

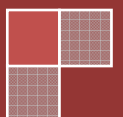
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## School-Work Alternating In Italy: A Critical Study

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### ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes and critically assesses the school-work alternating model as practiced in the high school system of the Autonomous Province of Trento (Italy). Throughout the assessment, the main weaknesses highlighted by graduates were the limited guidance they received from their teachers and the ineffectiveness of the work placement schemes put in place by the schools. The paper therefore raises fundamental questions about this educational model and suggests that improvements should include greater involvement of the students in selecting and shaping their internships and greater assistance to help students choose career paths or further academic directions.

**Keywords:** Guidance – Internship – School-work alternating - Post-diploma transition - Work placement

### 1. THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

Many are the causes external and internal to the labor market that have led to the high rate of youth unemployment in Italy and in many European countries, as well as to job instability that extends long after entering the labor market. The gap between school-based learning and working practice is one of the central factors that adversely affects the ability of young Italians to find an occupation that is coherent and congruent with the educational title obtained, relatively quickly after completing their studies. The Italian school system therefore needs to create conditions for greater employability of its graduates, and especially for those who do not move on to university.

A solution may come from offering opportunities that allow high school students to acquire so-called "key skills" that are particularly sought after by companies (communication, teamwork, leadership, autonomy at work and problem solving). Another important factor for a young person seeking employment also consists in becoming acquainted with work culture and business organization.

As a whole, the education system can hardly provide training that meets the needs of flexibility, adaptation and adjustment to new technologies as well as advanced specialization, which would limit the possibility of a widespread and positive encounter between supply and demand.

A significant step in addressing the problem in Italy is Law No. 107 of 13 July 2015 that has attached particular importance to the work experience of young people during their school years, so much so that it has made it compulsory. To implement *work placement schemes* does not imply only organizing *internship* for students but also to take the outlook of changing the position of school in society, so that it no longer stays exclusively locked within its walls as a repository of knowledge, but opens out to local, national and international cultural and productive reality (Schizzerotto, Barone, 2006).

Internship remains a basic tool albeit to be placed within a larger context. First, internship have nothing to do with employment. Students in general are not paid, but are offered educational goals. They cannot be thought of as a means of creating employment, even though the recruitment of a student on placement may be a valid secondary effect, as confirmed by research conducted in other countries (Mihail, 2006; Smith, Wilson, 2004) and in Italy (AlmaDiploma, 2016).

Highlighted instead are the guidance purposes of internship in producing greater awareness when choosing the path of study after the high school diploma or of the employment sector when seeking a future job. This tool can therefore be considered as an integral part of the guidance process that schools have the task of activating during the last three years of secondary school in Italy. It is within this problematic framework that the survey that this paper deals with was carried out. The survey was conducted between 2013 and 2015 by the *Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Trento*, on behalf of IPRASE - the Institute for research and educational experimentation of the Autonomous Province of Trento - and focused on the analysis of students' perceptions, attitudes and decision-making styles during the transition phase. Anna Ress worked on the survey together with the authors of this essay.

The survey questions can be grouped into three main categories:

- a) *Guidance applied*: how was guidance towards employment implemented by the schools? What were the levels of participation? What other sources, channels, or experiences were added to it by the students?
- b) *Guidance perceived*: what degree of success did the guidance towards employment implemented by the schools receive in terms of positivity, satisfaction and usefulness of any experience made? What criticisms were made? What shortcomings were observed?
- c) *Guidance results*: what effect did guidance activities practiced by the schools have on the actual integration of secondary school graduates into the labor market? Are there other non-school paths that could significantly influence labor market access?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

A first collection of data was conducted by means of a questionnaire distributed to 51 high school 5<sup>th</sup> year classes (equivalent to a total of 835 students who would graduate at the end of the school year). The procedural nature of the phenomenon analyzed required a second investigation, longitudinally, after graduation. In fact, in the following year 479 graduates were surveyed via two parallel interview methods (*web survey* and *Cati*). It was thus possible to compare the data concerning intended choice with the choice actually made at the conclusion of this transition phase.

As for the variables used, the *current condition*, which identifies the post-diploma situation, distinguishes four main categories: *students*, including those studying *workers*, with the exclusion of students but including those also looking for another job; *young people looking for work*, namely those only looking for a job and not engaged in any other activity; and *NEETs*, or those who do not study, do not work nor are looking for a job. In the analyses, several socio-demographic features such as *gender*, *cultural capital* of the family (defined by the highest academic qualification achieved by the parents) and *citizenship* were used as control variables. Independent variables used by the study include the *type of secondary school attended*, which may be either: (i) a '*liceo*' (high school specializing in scientific, classical, linguistic, social and artistic studies) or (ii) an '*istituto tecnico*' (secondary school specializing in technical and trade subjects); the *final score obtained at the school-leaving examination*; the degree of *guidance-related confidence* achieved in the transition, an *additive index* constructed from a set of attitudes that define the degree of awareness about his/her options through which the young person looks at the future. This index was subsequently recoded into three levels (*low, medium, high*).

## 3. THE RESULTS

### 3.1 *Guidance applied*

A student's participation in guidance activities for employment purposes is related to that student's will to enter the labor market as soon as the school-leaving diploma high school examination is obtained. In fact, nearly one in three young people declares not to have done anything, in the post-diploma transition phase, to expand his/her future professional horizon through guidance activities, thus showing complete lack of interest in the matter. Only a quarter of the interviewees showed a proactive attitude, claiming they had analysed work prospects in detail. Among the others, participation remained at a substantially passive level. If one observes the prevailing attitude in the different profiles of interviewees, there is less interest in the issue about finding a job among those who have continued their studies than among those who are working or looking for a job. Other analyses have shown that graduates from technical institutes, when compared to '*liceo*' students, were more involved in gaining knowledge about the labor market. It is important to note, however, that even among those, more interested in the professional world, i.e. those who have a job or who are looking for one, as well as among the graduates of technical institutes in general; the proportion of those who have sought detailed information never reaches the majority.

The main source of guidance for over two-thirds of interviewees is Internet. Important for about one-third of young people is also reading newspapers, magazines and specialized brochures. Less significant are events such as trade fairs, placement services and traditional media (TV and radio). If one looks at the role played by the school, one sees that only one in five interviewees turns to school guidance to acquire knowledge about the labor market. As students place relatively little faith in employment guidance activities conducted by schools, which anyway seem to be not very effective, let us analyze the reasons why.

The first element that emerges is the interviewees' scarce perception of having experienced guidance activities. This can be attributed, at least in part, to the lack of recognition of the specific purposes of the guidance activities proposed by the schools. By comparing the activities between them, individual *counseling* initiatives are less frequent compared to other routes such as choice support workshops, skill evaluation tests, university open days, group talks with experts. The perception of having participated in guidance activities is higher among high school graduates from technical institutes compared to '*licei*' graduates, and higher among those who are working or looking for work than among current university students.

Focusing on concrete life experiences considered typical of employment-related guidance, the survey has shown good, at times outstanding, distribution of contacts with the world of labor through personal initiative and events

organized by the school or work placements (see Table 1). The experience-based links between school and work, where they exist, are concentrated in the central years of secondary school and especially in the fourth year. When students reach the fifth year and approach the school-leaving exam, they find it is difficult to have profession-oriented experiences because they are not proposed by the schools and because most of the near-graduation students concentrate their efforts on the final exam of the educational cycle and/or on the preparation for university admission tests.

Almost three-quarters of the students claim, however, that they have had work experience not organized by the school. Less common is work experience organized by the school and *internship* in particular. The survey confirms the trend among vocational schools of offering more opportunities for work experience or work placement opportunities compared to *licei*. Finally, it is much more likely that workers have already had work experience when attending secondary high school compared to university students.

**Table 1 - Participation in guidance activities during school studies, by type of school (percentage)**

	Liceo (N = 254)	Istituto Tecnico (N = 225)	Total (N = 479)
Work experience organized by the school	38.5	67.3	52.1
Other work experiences	70.3	78.2	74.0
Training placements at companies or other bodies	36.9	73.0	53.8

### 3.2 Guidance perceived

According to the data collected, only one third of young people are satisfied with the information on the employment market received from schools. Looking at interviewees from the perspective of the school path they followed, the least satisfied are the *licei* graduates (14.9%) compared to the *istituti tecnici* graduates (54.9%), while considering the current condition of the interviewees, university students are more critical of the school's labor market information services (25.2%) than workers (54.1%) or job seekers (38.8%).

Table 2 illustrates the perception of the usefulness of work experiences practiced concretely during high school. According to data collected through the questionnaires, it is evident that job opportunities, organized or not by the school, as well as work training have satisfied in terms of adequacy only from one fifth to one third of those who have experienced them.

**Table 2 - Perception of usefulness of work experience, if done, related to current condition (percentages)**

<i>They have been very or quite useful:</i>	Students	Workers	Job seekers / NEETs	Total
Work experience organized by the school	17.5	29.8	24.2	22.2
Other work experience	20.4	39.0	11.1	24.0
Training placements at companies or other bodies	23.5	44.3	34.3	31.7

### 3.3 Guiding experience and entering the labor market

Beyond perceptions, that are subjective, there remains the need to measure the actual effectiveness of guiding experiences. Which factors actually affect real opportunities in the post-exam high school transition? Are guiding experiences important in terms of objective results? We have tried to answer these questions by analyzing the incidence of guidance practices compared to the chance of finding work or not after high school graduation. For this reason, the following analyses are limited to the sample of young graduates who have chosen to work or to seek employment, thus excluding current students and *NEETs*.

Probability of getting a job is higher for those who have a meaningful work or training experience (not necessarily related to the job in question): for example, for those who have spent a period of study abroad, the chance to work a few months after graduation was equal to 63.8 % Vs. 54.6% for those who did not have such experience; likewise, the work experience organized by the school increases the chances of working from 53.1% to 61.6%.

Even the practice of *work training placement* organized by the school seems to have a positive impact, albeit in a very limited way, on the access to the labor market, seeing that if the probability of working is equal to 56.1% for those who have not practiced work placement that increases to 59.6% for those who have had this opportunity. However, the most important action seems to be the experience of a job found independently from the school. In fact, we find that 69.7% of those who have experienced work activity independently from the school are inserted in the world of labor after a few months of obtaining the high school degree. Only 27.8% of

those who did not have this experience worked at the time of the interview. This phenomenon apparently proves that work found autonomously or anyhow without the intervention of the school is more functional to the purpose of faster employment of secondary school graduates. However, it should be noted that this is a snapshot of the situation of neo-graduates shortly after obtaining their high school diploma and that in most cases the type of work found when exiting the school system on average consists in a low profile job featuring poor temporal stability. The situation may be different after a longer period of time and with reference to less precarious work. Table 3 shows a more detailed analysis, based on three logistic regression models, conducted to verify the actual extent of some of the factors influencing job opportunities of the young neo-graduates interviewed.

**Table 3 - Logistic regression models on worker status rather than on looking for work status, N = 135**

	Mod.1 Guidance experience	Mod.2 Demographic indicators	Mod.3 Graduate profile
	Coeff. $\beta$ (standard error)	Coeff. $\beta$ (standard error)	Coeff. $\beta$ (standard error)
<b><i>Work experience organized by the school (Ref. No)</i></b>			
Yes	0,215 (0499)	0303 (0514)	0613 (0579)
<b><i>Other work experience during studies (Ref. No)</i></b>			
Yes	1,760 (0436) ***	1,749 (0441) ***	1,410 (0491) ***
<b><i>Work placement during school (Ref. No)</i></b>			
Yes	0088 (0520)	0009 (0539)	-0538 (0622)
<b><i>Experiences of study or training abroad (Ref. No)</i></b>			
Yes	0216 (0386)	0,222 (0411)	0408 (0484)
<b><i>Gender (ref. Females)</i></b>			
males		0016 (0415)	-0577 (0544)
<b><i>Citizenship (ref. Foreigners) <sup>a</sup></i></b>			
Italian		-0408 (0711)	-0521 (0846)
<b><i>Family's Cultural Capital (Ref. Low)</i></b>			
Medium		0271 (0422)	0768 (0498)
High		0303 (0591)	0575 (0721)
<b><i>Type of school (Ref. Tech. Inst.)</i></b>			
Liceo			-0759 (0562)
<b><i>School-leaving exam score (Ref. 60-69)</i></b>			
70-79			0105 (0513)
80-100			0304 (0657)
m.v.			1,131 (1302)
<b><i>Determination index (Ref. Low)</i></b>			
Medium			1,944 (0577) ***
High			2,216 (0584) ***
m.v.			1,567 (1280)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0110	0115	0250

N.B. \*\*\*: p <0.01; \*\*: p <0.05; \*: p <0.10; <sup>a</sup> Warning, low numerosness

Model 1 is the starting point and confirms that the most meaningful guiding experiences as regards job placement are those conducted in the workplace independently from the educational institution. Training and professional experiences considered alone account for 11% of the variability in the probability of getting a job.

Model 2 includes the socio-demographic control variables such as gender, nationality and the family's cultural capital in order to ascertain how the guiding experiences conducted remain significant under the same conditions of social status. The impact of such experiences remains unchanged even when considering the socio-demographic aspects of the interviewees. These factors add little to the explanation of the different job opportunities among the high school neo-graduates (11.5%).

The third model introduces school career indicators (type of school attended and school-leaving exam score) and attitude (guidance-related determination index): extra-curricular work experience remains the most important indicator even independently from the type of school education and the degree of motivation shown. This last aspect seems to be very important in finding a job, namely the level of guidance-related determination achieved seems to have a very strong impact on accessing the labor market. Considering these elements too, it explains up to 25% of the diversity in the probability of finding employment. Although these results offer several interesting indications, it is evident that there is undoubtedly a large degree of variability in the job opportunities of young graduates that cannot be explained with these factors.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR ENHANCING THE SCHOOL-WORK ALTERNATING MODEL**

With this essay, our intention was to explore how and to what extent *school-work alternating* model has been acknowledged by the school system of the Autonomous Province of Trento as a whole. This means not just how it has developed in the "*istituti tecnici*" that for a long time have been offering projects aimed at providing practical skills to future workers, but also how "*licei*" are reorganising in order to comply with national legislation that envisages work experience in collaboration with the world of labor. These are our conclusions:

- The initiatives carried out by schools to guide students in their post-diploma high school choices were many, but a significant part of the students did not see the role played by the educational institution as being particularly active, especially where employment is concerned.
- Predictably, the focus of students on employment opportunities following the diploma depends on their school path: it is greater for students from "*istituti tecnici*" and less intense for those from "*licei*" who, in a greater number, envisage the continuation of their studies.
- Overall, however, the data show that the information on future opportunities is pursued autonomously by the students (via Internet), individualized counseling activities appear to be quantitatively limited, not always evaluated positively and placed on a lower level of importance compared to other activities such as choice supporting workshops, skill evaluation tests, "university open days" and group talks with experts. The appreciation for all of these actions in any case never reaches high levels.
- Lights and shadows also characterize the internship activated in companies, to a variable extent according to the type and quality of individual experience acquired and to the climate found in the labor context. A partly unexpected result entails the need to reflect and rethink how the student address the internship, how he/she is prepared by the school and how the company approaches him/her. It appears, in fact, that institutional education produces rather limited practical effects on the opportunity to find work after secondary school graduation.
- Extra-curricular work experiences are rather more significant in terms of post- high school graduation employability. Those who have acted autonomously in the search for some contact with the world of labor, therefore, seem to have more probability of finding a job quickly after graduation, as seen in the interviewees who were already working five months after graduation. This result is in contrast with the aims of the school's work placement schemes and it sheds doubt on their guiding and educational role, at least as regards their more common applications.
- To improve organizational work placement proposals, it may be useful, instead, to consider the proactive attitudes of young people who have identified, and perhaps even chosen independently, the company where they wish to engage in work experience. Initiative, commitment and motivation in acquiring the necessary skills for a future career already during their studies are useful qualities on the road to success in finding employment. These factors are included in the "guidance-related determination" index that, as we have seen, appears to be closely correlated with the access of the neo-graduated to the world of employment.
- Therefore, rethinking school-work alternating means to conceive internship - which are its constituent instrument – by paying attention to aspects such as student motivation, his/her active involvement in the project, coherence with the student's secondary school subjects, innovative teaching of the skills that accompanies, progress monitoring (done by a school tutor and a company tutor) and, finally, evaluation of the achievement or not of expected results and the student's reflection on or processing of the experience undergone.



- The foregoing phases represent an ideal model of *school-work alternating* that requires, however, flexible interpretation for its implementation in different work contexts and according to the different types of schools. More complexity is highlighted especially for ‘licei’ than for “*istituti tecnici*”, due to their different characteristics and hence the different perspectives of post-secondary school choice.

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