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Wanted: Legitimacy. School and teachers as seen by young people: opinions and expectations

Marina D'Agati*

Dipartimento di Culture, Politica e Società, Lungo Dora Siena 100 A, 10153 Torino, Italy

Abstract

This study aims to shed light on representations and perceptions of school and teachers. 560 young people, aged 18-25 and living in a region of Northern Italy, participated in the study. A quantitative survey method using structured questionnaire to obtain the data is employed. In questionnaire participants were asked about: a) evaluation of school experience; b) perceptions of school's effectiveness in reaching traditional goals; c) perceptions of school priorities, goals, problems, activities, responsibilities; d) perceptions of teachers' professional characteristics; e) perceptions of teachers' weaknesses. Results show that young people's overall evaluation of both school and teachers is generally positive; however findings suggest that the legitimization of school and teachers is in general weak, especially when we observe perceptions of priorities of school and teachers' shortcomings. This study indicates the importance of studying young people's representations and perceptions towards school and teachers as the information collected would help administrators and stakeholders to plan and maintain higher level of school effectiveness, teachers' motivation, authority and legitimacy.

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Keywords: Legitimation of school; school effectiveness; school perception; school priorities; teacher's authority; teachers's professional characteristics

* Corresponding author. Tel.: + 39 011 6702602; fax: + 39 011 6702606.

E-mail address: marina.dagati@unito.it

1. Introduction

The main challenges facing the education systems in the 21st century are issues of access, equity, quality and effectiveness (Botha & Makoelle, 2012) in the management of educational resources. Many are directly linked to the rapid changes going on in today's world: the globalization, the development and usage of information and communication technologies at work and in day to day life, the flexibilization and the polarization of the job structure (Allen & van der Velden, 2012), the growing diversity of our societies, etc. Some challenges are short term, such as reallocations of inputs, while others are longer terms and may require a strategic approach to finding solutions. This is reflected in their increasing importance in national education agendas. Long term challenges include integration of the most fragile members of the population (i.e. immigrants and those belonging to disadvantaged social groups). At the same time, attempts to measure the outcomes of schooling have assumed greater importance in many countries in the OECD area, together with an increased focus on factors which improve outcomes (OECD, 2013). Anyway, the issue of stable and adequate financing is crucial, as well as the need to balance short-term effectiveness with longer-term growth. This creates new responsibilities, both for teachers and schools, and for the national systems within which they work.

As far as Italy is concerned, the school system is normally referred as public education. In the course of the last two decades, significant legislative measures have been implemented and several reforms have been carried out (Fornari & Giancola, 2011; Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2012). For example, school curricula have been renewed; the age range of compulsory schooling has been raised in 1999 from the age of 14 to 15 and further to 16 in 2003; the principle of school autonomy was introduced. Furthermore, the results of international learning tests (PISA, TIMSS and others) show persistently negative differences between Italy and the other industrialized countries. They also show sharp territorial differences, especially in the north/south divide but also between the different kinds of educational establishments and between individuals.

In this respect, the purpose of this article is to explore the perceptions and expectations that young people between 18 and 25 years of age have of school and teachers. Specifically, it aims to shed light on the relationship between their representations and legitimation of school and teachers. Regarding the aim of the article, the following research questions need to be answered:

- How do young people evaluate school so far in relation to its objectives, mandate and tasks?
- In its role of socialization agency, which of its main traditional functions is school capable of fulfilling?
- How is today's upper secondary education judged on the whole?
- What functions should the school give priority to in the future?
- How do young people view teachers? What are their shortcomings?

The article is organized as follows: after outlining the current structure of the Italian educational system, the theoretical framework and illustrating the study's methodological aspects, the main findings will be presented and discussed. They should be considered as exploratory, both because of their regional dimension and as a result of some limits in the data collection process.

Discussion of these results are provided as well as directions for future research.

1.1. The Italian educational system: some institutional features

Let us start with an overall look at the current structure of the Italian educational system.

The Italian Education System consists of three cycles of education: primary education, secondary education (lower and upper), tertiary education (see Figure 1).

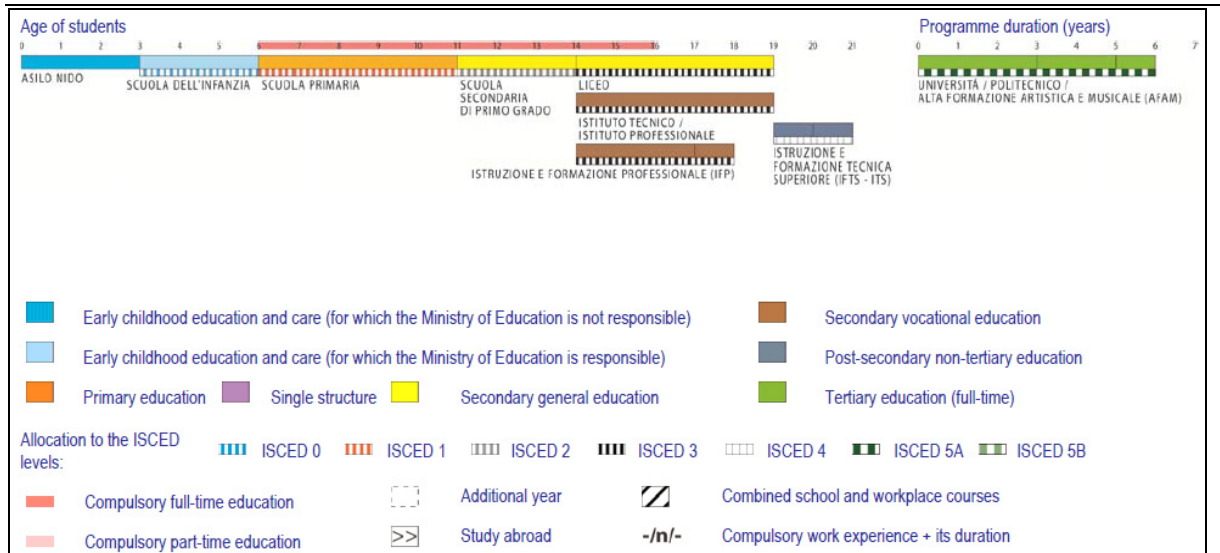


Fig. 1. The Italian Educational System
Source: Eurydice (INDIRE 2013)

Compulsory education, lasting 10 years, starts at the age of 6. First cycle of education is made up of: primary education (lasting 5 years), for children between 6 and 11 years of age; lower secondary education (lasting 3 years) for children between 11 and 14 years of age; second cycle of orientation at upper secondary school (2 years). Second cycle of education can be accomplished either in State upper secondary schools (licei, technical institutes and vocational institutes), (lasting 5 years) for students from 14 to 19 years of age or through the three-year vocational education and training courses, falling under the competence of the Regions. Post-secondary non tertiary education is offered through post-qualification and post-diploma vocational courses organized by the Regions or higher technical education and training courses (IFTS).

Tertiary education consists in higher education offered by universities and the High level arts and music education system.

1.2. Theoretical framework

This article brings together two types of studies. The first concerns institutional legitimation. Legitimacy is a 'slippery' concept (Hough & Maffei, 2013). Max Weber was the first to use this term specifically. His typology of legitimate authority has achieved classical status in the literature of political-science and political sociology. Weber defined legitimacy as the quality of an order (not only a political order) to which social action is oriented. According to the German sociologist, legitimacy is a 'belief': an institution is perceived as legitimate when a collectivity believes that it has the right to govern or make decisions. A number of theoretical approaches followed the tradition established by Max Weber. Among the principal ones are the strategic (Lindblom, 1994) and the institutional approaches (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983; Scott & Meyer, 1983). Mention should also be made of Suchman's typology of legitimacy (1995). He identifies three forms of legitimacy: pragmatic, moral and cognitive. The first type, pragmatic legitimacy, refers to the instrumental value of the organization for its stakeholders. Moral legitimacy concerns the public's normative evaluation of the choices made by an organization: in other words, it is granted when an organization reflects socially acceptable or desirable norms, standards and values. Lastly, cognitive legitimacy is accorded when an organization pursues objectives and activities that society regards as appropriate, proper and desirable. Suchman thus tells us that there is not one, but many types of legitimacy. Likewise, there can also be several kinds of legitimacy for the school and those who work in it, and they can be perceived and gauged through different indicators. For instance, legitimation may take place through the ability to participate in decision-making, or there may be legitimation based on the institution's performance. It is on the latter that we will focus our attention in the following pages.

The second type of studies considers the school, together with the family, as being a key institution in young peoples' growth and upbringing. Specifically, they focus on the relationship between perceptions of school experience and adolescents' orientations to institutional authority (Gouveia-Pereira *et al.* 2003). Several studies suggest that the school experience has an enormous influence on how orientations to the institutional system are acquired (Emler, Ohana & Moscovici, 1987).

2. Method

This study is a part a larger research project funded by the Piedmont regional administration and entitled *The Institutional and Cultural Roots of Development in a Knowledge-Based Society*. It involved six lines of investigation. The findings presented in this article are taken from the working package n. 5, *Local governance of training and education institutions and their legitimization*.

2.1 Participants

The study is based on a sample of 18 to 25 year old young people (N=560) attending or had completed upper secondary schools in Piedmont, a region of Northern Italy.

Demographic data was collected on gender, age, type of upper-secondary school attended and occupational characteristics. Table 1 below presents a summary of sampling characteristics.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample (%)

Number of subjects, N (%)	male	267 (47,7)
	female	293 (52,3)
Age	18-21 years	62,5
	22-25 years	37,5
Type of upper-secondary school attended	liceo	35,4
	technical institutes	36,6
	vocational institutes	28,0
Occupational characteristics	full-time student	60,8
	employed (or in civil service)	31,1
	unemployed	8,1

2.2 Data collection and analysis

Research was carried out between November 2009 and April 2014 by a group of scholars at the University of Turin. Questionnaires were administered in 2011. The data were analyzed by SPSS, version 21. Dependencies between variables were determined by a goodness of fit chi-square test, the closeness of the relationship by Cramer's contingency coefficient and the strength of differences using odd ratios. All statistical test were performed on the asymptotic significance of 0.05. In detail, the study is based on a mixed method, with two survey investigations followed by qualitative data collection through in-depth interviews and focus groups.

2.3 Questionnaire

The questionnaire included 51 questions with several response formats: closed-ended questions (single-choice or multiple-choice), open-ended questions, rating scales, Likert-type scale. The instrument was divided into seven sections addressing: 1) knowledge and information about the regional school system; 2) legitimization of the school system; 3) trust in school and in institutions; 4) interpersonal trust; 5) opinion of teachers' authority; 6) dynamics of social inclusion/exclusion; 7) sociodemographic background

3. Findings

3.1 Young people's opinions towards school's main functions and teachers' professional characteristics

School has many function tasks which include: all-round development of the individual, citizenship training,

aesthetic development, conservation and promotion culture, development and cultivating good and higher values of life, development of attitude and communicative ability, etc.

Therefore an important question is whether young people think school performed well in its main functions. This item was answered on a 1 to 5 Likert-type scale ('very low' to 'very high'). Results based on Table 2 show that respondents perceived school as performing well enough (or 4 to 5 on a scale of 1 to 5) in fulfilling some of its traditional objectives: nearly half of the respondents (45%) report that school is still the best place for learning scientific and technical knowledge and a 'training ground' for learning the basics of living together (35%). Conversely, they indicate that it performs not well (or 1 to 3 on a scale of 1 to 5) in developing appreciation of the arts in different forms, in encouraging a healthy body and a responsive mind, and in citizenship education.

Table 2. Respondent's opinion towards school effectiveness on its structural functions (scale of 1 to 5) (%)

<i>In your opinion, to what extent does the school currently is able to achieve these goals?</i>	Very low			Very high	
	1	2	3	4	5
transmitting a scientific and technical knowledge	55,3			44,7	
offering students skills needed in the labor market	71,2			28,8	
teaching to appreciate art and developing esthetic taste	82,9			17,1	
educating for citizenship	74,2			25,8	
teaching how to deal with others in daily life	64,6			35,4	
helping young people to understand different cultures	71,9			28,1	
encouraging a healthy body and a responsive mind	77,7			22,3	
promoting critical thinking skills	62,5			37,5	

Teachers' role perceptions and views of their professional characteristics were also favorable in the main (see also Figure 5). Respondents perceived their teachers as well-prepared and competent (47%), convinced of the values they hold (47%) and, above all, impartial in dealing with students (Table 3).

Table 3. Perception of the justice of teachers' behaviour

<i>Do you feel that you are treated by the teachers in your school...</i>	
the same way as your classmates or other students	76,4
better than your classmates or other students	11,7
worse than your classmates or other students	11,9

3.2 Trust

Trust in public institutions plays a key role in democratic societies. To the extent to which individuals rely on institutions (vertical trust), they would be more willing to participate and get involved in public life; therefore, trust in institutions impacts in the legitimacy and stability of democratic regimes.

Even though trust in public institutions has declined in Italy over time and that this decline has accelerated over recent years (particularly following the recent financial crisis), young people relied on school. As we can observe in Figure 2, the highest level of trust was expressed in classmates (83%), followed by trust in teachers, non-teaching staff and school as a whole, whereas the representative bodies (50%) exhibit comparatively lower trust.

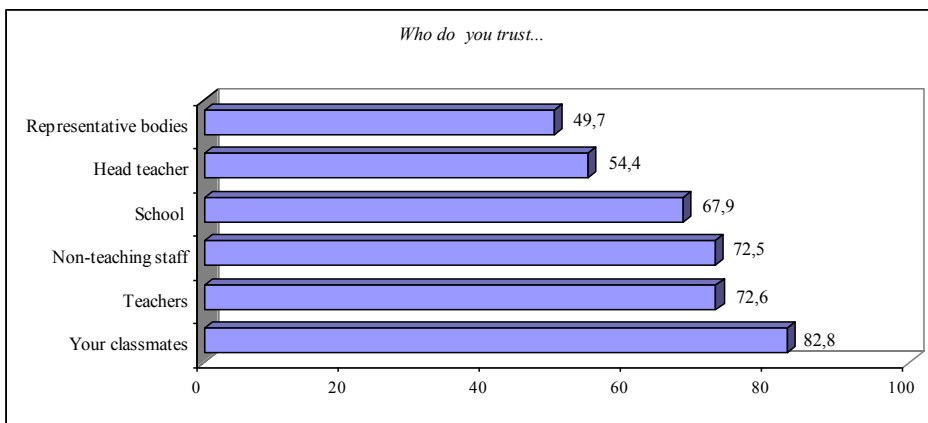


Fig. 2. The importance of classmates (% of 'yes' response)

3.3 School improvement priorities and perceived teachers' weaknesses

All respondents were asked to think about the school priorities that were identified as needing attention in school at the time of the interview. As shown (Figure 3), the top school improvement priority among young people interviewed was offering students skills needed in the labor market. Roughly two-thirds (64%) express this view. This priority was followed by transmitting technical-scientific knowledge, whereas developing appreciation of the arts in different forms and encouraging a healthy body and a responsive mind were not perceived as relevant priorities.

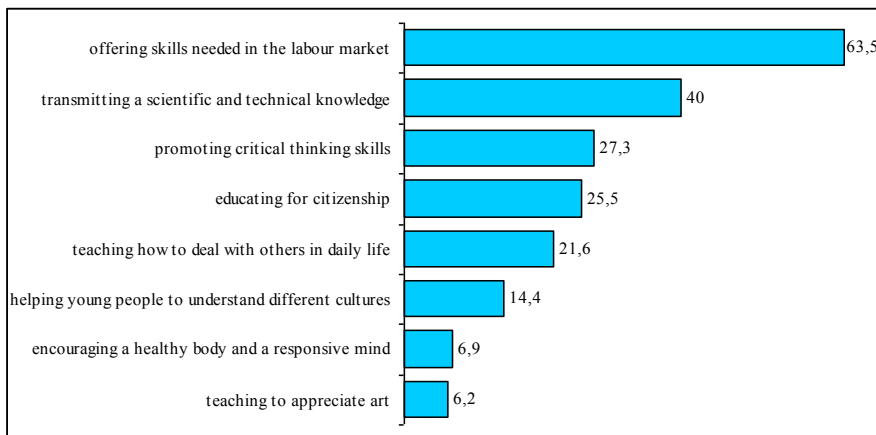


Fig. 3. Priority themes in school improvement (%; 1st & 2nd choice)

In addition, when asked about a range of school problems including bullying, unmotivated students, obsolescence of technological and computer equipment, outdated programs, young people had got very clear ideas. A scale of 1 to 5 of relevance was used, where 1 denotes that a particular problem is not at all widespread in school, and 5 denotes extremely widespread. Results are summarised in Figure 4, using bandings of 1—2 (entirely marginal), 3-5 (widespread-very widespread). Nine out of every ten respondents cited lack of students' motivation as a serious problem, following by obsolesce of the school's technological equipment and teaching facilities.

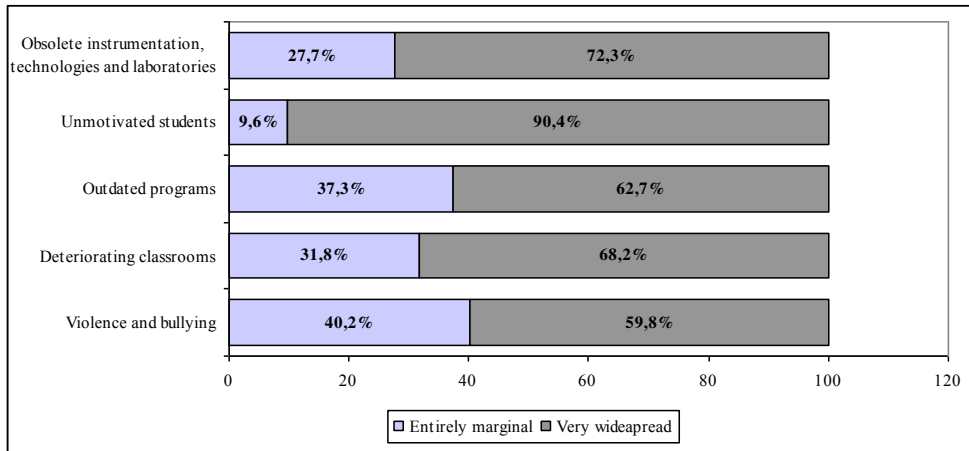


Fig. 4. How widespread do you think the following problems are in school?

Another issue that requires a closer analysis focuses on teachers' weaknesses. As shown in the figure below, the top two perceived teachers' shortcomings were engaging students, followed by listening to them, understanding their wants and needs. They were indicated as a critical problems by more than one out of two interviewees.

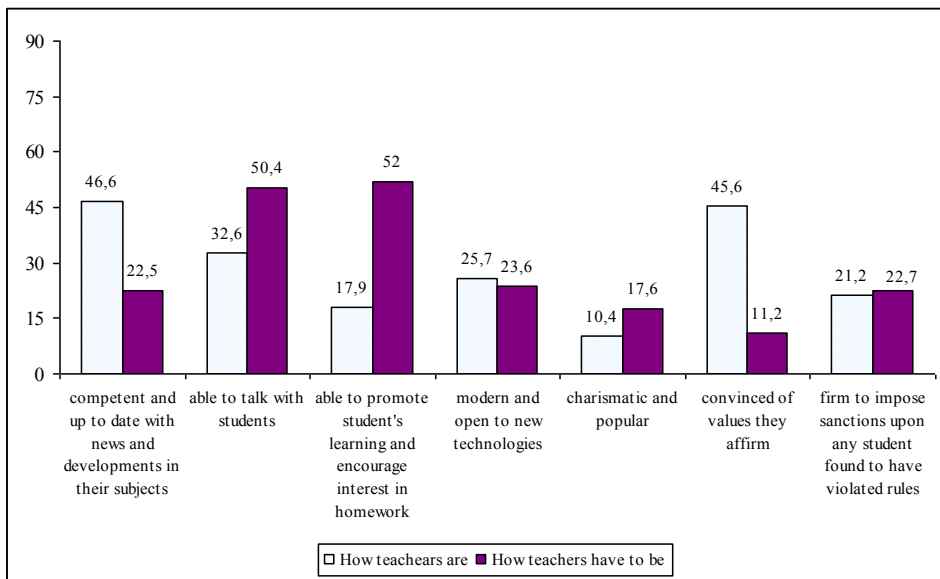


Fig. 5. Perceived professional characteristics of teachers: between being and having to be (%; 1st & 2nd choice)

4. Discussion

The foregoing results depicts a picture of how young people interviewed perceived both school and teachers. The majority of respondents reported that school performed well enough in fulfilling some of its traditional functions, especially gaining exposure to technical-scientific knowledge, teaching critical thinking and learning the basics of living together. Opinions of teachers' professional characteristics were also favorable in the main: interviewees saw their teachers as well-prepared, competent, capable of ensuring that the rules are respected, convinced of the values they hold and impartial in dealing with students.

However the analysis of school priorities and teachers' weakness raised questions of legitimacy. It is clear that, on

balance, school and teachers gain vital credibility and legitimacy from their relationship with students (and families). In particular, one of the most important factors leading to a gain of credibility and public legitimacy by educational institutions is ability to be responsive to students' needs. If educational institutions fail to do so, it will be much more difficult for them to win public legitimacy. Specifically, results of this study show a dissonance of perception between what school concretely accomplishes and beliefs about how it should act. In other words, it is a failure of the actual outcomes to meet the expected outcomes. From this perspective, results enable us to identify some key issues and goals that should be addressed in the future and that are consistent with recent studies (Sciolla e D'Agati, 2006; Cavalli e Argentin, 2010; Bertolini e D'Agati, 2014).

The first concerns the school's faculty. From their teachers respondents would like to have greater participation and passion, not so much regarding the values they believe in, as in what they teach. Furthermore, young people in Piedmont reported that teachers should also be capable of listening to their students, understanding their wants. In other words, they required more attention to be paid to their needs. They would like to have a relationship with their teachers that is less formal and institutional, and more open to exchanges of views. This is not a demand for concurrence in values (which, as we have seen, is not sought), but for greater agreement on the relational-expressive front. In fact, it is precisely those interviewees who viewed the school as inadequate in pursuing its goals and, at the same time, today's teachers as ethically convinced on the whole, who were most insistent about this aspect.

Another area that needs immediate attention as identified from the findings regards what the interviewees believe to be the school's most critical problem: unmotivated students. This issue is strictly connected to the first: how can teachers who are perceived as lacking in the ability to engage their students possibly motivate them? The relationship established between teachers and students, consequently, is essential in making schoolwork and learning more rewarding. The (de-) legitimization of the school is also a question of this relationship.

The third key issue regards school improvement priorities. As shown, there are variations in needs specified for different priorities. On the one hand, the first most often mentioned goal is equipping students with the necessary labor market skills or with a range of resources to join university programs. Responses suggest that it is an unmet need: as shown before, young people interviewed perceived that school did not perform well in preparing youth for both the labor market and higher education programs. On the other hand, the second most mentioned priority was transmitting technical-scientific knowledge. Unlike previous priority, the data showed that it is a function that today's education system is able to pursue effectively. This seem to suggest that though the educational system struggles to achieve certain goals, young people do not think going to school is a waste of time.

5. Conclusion

These key issues point to an urgent need for action and tools, deployed in different planes, settings and levels, not just for the school as an institution, but also for its faculty. It is not a question of laying the blame on the school or teachers, but of considering discrepancies that emerged from analysis as problems that require clear answers.

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