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Teachers' Perceptions and Conceptualizations of Low Educational Achievers: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Disengagement for Future NEETs

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Abstract

The NEETs phenomenon in Italy is not a recent one, but it increased dramatically after the Global Financial Crisis. As in France many different factors influence it, but the prevailing two are the skills mismatch and the youth generations' discouragement. Whereas in France the role of the school is crucial into tackling NEETs, in Italy the initiatives are mainly carried out by local authorities and small and medium enterprises. Therefore, more research is needed that sheds lights on teachers' role in dealing with low educational achievers. This exploratory study investigates teachers' perceptions and conceptualizations of low educational achievers in upper secondary schools, analysing their response to the issues connected to low attainment in terms of teaching strategies. From the study emerged strong communicative barriers between teachers and students that could lead teachers to stigmatize low achievers in their academic failure, ingenerating lack of self-esteem and disengagement in young people.

Keywords

Low Educational Achievers, Upper Secondary School, NEETs, Teachers' Perceptions

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Teachers' Perceptions and Conceptualizations of Low Educational Achievers: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Disengagement for Future NEETs

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The NEETs phenomenon in Italy is not a recent one, but it increased dramatically after the Global Financial Crisis. As in France many different factors influence it, but the prevailing two are the skills mismatch and the youth generations' discouragement. Whereas in France the role of the school is crucial into tackling NEETs, in Italy the initiatives are mainly carried out by local authorities and small and medium enterprises. Therefore, more research is needed that sheds lights on teachers' role in dealing with low educational achievers. This exploratory study investigates teachers' perceptions and conceptualizations of low educational achievers in upper secondary schools, analysing their response to the issues connected to low attainment in terms of teaching strategies. From the study emerged strong communicative barriers between teachers and students that could lead teachers to stigmatize low achievers in their academic failure, ingenerating lack of self-esteem and disengagement in young people. Keywords: Low Educational Achievers, Upper Secondary School, NEETs, Teachers' Perceptions

In Italy over 2,25 million young people, approximately 24% of the population aged 15-29, are NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training). After a short period of limited decrease, from 2007 to 2012 there has been, as a result of the Global Financial Crisis, a substantial annual increase of NEETs, from 18,9% to 23,9%, particularly in Central and Northern Italy (ISTAT, 2014). The majority of them is female, has Italian citizenship (migrants are only 13% of the total)¹, and has a low level of education, i.e. 78% of them did not complete compulsory education and reached only a lower secondary diploma (Italia Lavoro, 2011). In Italy early school leavers are 17% of the population aged 18-24 and this data is positively correlated to NEETs². If it is expected that extremely low levels of education and functional illiteracy represent an obstacle in finding an occupation, it has to be noted that also achieving an upper secondary diploma in the vocational education track without further specialized training puts young people at a risk of becoming NEETs.

Several are the causes for the increase of NEETs in Italy, and many of them are strictly linked to socio-economic factors (e.g., the economic crisis, a blocked upward social mobility, lack of support from the welfare state) that force young people to live with their parents longer than the European average. However, one of the typical features of the NEETs phenomenon in Italy is the skills mismatch in the labour market (Gentili, 2014) and the discouragement that follows and that changes young people's attitudes and behaviours. In this sense, it is worthwhile to analyse the school context, and related factors such as low achievement levels, where probably this mismatch originates.

¹ Source: Eurostat, available online at http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/statistics/search_database.

² Source: Eurostat.

In the review that follows, an initial comparison between the Italian and the French educational context will serve as a basis for posing the research questions of the present study. The reason of this comparison at macro-level is that, despite the several similarities that these two systems of education show, there are substantial differences in the approaches and in the results of the actions taken to deal with NEETs related issues. Then, a micro-level exploratory analysis will support the formulation of possible interpretative hypotheses on the role of teachers' perceptions on interactions with low achievers' students and their opportunity to learn.

The NEET Generation in Italy and in France³

Only recently both in Italy and in France the concept of NEET has been adopted, and in France it is still rarely used. In Italy, youth unemployment is not a new phenomenon, with a recurrent emergency over the last three decades.

According to a study published by the Conseil d'analyse économique (Cahuc et al., 2013) there are approximately 1.9 million NEET people in France, (the 13% of the 15-29 population, roughly 10% less than in Italy). Half of these are searching for employment, while 900 thousand are totally inactive, thus representing the most vulnerable part of the population. Contrary to what one may believe, the majority of the NEET do not live in the ZUS (*Zone urbaine sensible*, i.e., Sensitive Urban Zones) and they are furthermore not of immigrant origin, even though, with relation to their impact in society these categories are over-represented. As in Italy, also in France, teen parents among NEETs are not a relevant part of the problem (Colombo, 2012; Schulze-Marmeling, 2012).

To encourage the inclusion of NEETs in a training and professional accompaniment program, France has instituted the *Revenu de solidarité active* with the objective of guaranteeing a minimum income to those who are not working, at the same time obliging them to find work or undertake a personal project that can improve their personal financial situation. France has also set up an early monitoring and intervention programme devoted to avoid deficits accumulation, the *Programme personnalisé de réussite éducative* (Personalized programme for educational success)⁴. In addition to this, it is worth mention the *formation en alternance* (dual education training) for the integration of young people in the labour market through apprenticeship contracts or with individualized tutoring in a vocational school.

The Italian approach to tackle NEET issue is well represented by the recent initiative *Apprendistato e Mestieri a Vocazione Artigianale* (Apprenticeship and Trades in Artisanal Vocation)⁵, aimed at supporting the application of the apprenticeship contract, in order to increase the employment levels of young people. This action is mainly devoted to enhance skills development in the workplace, with a 6 months period of apprenticeship in small and medium enterprises. Another initiative, *La scuola per lo sviluppo 2000-2006*⁶ (School for development), promoted in some regions of Italy the creation of centres for adult learning in secondary schools in order to motivate disadvantaged young people and provide them with guidance for competences development.

The involvement of schools in tackling NEET is present in both countries, but in France is probably stronger the idea of an early and systematic intervention within the system of education, whereas in Italy the focus is shifted to the labour market, with a more relevant presence of local authorities and enterprises in the initiatives promoted.

³ Francesca Corradi is the author of this and the following two paragraphs. Gabriella Agrusti is the author of the remaining paragraphs.

⁴ See also: <http://eduscol.education.fr/pid23199-cid50680/ppre.html>.

⁵ See also: <http://amva.italialavoro.it>.

⁶ See also: <http://archivio.pubblica.istruzione.it/fondistrutturali/pon/pon.shtml>.

Low Achievement Levels and Early School Leaving

Skills mismatch is evident in Italy (Unioncamere, 2013), where 47 thousand professionals are lacking, mostly in vocational education diplomas and graduated in technical and scientific subjects (e.g., software developers, technical designers, green-economy and agri-food technicians). The transversal skills, such as literacy, numeracy, problem solving, ICT skills, are mostly lacking and the Italian schools seem to fail their task in providing young generations with those. The share of 15-year-old pupils who are at level 1 or below of the OECD PISA combined reading literacy scale are 19.5%⁷, and in OECD PIAAC the 27.7% of the population are at level one or below in literacy skills (Di Francesco, 2013).

Mismatch is evident not only in the discouragement that high-school graduates show when they cannot find a first employment, but also in early school leavers, that are 17.6% of the population aged 18-24 (MIUR, 2013). This major problem, positively correlated with NEETs emergency, has been contrasted in Italy only quite recently - in the last decade - with a progressive increase of compulsory schooling years and with the introduction of initiatives mainly delegated to local authorities.

Conversely, early school leaving is not directly linked to NEETs in France, because of a series of reforms to the school system that started in 1960 and led to a relatively consistent number of people receiving their baccalaureate (Schulze-Marmeling, 2012). A study on the causes of early school leaving (Bautier et al., 2002) analyses the strategies adopted by teachers to help students with difficulties. Teachers applied a “pédagogie du concret” adapting their practices to the possible needs and difficulties of the students. Further case studies show that also primary school influences students’ cognitive drop out, since it allows the accumulation of delays with respect to normal tendencies and expectations (Bautier et al., 2002). Bautier, as Mägi (2003), notices the almost systematic pair between ‘less investment on learning / less knowledge development’ and its relationship with parents’ education.

Les Exclus de L’intérieur: Different Forms of Exclusion

The French school system abides by the principles of equality, opportunity and promotion based on merit, welcoming all students without distinction, although the drop-out is higher among students of immigrant origin. This cannot be considered discrimination, since the schools do not openly exclude anyone on the basis of ethnic criteria. It is a social phenomenon whose origins are outside of the school system, but has a negative impact on the educational success of students that belong to certain social groups. The French school system has not yet found the tools to counter this phenomenon and as Castel (2007) puts it we are dealing with:

d’une école qui promet beaucoup à tous, mais donne beaucoup à certains et très peu à d’autres. L’école est [...] l’institution la plus importante pour promouvoir l’intégration des citoyens d’une nation et elle a fait la preuve de son efficacité sous la III^e République⁸. (p. 53)

Under the surface, the school system causes early school leaving cases among the parts of the population who are culturally disadvantaged, who cannot be openly penalised, as

⁷ Source: Eurostat.

⁸ “a school that promises a lot to everyone, but gives a lot to some and too little to others. School is [...] the most important institution to promote integration of the citizens of a nation and has proven its effectiveness under the Third Republic”.

that would violate the principle of equality among people (Bourdieu, 1966). In this way, the school system becomes a powerful means to maintain social stratification, causing differentiated educational experiences and considers the “cultural capital”⁹ (Bourdieu, 1966) transferred from the family as if it were a natural talent of the student. Cultural advantages and disadvantages become part of a cumulative structure, because school performance in turn influences subsequent school results in the same way that educational choices made at the beginning influence those made further on.

Children that come from more advantaged social classes have acquired behaviour, knowledge and language that are in line with those expected by the teachers at school. Language is the first skill that the teachers evaluate and the results of this evaluation are communicated to the students, also unknowingly, and modify the student’s idea of themselves, their attitude towards school and their self-esteem (Bandura, 1977, 1978; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

These considerations can apply also to the Italian context, as emerges from the results presented in the next paragraphs. Every pupil is potentially at a risk in a unilateral teaching approach, focused on elements such as non-flexible school time, a narrow curriculum, an exclusive attention on elementary skills, academic failure and school year repetitions, teachers’ stigmatization on students and their relatives. When and how does this perspective emerge in teachers and educators? As it will be explained in the next paragraph, the premises for this research work are rooted back in a completely different setting, i.e., in trying to define a possible strategy for rebuilding elementary and transversal skills in Italian low educational achievers through the support of e-learning.

Rebuilding a Sense of Possibility through Digital Competence

Young adults in Italy, irrespectively of their social status or qualification, spend a consistent portion of their time online, on the average 5 hours a day, and this time is mainly devoted to communicate in social network sites or to retrieve products and information on the Internet (European Digital Landscape, 2014). They access the Internet usually more by smartphones than by laptop or desktop computers and this highlights the fact that is something that they actually experience potentially every moment of their lives, even if not for formal education purposes, but mostly for leisure and hobbies. Thus, young people have the opportunity to build their knowledge online in a self-regulated way, starting from the surplus of information available in the Internet. Nevertheless, the availability of information does not guarantee per se the possibility of reaching it, nor the ability to decide when it is authoritative and reliable. Other than basic ICT skills, the digital competence, intended primarily as the ability to retrieve information and to assess its suitability to learner’s needs, can make the difference in learning outcomes. The possibility to turn into a strength an already pervasive common habit of Italian young adults was the major assumption of the project *LIBE – Supporting Lifelong Learning with Inquiry-based Education*, funded with support of the EACEA in the LLPKA3P programme (Project Ref. No. 543058-LLP-1-2013-1-IT-KA3-KA3MP). LIBE project aims at designing and implementing an innovative e-learning management system devoted to develop key information processing skills for ICT (literacy, numeracy and problem solving), with an inquiry-based approach in low educational achievers aged 16-24.

In the initial stage of the project one of the main concerns was to envisage a proper framework of learning outcomes for the development of the activities that could be

⁹ The “Cultural Capital” is an accumulation of knowledge, behaviour and attitudes towards culture that is transmitted first of all by the family.

appropriate for low educational achievers, but at the same time challenging and meaningful for them. The LIBE researchers organized a set of focus groups with experienced teachers and adult educators in order to profile the “low achiever” from their perspective, other than on data already available on NEETs in Italy (Di Francesco 2013; INVALSI, 2014), and ultimately to sustain, with a set of open educational resources online, formal education interventions towards this group.

Research Questions

The review has identified that skills mismatch after upper secondary school diploma and early school leaving can be envisaged as factual elements strongly linked to the NEET phenomenon in Italy. Behind these, low basic skills and the parents’ levels of education play an important role in the low attainments that inevitably come before the entrance in the NEET group. Not entirely clear is instead the role of the schools and teachers in dealing with low achievers when they are not yet fully disengaged from learning. Thus, the main research questions for this part of the project were:

- (1) How do upper secondary school teachers perceive and conceptualize low achievers, in terms of skills and attitudes?
- (2) How do teachers respond to the issues connected to low achievers in terms of teaching strategies?

The selection of upper secondary school teachers was mainly dictated by the need to find meaningful strategies for the age group comprised from 16-24.

Method

The empirical data were collected during the course of four focus groups. The objective of these groups was to study the attitude of teachers towards low achievers and their educational needs. The intent was to build an exploratory study carried out to envisage a possible saturation of concepts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and to build initial hypotheses on which further investigation is needed. The focus group technique was deemed more useful than traditional interviews to capture possible contrasting or converging positions of teachers in reflecting on their own experience. The interaction between teachers can lead to relatively spontaneous responses, reducing the possible social desirability in the answers, mainly thanks to the willingness to challenge others and see how they respond to such challenges (Morgan, 1988).

Participants

Two focus groups were conducted in Northern Italy (6 and 7 participants each) and two in Central Italy (5 participants each). It was decided to concentrate in these areas and not in the South of Italy, even though the NEET phenomenon is wider there, because of the dramatic increase Central and Northern Italy showed recently (Italia Lavoro, 2011)¹⁰. The moderate sized groups allowed obtaining a greater contribution by each individual participant, not only in terms of a larger total volume of comments, but also in terms of a higher involvement of the participants in the discussion.

¹⁰ In addition to this, the same study suggests that the high presence of undeclared work in Southern Italy can inflate NEET percentages.

Participants were teachers from upper secondary school (Table 1). They participated either on a voluntary basis or upon request of their principal, but having anytime the possibility to withdraw from the study.

Table 1. Details of the focus groups.

| Focus group | Location | n. participants | Subjects taught | Typology of school |
|-------------|----------------|-----------------|---|--|
| 1 | Central Italy | 5 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geography • Human Sciences • Mathematics and Physics • Economics • Art History | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upper Secondary School (vocational track) • Upper Secondary School (Humanities) |
| 2 | Central Italy | 5 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geography • Human Sciences • Mathematics and Physics • French | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upper Secondary School (vocational track) • Upper Secondary School (Humanities) |
| 3 | Northern Italy | 6 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mathematics and Statistics • Economics • English • Software Engineering • Italian • Italian as a second Language | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upper Secondary School (vocational track) • Upper Secondary School (Humanities) • Centre for LLL |
| 4 | Northern Italy | 7 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mathematics • English • Software Engineering • Human Sciences • Italian • Italian as a second Language | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upper Secondary School (vocational track) • Upper Secondary School (Humanities) • Centre for LLL |

Several months before the actual focus groups took place, researchers sent a formal letter to school principals explaining the project and the level of the involvement required by participants. Each school governing board formally approved the participation to the project, publicizing its aims, methods and stages of development among teachers that were subsequently contacted individually to confirm their participation and to give their informed consent. Participants were assigned to the groups in order to respect the variety of subjects taught and the different school tracks represented.

Materials

The guidelines for conducting the focus groups included eight questions regarding three main topics:

- Low achievers knowledge and skills - the questions were aimed at the most important skills that low achievers should have acquired and the skills that the students acquired with greater difficulty (2 questions)

- Activities and topics that should be preferred for low achievers remedial education - the questions were aimed at encouraging thoughts on possible contents and cognitive strategies with reference to literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments (3 questions)
- Successful experiences with low achievers - the questions were aimed at eliciting successful experiences to improve learning levels in low achievers (3 questions).

Procedures

The authors had the role of mediators in two focus groups each. An additional researcher took notes during the sessions in order to summarize the main positions at the end of the meeting.

At the beginning of the session, the moderator made the introduction to the aims of the research project and invited each participant to introduce him/herself briefly in order to create a good climate for discussion. The level of engagement was generally high and the need to express personal points of view was equal to that of receiving more information on the project aims and/or details of the topic proposed.

Each focus group had an average duration of approximately 125 minutes, for a total of eight and a half hours of conversation. At the end of each focus group, the assistant moderator read aloud a summary of the positions expressed in order to check whether they were correctly captured or not.

The audio of all the groups was recorded and then fully transcribed. Individual access to the records was provided to all the participants after the focus groups, in order to verify data correctness and completeness. Participants were protected by confidentiality and anonymity in public reporting, including the results communication to their school principals and governing boards.

Teachers' answers were compared with each other and classified according to hermeneutic analysis (Cataldi, 2009; Kvale, 1996; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). This kind of analysis, similar to thematic analysis, has its origins in textual semiotics (Ricoeur, 1986), and usually applied to different kind of texts (e.g., unstructured interviews, observational reports, personal documents). The first step included the definition of the key concepts starting with the guidelines of the focus groups. For this purpose, two independent researchers examined the transcripts; the teachers' different positions on the topics considered were identified and categories were created. This process was realized in a reference chart (Tables from 2 to 4) in which the different positions expressed during the focus groups were grouped into corresponding conceptualization and, for each position, examples of different reasons expressed by the teachers were collected. To create the review the *cut-and-paste* technique was used (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990) using Microsoft Excel. This consists in coding, selecting the most important topics and putting them into the table according to the position expressed. This technique was selected in order to facilitate the complex process of comparing discussions across several groups. With this method of analysis, 19 positions were obtained for 5 conceptualizations. Each participant in the tables is identified with a unique code that allows tracking the different opinions of the same person.

Findings

The analysis of the transcriptions allowed us to retrieve the distinctive features of low achievers as perceived by teachers at the cognitive level (missing or poor transversal skills, with a specific focus on ICT related skills) and at the attitudinal level (counterproductive

behaviours and their possible origins at the school level). Each of these layers contributed to form two complementary conceptualizations of low achievers. Finally, the teachers' response to tackling low achievement related issues emerged as last conceptualization.

Literacy and communication barriers

Teachers' envisaged in literacy, in its broadest definition, the set of skills where low achievers are particularly weak. Table 2a reports the most significant examples of these positions. Teachers perceive not only reading comprehension, but also understanding the tasks they propose, and expressing ideas orally, as relevant areas of weaknesses associated with this group of students. This constitutes the basis for a transversal concept, that of communication barriers between teachers and students (Babad et al., 1991; Lucas & Borders, 1987). Those barriers appear frequently in the words of the participants (e.g., there is a "wall" that separates students from specific subjects, students' argumentation results not logical nor clear to the teachers, the handbooks are "mute" for students).

Table 2a. Low achievers distinctive features perceived by teachers (Cognitive level).

| Conceptualization 1: Literacy and communication barriers | |
|--|--|
| Difficulties in understanding tasks | RM_1_4_03: "Low achievers main limitation is that of being unable to understand a given task [...] they cannot find the gist of what we say to them." |
| Difficulties in oral expression and in writing | RM_1_4_03: "As a matter of fact they cannot read nor speak, i.e. they are not able to express contents properly and in a clear way, functional to the communication with others." RE_2_CTP_01: "If they are Italian mother tongue, actually they often speak an Italian dialect, in a strongly ungrammatical and incorrect way." |
| Difficulties in reading comprehension | RE_1_3_04: "Reading comprehension, both for decoding and for retrieving basic ideas conveyed by the text, because generally they have an extremely poor vocabulary [...] they lack of awareness in using supporting tools such as a dictionary [...] these kids are not used to reading and those difficulties in reading comprehension have bad consequences basically on all subjects." |
| Difficulties in retrieve and access information | RE_2_3_05: "Given that nowadays we are overwhelmed by information it is not a trivial matter to find what is needed, so that is a kind of an art being able to find it." RE_2_3_03: "In a pile of information available they do know how to choose the relevant ones, this is what I see when they try [...] with Google they do not go beyond the third result and that becomes their Bible." RM_2_3_03: "[They cannot] select the information they have. The first step is to get this information that my Math students do not have.. it is like a wall in front of them that only in the last years of schooling I manage in some way to [eliminate]." |
| Difficulties in evaluating information | RE_1_3_02: "Nowadays, evaluating the information is a crucial element, not only for students with difficulties but even for us, especially when you have such an easy access to a lot of not relevant information." |
| Difficulties in abstract reasoning applied to non-routine problems | RE_2_3_04: "When it comes to taking a step forward, for example to find an application of what has been learned in order to solve everyday real problems, they show huge difficulties, especially in creating abstract models from a given situation, i.e. in geometry or in algebra problems." RM_1_4_03: "They tend to learn with uncritical acceptance, without any attempt to apply what has been learned. This is also because there is a very small propensity to practice and to transform learning according to a new context conditions." |

ICT and Learning

This distance in communication seems to be accentuated if considered in relationship to the use of ICT in teaching and learning (Table 2b). Young people in the age range considered (16-24), even if low achievers, are digital natives (Prensky, 2001) as opposed to teachers, that are digital migrants, given that in Italian upper secondary schools almost 60% of teachers are over 50 (Eurostat, 2013¹¹). Often teachers are not specifically trained to the use of ICT in the classroom, even if frequently they are self-learners on a voluntary basis. Teachers' self-efficacy in the use of multimedia documents and ICT in general is not so strong and this produces two opposite reactions to technology: (1) refusal, as it is perceived as a counterproductive element in pedagogy that reduces in depth analysis, reasoning, independent thinking, original production; and (2) acceptance, as leverage to raise students' interest and motivation, to make them active participants in during classes, to foster collaborative learning. However, even in case of positive views, teachers generally showed scepticism towards the use of ICT for low achievers remedial programs, chiefly because it tends to speed up processes and interactions, whereas a slower pace appears to be needed in their views.

Table 2b. Low achievers distinctive features perceived by teachers (Cognitive level).

| Conceptualization 2: ICT and learning | |
|---|--|
| Digital natives vs digital immigrants | <p>RM_1_4_01: "We (teachers) have an average age of 50 [...] 15 years ago the Internet did not exist and personally, I learned how to use it as an amateur and without any help [...] Probably our professional skills have serious lack in this field [...] Anyway students are changing their way of learning, and we can pretend it is not true, we can like it or not, but we have a problem on how to use the Internet in teaching."</p> <p>RM_1_3_02: "They have a kind of familiarity with multimedia tools and in this the school should do something, not because these instruments have a value per se, but because they can help us in using the same language they use."</p> <p>RM_2_4_01: "They are very good at using ICT but sometimes they repeat a routine without knowing why they are doing it."</p> |
| Disadvantages in using ICT for learning | <p>RM_1_4_03: "ICT and multimedia use make them seem smarter and higher achievers than they actually are, especially if compared to my knowledge in these things, but actually it is like giving a powerful tool in the hands of a child. They do not understand the resource they have, because they are not able to select information [...] and their low attention levels are due probably to the fact that they are too frequently exposed to these new technologies."</p> <p>RE_2_3_04: "When it is not supported in advance by a good preparation, ICT is likely to do more harm than good."</p> <p>RM_1_3_02: "Their difficulty is on interpreting all the possible meanings of a multimedia product. They can make only a superficial use of these materials and their interpretation of what they are doing is limited."</p> |
| Advantages in using ICT for learning | <p>RE_2_CTP_02: "If they listen to music they like, if they watch movies they are interested in [...] of course they pay attention [...] I use multimedia documents a lot."</p> <p>RE_2_3_04: "Peer education in forums works quite well [...] if someone has a specific problem on a topic, the others try to help him/her and they feel motivated in answering to the question."</p> |

¹¹ Source: Eurostat. It is worthwhile to notice that in France there is only a 30% of teachers aged over 50, and there is 30% more of teachers <39 than in Italy.

Passive Behaviours

Low achievers distinctive attitudes were mainly related to low attention levels and short duration of the ability to remain focused on an activity, particularly in response to traditional face-to-face classes. A general lack of curiosity, of willingness to go further in exploring learning materials in an active way, was detailed by teachers into the lack of initiative, of autonomy in organizing their learning and, following that, into the absence of any monitoring, self-regulation and self-evaluation process. This in upper secondary school is perceived as a relevant disadvantage, especially if referred to the limited opportunities to realize actual individualized interventions. Table 3a offers the most representative examples of these positions in the words of the teachers.

Table 3a. Low achievers distinctive features perceived by teachers (Attitudes).

| Conceptualization 3: Passive behaviours | |
|---|---|
| Low attention levels | RE_2_CTP_01: “The first thing that you notice immediately is their extremely low attention levels. Thus, you need to vary activities a lot, because if you succeed in grabbing their attention it is only for a few minutes, 10-12 minutes at maximum.” RE_2_3_01: “They have a lot of problems, including the fact that they are far from being adults [...] low achievers struggle to pay attention to what they are listening to.” |
| Shallowness in reading for learning | RE_2_3_01: “They can’t read but even those that are a bit better have a shallow way of reading [...] they read <i>approximately</i> and words do not count for their precise meaning but for their approximate meaning.” RE_2_3_02: “In my case they study mainly on their notes, but I suggest they check what I say in the handbook, because sometimes I could be wrong. They never check, because they stop at the first information they get.” |
| Lack of initiative | RM_1_4_01: “For many of these kids with difficulties the text is mute [...] They do not ask any question to the text, even if it is short, not on a single word, even though, for instance, I allow them to use their mobile phones as a dictionary.” |
| Lack of autonomy | RE_2_3_03: “They lack autonomy a lot. They still need to be taken by the hand as they were in primary school.” |
| Absence of self-evaluation | RE_1_3_04: “They do not know how to self-evaluate their learning, and sometimes it depends on the lack of conceptual instruments to make these operations.” |

Possible Causes of Low Achievement Levels

Even if this conceptualization was not explicitly expressed by the guiding questions used to moderate the focus groups, the need to find possible causes of low achievement levels naturally emerged from participants’ discussion. Two main positions (Table 3b), to some extent opposed, appeared: (1) the lack of prerequisites, not only in specific cognitive domains, but also and more importantly in the capacity of working hard; and (2) the lack of self-esteem mainly due to previous, recurring academic failure (Bandura, 1977, 1978).

The first of these two positions refers recurrently to a missing passage into adulthood as sign of independence and autonomy – that occurred also in the conceptualization related to students’ attitudes (Fuchs et al., 1994). It refers also to a recurrent *topos* in Italian teachers’ opinions on students’ outcome, which is the heavy inheritance coming from primary and lower secondary schools that would lead to serious lack in basic skills. In addition to this, in upper secondary school, where free and compulsory education ends, at 16 years of age, assessment is probably perceived by teachers almost exclusively as a selection process – at least in the first years.

The second position, instead, considered as a priority the human relationship, the reciprocal reliance to re-start motivation and interest. In this sense, and confirming teachers' views on the goals of different school cycles, this position seems to be a sort of step back that holds from the natural progression of activities, because low achievers are perceived as not yet ready for normal activities.

Table 3b. Low achievers distinctive features perceived by teachers (Attitudes).

| Conceptualization 4: Possible causes of low achievement levels | |
|--|---|
| Lack of prerequisites and constancy | <p>RM_2_3_01: "They cannot speak Italian properly at all [...] They should work more on this in primary and in lower secondary school."</p> <p>RM_2_3_02: "We need to start from basic skills with them, sometimes you feel as you were teaching at grade 5."</p> <p>RE_2_3_01: "I think they are basically lazy. Since they were children, they have never been used to hard work."</p> <p>RE_1_3_04: "They are not used to hard work, They have the idea they can get everything at once and so, after a couple of failed attempts, they get discouraged. Their academic past is crucial because these difficulties explode in high school but they originated in the previous cycles."</p> <p>RE_2_3_01: "Nowadays there is an inflation in rewarding these kids, so that for a modest commitment they are rewarded. When they get to upper secondary school, where the selection starts in the school corridors, meaning that not everybody has necessarily to do the same school, they tell you <i>why is it so? I tried, [even if I did not make it] I want my reward.</i>"</p> |
| Lack of self-esteem and previous academic failure | <p>RM_2_4_02: "What is negative in these kids is their lack of self-confidence in their possibilities to regain lost ground in learning. So sometimes they withdraw into themselves with regards to a specific subject such as Mathematics. They tend to assume negative attitudes towards the subject, i.e. "for me it is difficult, I cannot make it" – and in this way they create a wall."</p> <p>RE_1_3_04: "A kid can also be engaged, but when he faces the first failure, then the second, then the third one ... he stops working. Motivation for this group of people is crucial and needs to be supported."</p> <p>RE_2_CTP_01: "The human relationship is fundamental in the first approaches because they tend to disengage quickly and this is due to their academic failure, that makes them extremely vulnerable even in their aggressive behaviours. Those aggressive behaviours actually reveal their low levels of self-esteem."</p> |

Possible Modifications of Teaching Models and Practices

Another area that it was possible to infer from the interviews was centred on the adopted strategies and general teachers' attitudes towards low achievers. Three main positions were envisaged (Table 4): the first related to reducing the complexity but also the width of learning goals (terms used in this case refer to small portions of time, of texts, of attention needed to carry out a learning activity), the second on fostering relationships with students, taking particular care of the initial approaches, on reconstructing motivation after failure, the third one on proposing learner centred activities, based on young people's interests and ways to communicate.

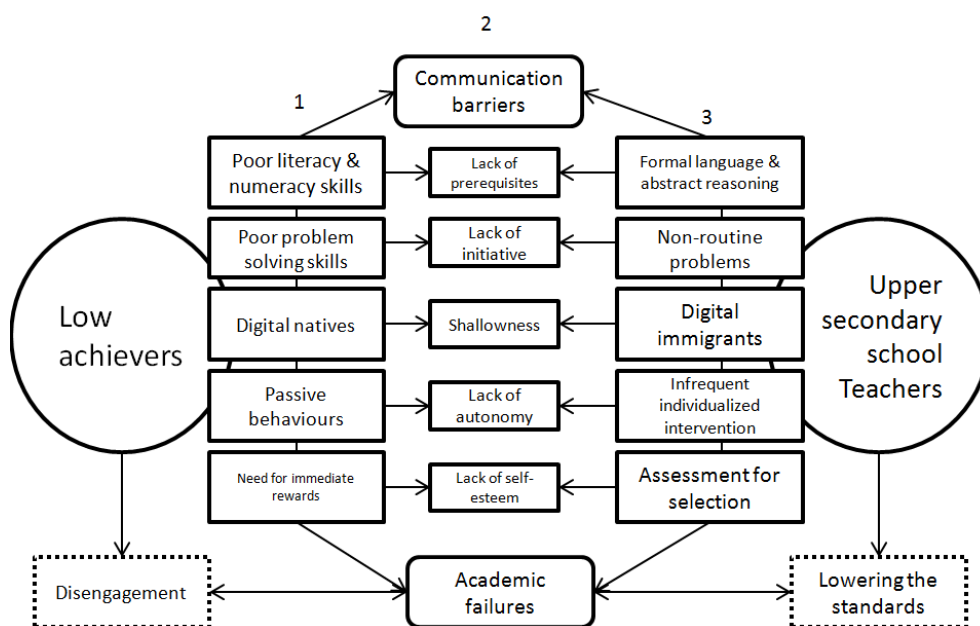
Table 4. Teachers’ strategies to tackle low achievement.

| Conceptualization 5: Possible modifications of teaching models and practices. | |
|---|--|
| Lowering the standards | RM_2_4_01: “We need to reactivate self-esteem in low achievers giving them easier goals.” RM_1_4_02: “We need to gradually propose simple topics, and so the student can be recovered and s/he feels that the teacher appreciates him/her.” RE_2_3_04: “In an online course you should propose short, short, short explanatory videos on specific topics.” RM_2_3_02: “It could be acceptable for them to write even short sentences but in a correct Italian.” RE_2_3_01: “[...] alternatively a kid can simply be in the wrong school [...] she/he is not to be treated as a serious case, it is only a matter of finding the right nest for him/her, it is just an error of collocation.” |
| Enhancing human relationships | RM_2_4_01: “Human relationships are the only thing that helped me in creating a peaceful relationship with everyone regardless of their achievement results.” RE_2_CTP_01: “With 16-18 year olds in compulsory schooling, we face a total absence of self-confidence, with respect to their families, to the school, to the institutions. So their initial attitude is to challenge us [...]. This is why the kind of approach you have in these initial moments is decisive.” |
| Forster active learning, based on students’ interests | RE_1_3_02: “I would focus a lot on what they like because you can discover that behind those bored kids that do not pay attention, there is the potential to work for a very long time on things that motivate them a lot.” RM_2_3_03: “For those kids with low motivation it is important to ask them to create something, an outcome produced by them.” |

A Map of Teachers’ Conceptualizations of Low Achievers

To sum-up in a coherent picture the prevalent positions emerged from the focus groups, a graphic representation was tentatively drawn. This allowed us to reconstruct the speech flow highlighting the positions that resulted, for their intensity of expression (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990), as more relevant to the participants and their possible links (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Conceptual map of teachers’ perceptions of low achievers.



The two agents are presented in the two circles and they allow us to read the map from left to right and vice versa. Column 1 represents low achievers' distinctive features (cognitive and attitudinal), whereas Column 3 lists teachers' features (factual and conceptual), both inferable from their discourses. They converge into the central column (2) which is a list of second level students' characteristics that in some sense can be produced by merging the first two.

Reading the figure from top to bottom, instead, it is possible to envisage in the communication barriers between teachers and students a transversal, recurrent and often implicit theme. The last row of the figure attempts at drawing, from the discourses of the teachers, the possible epilogue of the path, that leads to low achievers disengagement on the one hand and on the other hand to a final inclusion effort by lowering the standards and the complexity of the requests.

Conclusions

The purpose of this exploratory, interview-based study was to ascertain the ways in which teachers conceptualize low educational achievers in upper secondary school through analysing students' needs in terms of skills and attitudes and the strategies they pursue to tackle the issues related to low attainment. Moreover, it was also possible to determine a first interpretative hypothesis for envisaging, other than socio-economic factors, the elements that, within the teachers' perceptions and positions, could contribute to producing students' disengagement in learning within the Italian context. Other than the distinctive features of low achievers as perceived in the eyes of the teachers, the study highlighted two main problematic factors that should be further explored and triangulated with other research methodologies:

- (1) Communicative barriers between teachers and students. Those appear to be more relevant if considered together with two factual data about Italian schools, i.e. the relatively old population of teachers and the differences in access to ICT for learning. This could lead to stigmatize low achievers in their academic failure, ingenerating lack of self-esteem and disengagement.
- (2) Lowering standards in learning goals as a way to rebuild the relationships with these students. This implies putting aside assessment, and it has substantial implications in terms of equity, opportunity to learn and value of qualifications, even though it is not an entirely new process to the Italian school system. (Vertecchi & Agrusti, 2008)

Probably, following the French example, the introduction of younger cohorts of teachers in the schools specifically trained in verbal interactions and transversal skills development, and the adoption of systematic measures of prevention of low attainment since early years of schooling, could be ways to contrast not only the first evidence represented by low achievement levels, but also the more complex problem of NEETs.

However, this was a small-scale qualitative study and its results can only provide insights about teachers' opinions and beliefs regarding low achievers. Further studies will need to investigate the relationship between the above mentioned hypotheses and the NEET phenomenon. Nevertheless, considering that early leavers in upper secondary schools are positively correlated to NEETs, and that the skills mismatch in Italy represents one of the major reasons, attributable to the system of education, for the increase of young

disengagement, it is probably worthwhile to explore further the role of the schools and teachers' in the promotion of an actual integration of all citizens in the country.

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