigalupo et al. 2016: 6.

The *EntreComp framework* stigmatises unethical behaviour and invites people to reflect on “how sustainable long-term social, cultural and economic goals are” (Bacigalupo et al. 2016: 26). However, all values that are not translatable into an economically sustainable enterprise seem to be excluded from this framework, as the appendix listing the eight levels of competence for each sub-competence does also not contain references to altruistic values or ideals founded on sharing resources that are not purely for the purposes of the objectives to be achieved (Bacigalupo et al. 2016: 23-35).

Proficiency levels are not even described in the third person as is usual (“he/she is able to”), but directly in the first person, with a continuous repetition of the expression “I can”. This seems to conflict with the invitation to work as a team, which is also one of the sub-competences (Latempa 2018).

This emphasis on individuals having to become the creators of their own destiny in the work field, through forms of self-promotion which borrow their language from the marketing of commercial products, is a clear expression of the widespread neoliberal paradigm (Dardot and Laval 2009), and has also been acknowledged by Italian school legislation.

3. Competences and work in the Italian school system

The Italian State has long taken European recommendations into account, adopting certification of competence in the various education cycles⁷, in order to overcome the gap between training and work. However, it is only with L. [Law] 107/2015⁸ that this competence has become central in the training of Italian students.

This law - known as the “Good school” law - requires that schools adopt a three-year plan for their educational offering (PTOF) in which they must identify the interventions they intend to carry out to broaden or strengthen students’ competences. The law specifically establishes the areas in which actions are to be taken (L. 107/2015, Art. 1, sub. 7).

In addition to a particular focus on some practices already considered in school legislation - such as the development of responsible behaviour “inspired by knowledge

⁷ In Italy the certification of competences - provided in Presidential Decree 275/1999, Art. 10 - was introduced by Ministerial Decree 139/2007 and Ministerial Decree 9/2010. In this regard, we may also cite: L.D. [Legislative Decree] 62/2017, M.D. [Ministerial Decree] 742/2017.

⁸ In 2017 the decrees implementing L. 107/2015 - Legislative Decrees 59-66/2017 - were issued.

and respect for the law, environmental sustainability, the countryside, heritage and cultural activities” (*Ibidem*) - the “key competences” recommended by the European Union can be observed amongst the skills that it is considered necessary to implement: linguistic competence, both in Italian and in the English language, mathematical-logical and scientific competence, digital competence, active citizenship and democratic competence, economic-financial, juridical and self-entrepreneurship competence.

The proposal to increase alternating school-work pathways, which became mandatory with the application of L. 107/2015, is in addition to these competences.

Alternating school-work training had already been introduced into the Italian education system (L. 53/2003; L.D. [Legislative Decree] 77/2005; P.D. [Presidential Decree] 87-89/2010; L. 128/2013). In L. 107/2015 (Art. 1, sub. 33-43) it was indicated as being one of the main areas requiring intervention in order to improve the educational pathway (Art. 1, sub. 7), completely altering its episodic and occasional nature and making it a truly integral part of students’ training.

The reform, establishes that “alternating school-work pathways are included in the three-year plans of the educational offering” (Art. 1, sub. 33). In particular, it states the obligation to carry out at least 400 hours in the second two-year period and in the last year of technical and vocational secondary schools and 200 hours in the last three years of the “lice”⁹.

The Italian government considers L. 107/2015 and the “Jobs Act”¹⁰ to be two important, complementary tools for the adaption of competences to the demands of the labour market and to promote employment and thus overcome the ongoing economic crisis. However, the main limitation of these measures seems to lie in the idea that high unemployment, caused by the economic downturn and the contraction of domestic demand, can be overcome by measures concerning labour supply, starting with a reduction in its cost. The decrease in labour costs, although it may help to boost exports, actually depresses domestic consumption, and it is difficult to restore the demand for labour against a background of economic stagnation.

One of the problems which emerged soon after the application of L. 107/2015 was the difficulty of finding private and public-service corporations in the proximity of schools in some underdeveloped areas of Italy.

⁹ Theoretically-orientated, rather than vocational, Italian secondary schools.

¹⁰ The “Jobs Act” is a reform of labour law which includes several legislative interventions: D.L.[Decree-Law] 34/ 2014 (converted in L. 78/2014), L. 183/2014, L.D. 22-23/2015, L.D. 80-81/2015, L.D. 148-151/2015. Through the Jobs Act, some neoliberal policies have been adopted in order to make the labour market more flexible. For example, one of the changes introduced by the “Jobs Act” is the abrogation of article 18 of the Workers’ Statute, which provided for the reinstatement in the workplace for workers dismissed without just cause.

In order to carry out alternating school-work training, students are sometimes forced to move from their hometown to another town, using their own means of transport and without any reimbursement of the costs incurred. In particular, although the possibility of carrying out alternating school-work pathways abroad (Art. 1, sub. 35) represents an important training opportunity on the one hand, due to the possibility of strengthening competences in foreign languages, on the other hand, it risks reinforcing the inequalities of educational opportunities.

Indeed, high cost arrangements are not accessible to everyone; even though schools have a limited “solidarity fund”, established to help the most disadvantaged students, it is unlikely that families will explicitly make such a request, as it entails an implicit admission of poverty¹¹.

Moreover, students do not receive any salary for their activities, because the time they spend in companies or in private and public-service corporations is considered, in effect, a period of learning through work experience. As the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR) states in the operational guide for schools, the training periods undertaken at the host structures simply constitute curricular internships and, as a consequence, they must not be paid, being only the “practical” phase of alternating school-work pathways (MIUR 2015).

The situation in Germany, for example, is different because the alternating training pathways in the *Fachoberschulen* and the school-work alternation typical of the *Berufsschulen* dual system allows for the drawing-up of paid apprenticeship contracts. The work commitment is more extensive, consistent with the chosen path, and offers a good chance of being transformed into a permanent employment relationship.

In this sense, the very definition of alternating school-work training for Italian pathways appears inappropriate, given that the training to be undertaken does not constitute a work contract. Furthermore, the attribution of the label “work” to an unpaid internship risks normalising the idea that work does not necessarily provide remuneration, contributing to a reinforcement of a social trend and an image already widespread in the era of globalisation which is now also accepted at a regulatory level.

Since the MIUR underlines the less professionalising and more educational value of the Italian type of dual system, it becomes more difficult to understand the decision to

¹¹ During informal interviews with the author, some teachers working in upper secondary schools reported the difficulties they encounter each time they suggest parents in need of assistance make use of the “solidarity fund”. These parents generally refuse financial support and state that their children will not participate in activities abroad for other reasons, maybe to avoid the sense of shame generated by such a request. These teachers’ statements indicate the existence of a phenomenon that would be interesting to explore further through systematic study.

ask students who attend the last three years of *licei* to perform half the hours (200) required for those who are enrolled in the second two-year period and the final year of technical and vocational secondary schools (400). The choice made by legislators in the L. 107/2015 seems to be based on the idea that internship, rather than being an important moment of individual training and growth, is very close to a professional apprenticeship, from which *licei* students are partly exempt, due to the more theoretical orientation of their course of study¹².

The equalisation of the number of hours of alternating school-work training in *licei* and technical and vocational secondary schools - to be carried out in non-curricular time if possible - could instead be a significant opportunity to overcome this traditional distinction, which often results in forms of segregation due to students' socio-economic and cultural origins.

It is well known that although some researchers have shown a slow, but gradual decline in educational opportunity inequalities in Italy (Barone 2009; Barone, Luijkx and Schizzerotto 2010; Breen et al. 2009), students' socio-economic and cultural background still significantly affects their training pathways (Ballarino and Checchi 2006; Ballarino and Schadee 2006; Barone, Triventi and Assirelli 2018, Bonichi 2010; Bottani and Benadusi 2006; Brunello and Checchi 2007; Checchi 2010; Cobalti 2007; Gremigni 2018; Parziale 2016; Pitzalis 2012, 2017). Not only are these inequalities evident vertically, in relation to the level of education achieved, but also in the horizontal direction, with reference to the different types of studies undertaken (Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli 2009, 2010, 2011; Queirolo Palmas 2002). In fact, the differentiation of study pathways (tracks) causes an inequality in training opportunities (Ballarino and Checchi 2006; Checchi 2010; Gasperoni 1996, 2008). The tendency of upper class parents to enrol their children in *licei* and in the best schools gives rise to phenomena of "cream skimming", a school "distinction" that make the students of the various secondary schools unequal (Benadusi, Fornari and Giancola 2010). The greater number of hours of alternating school-work training provided for the students of technical and vocational secondary schools ends up reducing school time for curricular subjects, with the effect of impoverishing the education of already disadvantaged students and further increasing the inequalities in educational opportunities that still exist today in Italy (ISTAT 2017, 2018).

¹² In the Budget Law for 2019, as for the suggestion of the new Minister of Education, University and Research, Marco Bussetti, the hours of alternating school-work pathways (renamed: "Percorsi per le competenze trasversali e l'orientamento") were reduced. However, students attending technical and vocational schools will have to work longer hours - 150 and 210 respectively - compared to those attending *licei* (90).

During the first years of enforcement of the reform, several critical issues emerged. First of all, alternating school-work training is not consistent with study pathways¹³. Sometimes the theoretical competences acquired at school are inadequate to fully understand the kind of work which the traineeship entails and consequently the role of the adolescents is largely passive. Thus, for instance, students in alternating school-work training in some lawyers' offices end up being used to make photocopies, and those who are allowed to enter an operating room can only observe the actions of the surgeons when they are so permitted. In other cases, alternating school-work pathways are undertaken within commercial activities in which the required competences allow the students to be immediately inserted into actual work activities. In the large national newspapers some workers are anonymously reporting the decrease in overtime hours as a result of the employment of students in alternating school-work training.

Moreover, due to the delay with which the National Register for alternating school-work training has been established, various abuses and cases of the improper use of trainees have also been reported.

Aiming at providing greater guarantees and protections for students, on 18th October 2016, the MIUR launched the "National Champions of Alternating School-Work Training" programme, which involved sixteen medium and large companies able to offer 27,000 positions to trainees¹⁴. However, the presence amongst these subjects of corporations whose names have also assumed a negative symbolic value over time - as a direct symptom of the processes of globalisation and the expression of a clearly neoliberal cultural model - has not been favourably received by a part of the education system.

The problems that have emerged in alternating school-work training pathways have been particularly denounced by the Students Union which also organised parades and demonstrations in the main Italian cities¹⁵. The MIUR responded to students' requests

¹³ According to a survey carried out by the Students Union on a sample of 15,000 students, several problems emerged in the implementation of alternating school-work pathways. In particular, 57% of the subjects involved in alternating school-work training declared that they participated in activities not-inherent to their own study path, and 38% stated that they incurred expenses in order to fulfil the work obligation. Although the survey was not based on scientific criteria, whilst we are waiting for all students to express their evaluation of alternating school-work pathways - as provided for in L. 107/2015, Art. 1, sub. 37 - the information supplied by the Students Union highlighted the existence of some critical issues in the application of the law.

¹⁴ The companies, professional associations and members of the third sector that have been involved in the programme are: Accenture, Bosch, Consiglio Nazionale Forense, COOP, Dallara, ENI, Fondo Ambiente Italiano, FCA, General Electric, HPE, IBM, Intesa Sanpaolo, Loccioni, McDonald's, Poste Italiane e Zara. <http://www.istruzione.it/alternanza/campioni.shtml>

¹⁵ The main national newspapers (*la Repubblica*, *Corriere della sera*) reported that one of the most successful demonstrations organised by the Students Union took place on 13th October 2017 in seventy

by ensuring greater controls on activities carried out during the internship, without allowing any possibility of an opening, however, for radical changes in L. 107/2015.

The decrees implementing the “Good school” confirmed the central nature of competences and work in school education. In particular, in accordance with the decree on the evaluation of competences in the first cycle and in state exams (L.D. 62/2017), M.D. [Ministerial Decree] 742/2017 was issued which contained the new models for the certification of students’ competences in primary and lower secondary schools, including a section dedicated to the “sense of initiative”. The reference to entrepreneurship only appears in a note but it is required that, at the end of primary school, a child should be able to “carry out simple projects” and assume “his/her own responsibilities” (M.D. 742/2017, Annex B).

From these ministerial models and from the recent syllabus for the upper secondary school on entrepreneurship education (MIUR 2018), an ideological apparatus clearly emerges which orientates the new generation towards a fundamentally utilitarian vision of study and life, in which free will without social conditioning is ascribed to the individual, according to the myth of the “self-made-man”. Above all, it is required that, in the event that the new work-oriented planning of the education system fails, the fault is introjected by young students without any reference to the differing opportunities a different social position offers, which are a function of the quality and quantity of the economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital each one possesses. Substantial inequality is thus concealed by a formal equality and in this sense school seems to be continuing to exert a form of symbolic violence which is difficult to eradicate (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970).

4. Conclusions

European Union recommendations, within the “Lifelong Learning Programme” (European Council 2006) and the subsequent “Europe 2020” programme (European Commission 2010) have outlined a new educational model based on the “key competences” considered useful within the capitalist system of the new millennium. Specifically, after the effects of the “great recession”, which began in 2007 and which aggravated the existing income inequalities (Keeley 2015, OECD 2011), rather than directing economic policies towards significantly increasing state interventions in the markets, it was decided to give a central role to work training, through forms of apprenticeships to be undertaken

Italian cities. On the organisation of this event, see: <http://www.unionedeglistudenti.net/sito/13-ottobre-il-nostro-tempo-scarica-tutti-i-materiali/>

during educational pathways (European Commission 2012, 2013a, 2013b; European Council 2013). Furthermore, it was decided to support the culture of entrepreneurship and the sense of initiative, which is typical of neoliberal ideology, starting from the lowest levels of school education (European Council 2006; Bacigalupo et al. 2016).

If, on the one hand, it is still premature to evaluate the real effects the application of these measures in the educational field have generated in the labour market, it is, on the other hand, possible to highlight some critical aspects of the cultural model proposed. It is clear that humanistic culture and all forms of pure knowledge, which once constituted the focus of young people's cultural education, are nowadays marginalised in order to give increasing space to applicative knowledge and skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning, the value of which is recognised by the European Union (European Council 2012). Neoliberalism is thus spreading in schools and universities; they constitute the designated places for the promotion of relations with industry and the business culture best suited for the "Knowledge Economy" (Olssen and Peters 2005).

In Italy, L. 107/2015 and the subsequent applicative decrees incorporated the recommendations of the European Union regarding the promotion of key competences, and more specifically of alternating school-work pathways.

The idea of introducing a form of internship as an activity aimed at increasing students' potential, promoting both *homo sapiens* abilities and those of *homo faber*, could have represented an opportunity to overcome the traditional distinction between theoretical culture and practice. Thus, L. 107/2015 would have produced a small step forward towards changing the old school model, still substantially based on the "Gentile Reform"¹⁶, which was characterised by significant inequalities in educational pathways and opportunities.

Instead, on the heels of the European Union's indications, the reform seems to have considered competences and alternating school-work pathways as simple training for

¹⁶ The philosopher Giovanni Gentile, who was Minister of Education in Benito Mussolini's government from 1922 to 1924, was the author of a reform of the Italian educational system. After five years of primary school, students were oriented towards different lower secondary schools or work training (*corso integrativo, scuola complementare*). Those who attended the work training could not access upper secondary schools. The students who could attend *ginnasio* - generally coming from the upper classes - had the opportunity to study at classical secondary school (*liceo classico*), which, unlike other courses, provided access to all types of academic department. The class-based character of this reform was partly attenuated by the introduction of a unique middle school (L. 1859/1962), and by the liberalisation of university access for all students with a high school diploma (L. 910/1969). Although over time other reforms were realised, the distinction between *licei*, aimed at teaching pure knowledge to society's elite, and technical or vocational schools, oriented towards the world of work and consequently reserved for the lower classes, has remained substantially unchanged.

the labour market, and also maintains the distinction between *licei* and technical or vocational secondary schools, directing the traineeships on the basis of the school pathway undertaken, which is strongly oriented by the socio-economic and cultural family background. A reduction in the hours of in-class study - already decreased by numerous school projects - for alternating school-work training also involves a drop in content, that pure “knowledge” which is essential to acquire high-level skills and competences (Bruner 1966; Willingham 2010) and which students from disadvantaged backgrounds have more difficulty acquiring.

Although recent research showed some good practices carried out within alternating school-work pathways (Fondazione Di Vittorio 2018; Gentili 2018; Tropea 2018), L. 107/2015 does not appear to respond to the need to overcome the inequalities which still exist in Italy’s educational and employment opportunities. The neoliberal ideology that is underlying in the educational model defined by the European Union, on the basis of which Italian reform has been created, may allow some resilient individuals to improve their condition, but seems not to change the macro-economic mechanisms behind the reproduction of existing social relationships. Rather, the transformations taking place in the educational field appear to proclaim the advent of a “Competence Society” as a metamorphosis of an epiphenomenon that has its roots in the globalised capitalist system. After all, as Spinoza already observed, “ordo, et connexio idearum idem est, ac ordo, et connexio rerum” (Spinoza [1675] 2010, 1st ed. 1677: II, VII).

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