

EDITORIAL

Preventing educational failure and early school leaving

The situation of students living in disadvantaged conditions such as to expose them to the risk of educational failure and dropping out of school is an ongoing concern for the education system, for political institutions, for civil society and for the economy. When the educational fragility of these young people is accompanied by the lack of adults capable of guiding them, their path opens up to disaffection, to possible deviance or anyhow to the thwarting of their potential. Recently (2018), the MIUR – Italian Ministry for Education, University and Research – produced a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the phenomena of early school leaving and of educational failure in Italy, offering at the same time a set of recommendations for contrasting and preventing them. In a speech at a recent congress¹ the President of the Italian Republic invited the Italian population to consider this theme a vital issue not only for the school system but also for the whole of society, defining it as “*a civil amputation as well as an economic loss for the Country*”.

The second monographic issue of RicercAzione for the year 2018 addresses the educational failure theme with the presentation of research studies and experiences regarding the matter. In addition to the entity of the phenomenon and to the variety of its manifestations, the intent was to give voice to those who have activated educational, project or system-based measures to prevent it and tackle it. The project behind this issue stems from the many meetings with SEN workers of Trentino schools and from their experience collected during the research work ‘Leggere le fragilità educative a scuola per intervenire’ (i.e. Reading educational fragilities at school in order to take action)², presented in this issue, and from the will to showcase the commitment and creativity that schools put forward in order to respond to the

¹ The congress ‘*La scuola colabrodo, ridurre la dispersione è possibile*’ was organised by the *Tuttoscuola* journal on 2 Oct. 2018 in Rome. The journal also published a documented dossier regarding the matter in order to attract the attention of political forces.

² Girelli C. and Bevilacqua A., (2018), *Leggere le fragilità educative a scuola per intervenire. Una ricerca per sostenere i processi di crescita degli studenti nelle scuole trentine*, IPRASE (research coordinator: Maria Arici), Trento. The aim of the study, defined jointly by the Istituto provinciale per la ricerca e la sperimentazione educativa (IPRASE, Provincial Institute for Educational Research and Experimentation) and by the Department of Knowledge of the Autonomous Province of Trento, was to explore the school context in Trentino, ranging from primary school to upper secondary school levels and including the vocational training and education contexts, to highlight the conditions of students “*who find themselves disadvantaged [...] due to particular social or environmental conditions and with learning problems such as to significantly jeopardise their attendance and the positive progress of their education and training*” (Art. 3 lett. C of the decree of the Provincial President dated 8 May 2008, No.17-124, implementing art. 74 of Prov. Law No. 5 of 7 August 2006) and, most importantly, to meet the requirements of these students.

needs of those students who 'can't manage alone'³.

The issue starts out with articles offering elements of context: an interpretation of the phenomenon, the network effort, the awareness of the characteristics of new adolescents, the relationship between wellbeing and school success.

With reference to the national and international literature, Girelli and Bevilacqua present the dimensions and features of educational failure and of school dropping out, highlighting the indications that are on offer to design effective intervention policies and strategies.

After describing the national and international scenario, the same authors go on to illustrate the results of the investigation that had the goal of interpreting the issue as observed in Trentino schools.

La Femina et al. present the actions performed in Trentino by the Operational Unit of Psychology in order to support the educational fragilities emerging from the school context. The data and the cases presented show that there is the need to set up a working network of specialistic, social and school services, because only the bringing together of actions and of commitments can prove effective.

The school system's actions are aimed at adolescents whose manner of living their relationship with the adult world has radically changed over the last few generations. Lancini and Salvi offer several elements for detecting these changes, suggesting the need to interpret the role of adults based on methods that take into account the psychic, affective and relational functioning of the 'new adolescents'.

The research conducted by Lucisano et al. at lower secondary school level shows the need to rethink school work starting from the students' real-life experience. In particular, the study indicates the need of inter-

ventions aimed at improving the wellbeing conditions of students so as to improve their learning conditions by restructuring the ways in which life in the classroom is organized.

International studies point to migration backgrounds as a possible risk factor in terms of educational failure and dropping out. In his article on schools in France, Lerin presents cross-cultural mediation between the school and migrant families as a useful tool in reducing the educational fragility of these students.

The central section of this special issue is dedicated to the presentation of research studies and of experiences relating to the prevention of educational failure, aimed at improving the school experience for every student or at supporting specific fragility situations.

The development of ethical education and of socio-emotional skills is the theme of two research studies conducted, respectively, in Italian primary schools and in US nursery schools. The projects presented prove the importance of educating children to take care of themselves, of others and of the community starting from the very beginning of their school life, so as to develop within the school system contexts capable of supporting these relationships.

The first year of primary school is a decisive experience for children within the context of their school life. This is when they first encounter formal literacy and learning in general. Based on neuro-psychological research on attentive and executive functions, Veneroso et al. conducted an experimental study of a teaching model for learning in the first-year classes of primary schools in Trentino. The statistical results confirm the theory according to which the improvement of the attentive-executive system allows them to achieve higher degrees of automacity and

³ A set of experiences has been recently illustrated by Lorandi F. and Arici M. (edited by) (2018), *Ciascuno cresce solo se sognato. Le risposte di alcune scuole trentine alle situazioni di fragilità educativa*, WP No. 9, IPRASE, Trento.

precision in reading, writing and in numeracy and to improve self-regulatory aspects.

The study by Di Moreno-Morilla et al. conducted in 20 primary schools in Seville (Spain) stresses the need to consider the various points of view of the parents, children and teachers with regard to learning the written language. Within this context, they note how the low socio-economic status of families and their social marginality may be a critical factor against the positive development of their children's learning capabilities and may require special attention on the part of the school system in modulating its proposal so as not to diminish its effectiveness.

In their paper, Bevilacqua and Bergmann discuss the flipped learning approach to teaching as regards its potential effect on students showing difficulty in learning. The teaching practices based on this approach promote the development of a feeling of shared responsibility and care that improves the relational climate and overall learning.

The recent introduction in the school system of the school-work alternation method has showcased its opportunities as well as its critical aspects. The study by Poy et al. offers interesting insight, focusing as it does on the soft skills that can be developed thanks to these educational paths. The results provide information that can be useful in reinforcing the productive relationship between school and the external world, with a view also to reducing the alarming number of young people who are NEETs.

Batini et al. present the results of the second year of the 'NoOut 2' project for the promotion of educational success in lower secondary schools. The theory analysed in the study states that the activation of participative learning methods can increase motivation, the feeling of self-efficacy and the development of skills conducive to the promotion of educational success. The results from the experimental groups indicate sig-

nificant changes in these variables that are crucial factors in decreasing the occurrence of educational failure and of dropping out.

Learning foreign languages is a critical situation for students with language disorders. Language research presents the experience of individuals in conditions of isolation that do not correspond to the actual context found in Italian schools. For this reason, this action research - the results of which are presented by Celentin and Daloso - is highly original since it has activated foreign language learning paths for learners with language disorders conducted within the natural context of the classroom, thereby directing teaching practices towards inclusion.

Students coming from foreign families are the subject of two Trentino studies presented in the papers by Borri et al. and by Ziglio and Arici. The first paper addresses the theme of Italian L2 as school language, presenting a training path for upper secondary school and vocational training teachers for the production of customised teaching tools designed to favour the comprehension and study of content, while in the second paper the authors present the experimentation of the tutoring approach in order to meet the requirements of vulnerable foreign adolescents. Both these papers, in which the results are discussed, show the effectiveness of teaching customisation actions for students at risk of educational failure due to critical situations linked to their migratory background and to the learning of Italian as a second language, that also prove to be teaching and training means that are useful in increasing the inclusive valency of the school experience for all students, regardless of the origin of the obstacles that stand in the way of their educational progress.

With the last three papers, the focus shifts from teaching to organization.

Gurr and Acquaro discuss the strategic role school leaders can play in the promotion of the educational success of students

in a state of educational fragility. Three case studies are presented within the framework of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) relating to the principals of a primary school and of two secondary schools in Melbourne, Australia. The significant elements that emerge from the study regard the style of leadership of the school principal, which therefore can generate interesting ideas despite the difference between the two educational systems.

The role of special needs teachers does not concern solely students with disabilities but is also a resource that can increase the inclusive valency of the school environment. The way in which this type of teacher performs his/her task is the subject of heated debate. The experimentation described by lanes and Cattoni consists in the testing of a new model of teaching organization that envisages the use of SEN hours within a co-teaching context.

In addressing the continuously increasing complexity of their tasks, teachers ask for teaching methods that can accompany and support them in their daily work, translating the theoretic prospects into classroom practices that take into account the singularity and uniqueness of the situations they are faced with. Venuti et al. present the long-standing learning support experience of more than 70 teacher staff meetings at schools of all types and at all levels regarding the process of including students affected by autistic disorders. The strength of this paper, in addition to the specificity of the students' problems it discusses, certainly lies in the teachers' recognition of the validity of this support model and in the positive returns in

terms of learning and personal development of the students.

The set of issues addressed in this issue of *RicercaAzione* is complex and cannot be oversimplified in any way. In collecting these contributions, we found the need to apply a common approach, namely that of addressing the students' needs for growth within the prospect of educational success that coincides with the horizon of their life projects.

We must do so in our capacity as:

- Researchers in the field of education, so that we may interpret our work as *service research*;
- Individual teachers and health and social operators, so that we may develop the idea that even in the most difficult situations it is always possible to do something, even if only to change one's own way of reading reality and to create networks among the adults who are involved in various ways;
- Schools, because next to the monitoring that can detect not only problems but also, and most importantly, the resources present in each student, we must recognise the need of a directive function capable of promoting professional culture regarding inclusion and we must enhance and support the smaller or greater innovation actions performed;
- School system, because the complexity of the situations of these students requires flexibility and the possibility of finding solutions with a 'bottom up' approach, so as to meet their requirements in an effective manner.

I hope you enjoy reading this issue!