

ESTUDIOS E INVESTIGACIONES

Analysis and Researches

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EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS AND DROPOUTS: A MATTER OF EDUCATIONAL APPEAL

Absentismo y Abandono Escolar: Un Problema de Atracción de la Escuela

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RESUMEN

El objetivo de este texto es analizar el complejo fenómeno de la dispersión escolar y contextualizarlo dentro del sistema escolar italiano, centrándose en el sur de Italia y en particular en la Puglia y en la provincia de Lecce. La primera parte se concentra en las tesis teóricas relacionadas con este fenómeno. La misma definición de dispersión escolar transmite la idea de multidimensionalidad de este problema que comprende una variedad de acontecimientos y comportamientos que conducen en último análisis a la dispersión, y por supuesto tiene que ser diferente al término «drop out» o abandono, que se refiere específicamente a los estudiantes que interrumpen sus cursos de estudios sin acabarlos. En la segunda parte el texto describe el sistema escolar italiano y evidencia los recientes cambios en la estructura educativa, demostrando como los poderes y las responsabilidades competenciales de la administración del Es-

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tado y del Ministerio de la educación pública ahora se han trasladado a las autoridades locales como las Regiones, las Provincias y los Ayuntamientos, en una óptica de descentralización y desregulación. La tercera parte se centra en la dispersión escolar prematura en el sur de Italia, donde este comportamiento es muy común, debido a factores socioeconómicos, pero también a la desmotivación personal.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Dispersión Escolar, Atracción Escolar, Formación del Profesorado.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this text is to analyse the complex phenomenon of early school-leaving and to contextualize it within the Italian school system, with a focus on Southern Italy and, in particular, on Apulia and the Province of Lecce. Part one concentrates on the theoretical assumptions linked to this phenomenon. The definition itself of school-leaving conveys the idea of the multidimensionality of this problem, which covers a variety of events and behaviours — i.e. lack of admission, failures, irregular attendance, etc. — ultimately leading to dispersion, and has to be necessarily distinguished from the term ‘drop-out’ which specifically refers to students who interrupt their course of study without completing it. In Part two, the text describes the Italian school system and highlights the recent changes in the educational structure, showing how powers and responsibilities that were performed, in the past, by the State Administration and the Ministry of Education, are now transferred to local authorities such as the Regions, the Provinces and the Municipalities, in a perspective of decentralisation and deregulation. Part three focuses on early school leaving in the south of Italy, where this behaviour is particularly widespread, due to socio-economic causes but also to personal demotivation.

KEY WORDS: school dropout, educational attraction, teacher training.

1. SCHOOL LEAVING: THE THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

1.1. Set the subject

School leaving is a complex phenomenon, because of the numerous causes producing it and because of the way it occurs. This term refers to the

group of factors prolonging/interrupting the normal school path. And they are:

- i. Lack of admissions.
- ii. Compulsory schooling evasion.
- iii. Irregular attendance.
- iv. Failures.
- v. Retentions.
- vi. Drop-out.

In short, the term «school leaving» includes all the phenomena and behaviours, which change the normal school path of a student. Consequently, school leaving is not necessarily the synonym for dropping-out, i.e. the interruption of the school attendance, for some of the factors contributing to define the concept of dispersion refer to school failures rather than to the actual dropping-out. Nevertheless school failures often cause the voluntary dropping-out of the student, particularly when they recur with increasing frequency.

The definition itself of the drop-out phenomenon, is one of the problems researchers have to face when they deal with it. Besides the lack of a univocal and shared definition is not a mere matter of terminology, but it is linked to the complexity and multidimensionality of the phenomenon and to the juridical regimes operating in the different school systems. From the analysis of the literature of reference, we infer that the term drop-out is restrictive if applied exclusively to the students leaving school without completing their studies. For instance, Morrow (1986) distinguishes five categories of drop-out:

- a. *Push-out*, undesirable students that the school tries actively to get away.
- b. *Disaffiliated*, students who are not attached to school.
- c. *Educational mortalities*, students who don't manage to complete their studies.
- d. *Capable drop-out*, students having skills fit to the school programs, but who cannot succeed in adapting to the school's demands.

- e. *Stop-out*, students who leave school for a short time and then come back again.

Other authors underline that the drop-out behaviour is not necessarily associated with the physical leaving of the school. Solomon (1989) refers to the category of *in-school drop-out* to define the behaviour of the students remaining physically at school, though being disengaged and uninterested towards getting school qualifications. LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) distinguish between *dropped out* and *tuned out*: the former are students who leave physically school; the latter keep on going to school but are not tuned with it and perceive it as an irrelevant thing for their life aims, notwithstanding they remain at school, because they cannot find alternatives significant for them in the environment outside the school¹.

From a psychoanalytic perspective of the same interpretation, Pelanda (1999) suggests that the expression «school dropping-out» not only means the acting out leading to leave the school, but also more generally all the attitudes detecting an emotive disinvestment towards school and learning. Commenting on the different definitions of the phenomenon found in the literature, Liverta Sempio (1999) connects the school dropping-out to other forms of non-attendance, caused by extremely divergent reasons, such as the evasion² of the compulsory schooling or the absenteeism³. With regard to the absenteeism, it is difficult to find a proper definition for it, as it appears to be normally connected or intersected to other phenomena, such as the active refusal of school or the school phobia⁴.

As it emerges from the literature here reported, the concept of the school dropping-out phenomenon spreads till the potential and implicit areas of youth unease, which have not got concrete in acts or choices of path on the part of the subject yet. In other words, interpreting the drop-out phenomenon implies the temporal observation, that is to take into consideration the previous occurrences producing the abandon, and also the analysis of the

¹ Interpreting liberally the category of *tuned-out*, this behaviour appears to accomplish fully a form of teen-ager «parking» in the school-container, which anyway continues to have a significant value in the relational life, even if it is not important as overall life project.

² It is for instance still at a high level in some South-Italian regions.

³ The family may be aware of it or it may be kept hidden by the students to their family.

⁴ See Liverta Sempio (1999)

teenagers' life experience, of their perception of school as the place of their education, of the affective and cognitive investments (or disinvestments) at the base of their mental representation of school and school education. Consequently, the interpretative short circuit, connecting in a limited way the socio-economical disadvantage with the drop-out behaviour, continues to keep its checked validity, but it cannot justify by itself the complexity of the phenomenon in its many facets. In this regard it is fundamental to inquire into the way of intra-scholastic communication and into the structural aspects and the contents of the student-school interaction, so radically connoted asymmetrically and unidirectionally (from teacher to student).

Here are the principal variables affecting the direction and the result of the school paths:

- Socio-cultural family status: this variable influences deeply the school paths, determining extremely different opportunities at various levels:
 - i. Results in the compulsory school.
 - ii. Possibility to pursue the studies after compulsory school.
 - iii. Access to different kinds of non-compulsory school.
- Gender differences: girls are more inclined to pursue their studies, they also get better results. According to many surveys concerning these aspects, the ratio of the distribution by gender of the drop-out behaviour is about one out of three for the girls and two out of three for the guys⁵.

⁵ In reference to the gender variable, it is important to keep in mind that the gender stereotypes can affect educational choices and drop-outs. As regards Italy, the data of the IARD research by Cavalli and Facchini (2001) show a different behaviour on the part of the parents, with regard to their children's formative and vocational choices: for the girls, the parents admit the importance of «expressive» motivations, whereas for the boys the exploitable aspect of the choice prevails. Girls' parents consider «fulfilment» and «personal interest» more important factors in formative/working choices, whereas in the case of boys they favour factors as «earnings» and «economic stability». This different attitude of the family towards the important dimensions in the formative and working choices has its consequences on the inclination to pursue the studies: boys perceive the pursuing of their studies as an obstacle to the access in the working world. Therefore the most part of drop-outs among boys appears to be strictly connected to the gender stereotype, which attributes importance to the exploitable di-

1.2. Dropping-out as a developmental process

One of the clearest features of the drop-out phenomenon is the fact that it is a developmental process. In other words, we must take into consideration the temporal dimension, leading to the effective dropping-out, and the articulation and succession of life experiences of the students, who decide to put an end to their school experience. Their behaviour must be therefore set within a «history», because it would have meaning only in this way. As the phenomenon is produced by a series of causes, then they cannot be detected through an analysis focused only on the very moment of dropping-out.

The developmental aspect of the phenomenon is important to identify some precocious indicators, and that helps to plan and carry out preventive interventions. Concerning this, Kaplan et al. (1997) highlight the relationship between a low school performance and the dropping-out; furthermore, this relationship was already pointed out some time ago by both the theoretical and empirical researches. The scholars analysed the developmental process through which such a relationship is built: they assumed that the low school performance affects negatively the students' self-esteem, who react with the attenuation of their ties with the school.

Finn (1989) identifies two models of drop-out as developmental process: *frustration-self-esteem model* and *participation-identification model*. Both deals with the psychological effects of the school experience: the individual differences of such processes produce also different results in the school paths. According to the *frustration-self-esteem* model, the starting point of the drop-out process is the low school performance of the subject: low performances reflect on the psychological level turning into a reduction of the self-esteem of the subject. So he or she will perform problematic behaviours, in an escalation reaching the voluntary leaving of school or the exclusion by the school itself. So, in this model the process to drop-out is interpreted through a temporal concatenation of events: *the scarce school*

mension of the boys' choices, evaluating the possibilities to make money and to enter precociously the working market. As regards girls, the higher inclination to pursue their studies seems to be linked to the changed socio-economical picture, which shows an increased presence of women in the working market and moreover goes together with the girls' increased awareness of the importance of the formative investment for the fulfilment of a working and economic autonomy.

progress causes a reduction of self-esteem and the performance of problematic behaviours, conducing to drop-out.

The *participation-identification* model considers as a fundamental variable the level of active involvement of kids in their school experience and connects tightly such level to the school results: the degree of active involvement indicates the relationship/attachment to school. After all, a higher level of participation guarantees better school results; school success then leads to develop processes of identification with school, which enhance the students' sense of belonging to and sharing of the school aims. A virtuous circle establishes so among the active participation, the school success and the identification with school and its aims. Otherwise, the lack of active participation to the school life increases the possibilities to run into repeated school failures, which in their turn affect negatively the sense of identification with school, favouring so attitudes and behaviours of retirement from the school life.

Another possible interpretation of the drop-out phenomenon as a developmental process combines the psychological approach with the economical one⁶. In order to analyse the following steps of the process, also in this case it is better to start from the assumption that at the basis of the drop-out process there are low school performances. First of all, the low school performance affects negatively the students' self-esteem⁷. The school failure produces immediate and direct consequences on the way the kids perceive themselves as students. Such consequences are certainly damaging and can also have persistent and continuous effects, since a low idea of the scholastic self can lead the students to the perception of a total scarce self-efficacy and a negative self-attribution, that is the feeling of being unable to change with their own efforts the course of the school events — and the events outside the school field, too.

The next step is the attenuation of the tie with the school, which represents the defensive aspect of the relationship between students and

⁶ See Fini (2001)

⁷ In this case, a difference widely adopted in psychology should be made between the idea of the *scholastic self* — the representation of oneself as a student — and the idea of the *non-scholastic self* — the representation of himself or herself every kid has in the school activities and relationships.

school: the school failure already produces a lowering in the way the young perceive themselves as students, and what's more, they have also to defend from the possibility of a consequent overall lowering of their own self-esteem⁸. In such a situation, the defensive behaviour of the students tends to devaluate the importance of the school experience that they feel as source of frustration and unease. Such a devaluating behaviour towards the school experience they are living signals the passage from the decrease of self-esteem, caused by the failure, to the attenuation of the tie with school. This passage can be explained by an interpretative economical hypothesis, especially using the *exit-voice* model by the economist A. O. Hirschman (1970) — but the author worked it out as an explanation for completely different behaviours than the ones we are here analysing⁹. In case of drop-out behaviours, the students having repeated failures and school difficulties are from this point of view «drop-out risk» subjects for the school system: the fact of experiencing the school as a source of frustration and unease decreases to them the appeal of the school. This process of progressive devaluation can reach the moment in which the students consider the possibility to choose the *exit* option.

At this point it is crucial the way in which the school replies to the uneasiness of the student: if it is able to offer spaces and ways to give voice to their uneasiness, the students would be likely to choose the *voice* option, otherwise they will choose once and for all the *exit* option. Obviously, the choice between leaving (*exit*) or remaining at (*voice*) school depends essentially on the alternatives to the school attendance, that the students can see at their disposal: the more such alternatives are perceived by the students as acceptable and promising, the more easily they will tend to choose the *exit* option. It must be underlined that the *exit* option is feasible with profit only in contexts rich in work opportunities and wherein a high qualification doesn't

⁸ This event is particularly present in a strongly educated society, wherein a remarkable part of points of reference concerning youth are filtered through the school performance and therefore it is likely that a worsening of the scholastic self may imply a tendency to the worsening of the non-scholastic self, too.

⁹ The model of Hirschman analyses the behaviours of consumers in unsatisfactory market situations, reaching two possible options: *voice*, i.e. the protest, or *exit*, i.e. the abandon of the unsatisfactory goods. In the *voice* choice, the consumer remains anyway faithful to the product, even if disappointed and unsatisfied; on the contrary, the consumer who chooses the *exit* option turns him/her attention of acquisition towards alternative goods.

guarantee a remuneration much higher than that earned without that specific title. As a consequence, this model explains well enough the low but considerable percentage of drop-out in «rich» contexts and geographical areas, but it doesn't help to understand the more dramatic phenomenon of drop-out in degraded areas, as for instance those of the South Italy.

The path leading to the dropping-out can be traced to a perspective referring to the cognitive psychology¹⁰, according to which the decision to leave school can be defined as the interruption of the development and learning activity of the cognitive system. According to the cognitive approach, it is important to analyse the process through which the components of the cognitive and motivational system interact in the person and develop during time. The progressive learning leads to the increase and integration of strategies, which make almost natural, spontaneous and rewarding the development and keeping of motivation; in the same way, the difficulties in one of the components of the system can make the whole cognitive activity degrade slowly, until it cannot adequately carry out the requested tasks any longer.

This insufficiency or impossibility or decision not to pursue the studies manifests slowly and that makes the concrete moment of dropping-out not very significant as regards the search for the causes of the dropping-out itself. This «cognitive system decline»¹¹ is a slow process, which perhaps determined long time before; from this point of view, the very moment of dropping-out is simply the final result of a situation by then unbearable; it becomes a decision in the very moment the school requests are perceived as unbearable for the student's cognitive system, who senses these difficulties as insurmountable. In this perspective, the effective interruption of the studies represents only the moment in which the choice of leaving school is made, but it doesn't coincide with the actual drop-out situation, because it can come long before the choice. According to the cognitive approach, there are therefore drop-out students attending school: they have no interest in learning. They remain at school only because of duty or only in view of social credit useful for purposes other than the attestation of the real cognitive development achieved.

¹⁰ See for instance Comoglio (1999).

¹¹ Here at page 99.

1.3. A multiform phenomenon

Even if substantially diversified, all the presented approaches support the multiform aspects of the drop-out phenomenon, as it cannot be traced to one or few causes. LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) synthesized in four distinct categories the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the ground factors of dropping-out:

- i. Factors related to the students: personality, past experiences, socio-cultural and socio-economical features of the family environment, influence from the group of peers, scarce school progress, attraction for activities and opportunities outside the school.
- ii. Factors inside the school system, such as guidance and didactic inadequacy, scarce sensitiveness of the whole educational and institutional staff with regard to the students' problems.
- iii. Factors resulting from the interaction between the first and the second variables; in this case it deals with how the reciprocal attitudes of teachers and of students towards school can affect the school interaction and so the students' school performances.
- iv. Macrosystemic factors, such as the socio-economical-political context the school systems are part of, the changes in the social and family structures of reference¹².

The contexts of reference of the teenager are perhaps essential to understand the reasons of the drop-out phenomenon, even if its more direct meaning lies within the students' psychic economy: it is certainly not a clinical symptom, but it is anyway an event that can occur as a consequence to many causes and it ensures that its correct interpretation requires a careful analysis of every single case. In general, though teenagers' evolutionary engagements and school duties are connected each other in various ways, it

¹² It is widely agreed that the different factors that can lead to the drop-out phenomenon, have a different influence according to the school level: in the compulsory school the decisive factors are the socio-cultural ones connected to the social context of belonging, whereas in the non-compulsory school the individual variables connected to one's own personality above all seem to be the affecting factors. In the latter case, the dropping-out can be a consequence of a conscious path of choice, oriented toward the realization of a Self, which would be impossible within a school context (see Besozzi 1993; Gambetta...)

is likely that the former tend to prevail on the latter: if a teenager perceives the school life as a threat to his/her personal growth, he/she will put the carrying out of the evolutional engagements before the school ones.

A further field of research about the causes of dropping-out is the interpretative model, which connects the school unease to the deep socio-cultural changes of our epoch. For instance, Groppo and Locatelli (1999) maintain that the different forms of school unease — failures and dropping-out, as well as emerging behaviours, such as the inability to pay attention or concentrate, the «exaggerated excitability» — are no longer connected directly to generic socio-cultural factors as in the past, but to a more general dimension of change, maybe linked to the impact of the new technologies. On the basis of these changes, the drop-out phenomenon can be analysed from the cultural psychology point of view: according to the historic-cultural theory by Vygotoskij, then developed by Bruner, knowledge is not a merely mental and abstract phenomenon, but rather it takes shape in a specific socio-cultural context, characterized by the communicative codes it is structured by.

The refusal of one's own role of student executed by the drop-out can sometimes be interpreted as a claim of autonomy, which is as some kind of «emancipatory» choice. This situation emerges from the analysis of the drop-out stories carried out with tools of qualitative enquiry, such as in-depth interviews: in many cases the symbolization of one's own experience given by these drop-outs is definitely not fragile and seems to be more a way of claim rather than the place of reconstruction of a previous experience of failure.

In this context, the word drop-out itself is actually not very suitable and inefficacious: drop-out people are not «dropped», but they decide freely and actively to leave school within a series of feelings among which the sense of release is the prevailing one¹³. On the contrary, in many cases the school drop-out seems to be the inevitable result of the destiny already inscribed in the student's socio-cultural background and family history, but that does confirm the marked multidimensional aspects of the drop-out phenomenon.

¹³ See Ribalzi (1984).

2. THE ITALIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM. THE MAIN FEATURES OF UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEM

2.1. Policy structures

Lots of important developments in recent years have affected the way schools function. The most important one concerns the explicit striving of the Italian Government to decentralize and deregulate.

From an administrative and financial point of view, overall responsibility lies within the Ministry of Education represented, at a local level, by regional and provincial education offices. Regions can delegate certain responsibilities to the provinces and municipalities. From school year 2000-2001, all schools have *autonomy* in the field of administration, pedagogy, research, experimentation and development. An analysis of this deregulation policy shows, however, that this new strategy results in an increase in the autonomy of schools: they were given a greater responsibility for the design and execution of their own financial, material and staff policies than before.

The pursuit of deregulation harbours contradictory tendencies: the centralisation with regard to contents (product autonomy) is accompanied by an increase in material, financial and staff-related autonomy (process autonomy). Moreover, the present policy of deregulation threatens to put schools in a tight spot: while financial risks are being devolved upon them, they are, at the same time, expected to comply with all sorts of strict qualitative demands.

2.2. General administration

A real change in educational system structure, has resulted from the Law 15th March 1997, no. 59 and with the following delegated decrees which granted Regions, Provinces, Communes, Mountain Communities all the roles and administrative tasks currently performed by the state bodies, with the exception of a number of responsibilities relating to specific areas (e.g. foreign affairs, defence, finance, public order, justice, scientific research,

university education, school curriculum and regulations, general organisation of the school system and legal status of school personnel, etc.).

In brief, whereas, in precedence State Administration (central and peripheral) performed all function with the exception of those expressly assigned to the Regions and other Local authorities, with the above mentioned law the latter now perform all administrative functions with the exception of those reserved to the State.

According to Law Decree no.112 of 31 March 1998, in the field of education the State remains still responsible for the tasks and functions which concern the criteria and parameters for the organisation of the school system, its evaluation, the functions relating to the determination and allocation of financial resources debited to the State budget and for the allocation of staff to schools. To the Regions instead is delegated the planning of the integrated formative offer, a combination of education and vocational training, the programming of the school network on the basis of provincial plans, the fixing of the school calendar, contributions to non state schools, and vocational training.

Finally, to the Provinces, in relation to upper secondary schools, and to the Communes, in relation to schools of lower levels, are delegated the functions concerning the establishment, the aggregation, the amalgamation and the closing down of schools, the suspension of lessons for serious and urgent reasons, the setting up of school collegiate councils, control and vigilance, over them, including their dissolution. These rules are still in force, awaiting measures for the implementation of Constitutional Law 3/2001 foresees by Law of 5 June 2001, no. 131.

Autonomy regulations (approved with Presidential Decree no. 275 of 8 March 1999) have transferred to schools important administrative and managing functions of the educational service, as well as high responsibility tasks such as definition of curricula, widening of the educational offer, organisation of school time and classes, etc., within the frame of general branches valid at national level.

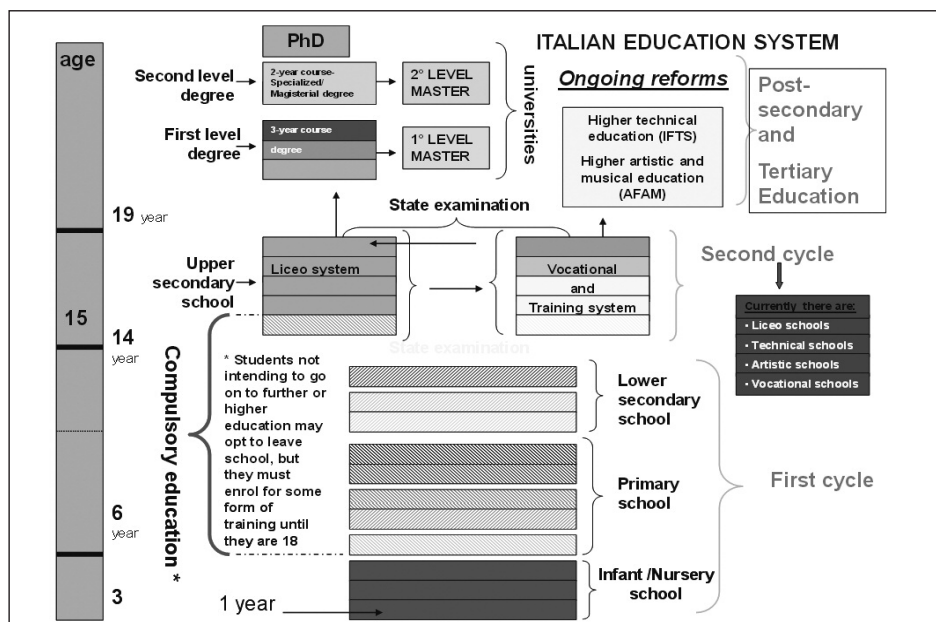
The State is responsible for school funding both for educational and administrative purposes. Regions have to provide directly, but more often under delegated power, services and assistance to students (canteens,

transportation, textbooks for primary schools, aid to the less wealthy, social and health assistance) out of their own budget and they also have to finance plans for the building of schools. Provinces and Municipalities can be delegated by the Region to provide assistance and services and their function is that of providing for school heating, lighting and telephone connections, maintaining school buildings.

2.3. Compulsory full-time education

Law 53 of 2003 for the reform of education and training system has progressively extended compulsory education from 8 to 10 years. However, it aims at widening and redefining the concept of compulsory education and training to ensure the right-duty (*diritto-dovere*) to education. This ensures the right to education and training for at least 12 years or until students obtain a qualification within 18 years of age. Such right relates to the first cycle of the education system, including primary and lower secondary education, and to the second cycle including the *Licei System* (system of upper secondary general education) and the *Education and Vocational Training System*, as well as the *Apprenticeship System*.

Another important reform is about the *school-job alternation* which implements training in the second school cycle, either in the *Licei System* or in the *Education and Vocational Training System*, to provide students not only with basic knowledge, but also with skills aimed at meeting the labour market requirements. According to the education and training *diritto-dovere* lasting 12 years, 15-year old students can carry out their whole training from 15 to 18 years of age through the school-job alternation.

Graphic 1. An overview of the Italian education system

The Italian education system includes:

- *Infant school* (non-compulsory) for children between 3 and 6 years of age.
- *Primary school* for children between 6 and 11 years of age.
- *Lower secondary school* for children between 11 and 14 years of age.
- *Upper secondary education* made up of different kinds of schools and, generally, for students from 15 to 19 years of age.

2.4. Focus on Upper Secondary Education

Up to school year 2003-2004, secondary education included lower education (or *scuola media*, lasting three years) and ***upper secondary education***; this latter was subdivided into two main educational channels: General Upper Secondary Education and Vocational Upper Secondary Education

2.4.1. General Upper Secondary Education (Liceo system)

According to the system still in force, general upper secondary education includes *liceo classico*, *liceo scientifico* and *liceo artistico*. It is regulated by «Gentile» Law of 1923, with the adjustments provided since then to timetables, teaching programmes and the already mentioned Consolidation Act no. 297 of 16 April 1994. The mentioned rules will stop being in force as soon as the legislative decree foreseen by Law no. 53 of 28 March 2003 for the regulation of the *liceo system* and of the *vocational and training system* will be issued. The education offered by *liceo classico* includes five years of study and is structured in two cycles: a two-year lower cycle *ginnasio* and a three-year upper cycle; *the liceo scientifico* comprises a five-year course, focusing on scientific training last three years of study; both aim at preparing to university study. Education offered by *liceo artistico* aims at art teaching, independently from its industrial applications; the courses last five years and are structured in two sections: one for figurative arts and stage design, the other for architecture.

All *licei* have a five-year duration subdivided into two-year teaching cycles followed by a fifth and final year destined to deepen knowledge and skills typical of the study course. The upper secondary leaving certificate (*diploma di superamento dell'esame di stato*) is the title required to access university and High Level Art, Music and Dance Education (*Alta formazione Artistica e Musicale — AFAM*).

2.4.2. Vocational Upper Secondary Education (Vocational and training system)

Vocational upper secondary education includes technical, vocational and artistic education. This education sector was subject to deep changes in the last decades; these changes affected mainly technical and vocational schools, which lost their strong professionalising nature. Their programmes have been gradually modified towards the fostering of cultural subjects and contents and to the detriment of the time destined to practise. This process diminished the previously strong difference between general and vocational upper secondary education.

Technical education aims at preparing to carry out technical and administrative functions as well as some professions in the trade, services,

industry, building, agriculture, navigation and aeronautics sectors. Vocational education aims at providing a specific theoretical and practical preparation to carry out qualified functions in the trade, services, industry, artisanship, agriculture and navigation sectors. Art education aims at preparing to artistic work and production according to the local industry tradition and typical row materials.

Table 1. Schools offering vocational secondary education

<i>Istituti tecnici</i>	Their duration is subdivided into a basic two-year cycle and a three-year cycle with more branches of study and specialisations
<i>Istituti professionali</i>	Their duration is subdivided into a three-year cycle, leading to obtain a <i>diploma di qualifica</i> , and a post-qualification two-year cycle (4 th and 5 th years) that grants admission to the university
<i>Istituti d'arte</i>	They foresee courses lasting for three years and structured in sections depending on the art specialisations: ornamental painting, ornamental sculpture, graphics, wood, ceramic and metal applied arts, etc. Applied art courses include practice in the laboratory. Law 27 October 1969, no. 754 has instituted in Istituti d'arte further courses lasting two years, granting admission to University. Courses lasting three years end with the <i>diploma di qualifica</i> .

Students have to make their choice at the end of *the lower secondary school*; a transition is however possible between the two systems. Furthermore, law allows 15 to 18 year-old students to attend 2nd level courses through alternation of study and work periods, under the responsibility of schools or training institutions, on the basis of agreements with enterprises or associations of professional classes, public or private bodies, or to attend integrated courses organised at vocational education and training institutes offering study programmes planned by the two systems together.

Access to both university and non-university higher education is reserved for students after passing the State examination.

Table 2. Admission requirements to upper secondary school

General Upper Secondary Education	Students who have obtained the <i>diploma di esame di Stato conclusivo del primo ciclo di istruzione</i>
Vocational Upper Secondary Education	Students who have obtained the <i>diploma di esame di Stato conclusivo del primo ciclo di istruzione</i> can enrol in this type of education institutes.
Vocational training course	In particular, the courses of the second level are reserved for those who hold a <i>diploma di superamento dell'esame di stato</i> . There are various types of selection to determine admission, using the objective evidence provided by entrance tests of students' prior knowledge of the subject or tests of capacity.

2.5. Curriculum and Subjects

The Italian Education System offers a range of upper secondary programs and arrangement of schools, as you can see in the following graphs:

— *General Upper Secondary Education*

<i>Licei classici and licei scientifici</i>	It has one only cycle subdivided into a two-year and a three-year periods.
<i>Licei artistici</i>	After a common two-year period, offer two specialisations: figurative arts and architecture, lasting two years

The subjects, except for religion or alternative activities (optional subjects), are: Italian, Latin, Greek, foreign language (only in the first two years), history and philosophy, natural sciences, chemistry and geography, mathematics and physics, history of art, physical education.

It is worth it to remind that schools have used experimentation not only to introduce new branches of study, but also to introduce other subjects (ICT, history of art in the first two years, and foreign language in the tree-year period of the liceo classico, etc.) or to modify the teaching hours of some subject. Due to the lack of a reform of upper secondary school, many institutes have started additional experimental five-year branches of study not foreseen by the school system, in order to meet the

new requirements of the students (for example, linguistic, psycho-pedagogical licei, etc.).

— *Vocational Upper Secondary Education*

<p>Istituti tecnici: the most widespread sectors, all having five-year duration. Experimentation branches of study have been started also by the technical institutes (for example, biological-sanitary, informatics branches of study, etc.); however, most institutes have adopted for some time the experimentation programmes elaborated by the Ministry of Education in order to obtain additional programmes, subjects and timetables.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Commerce specialisation:</i> trade, foreign trade, business administration, etc. - <i>Industry sector specialisation:</i> mechanics, electrical engineering, electronics, industrial physics, chemicals, textiles, etc. - <i>Surveying.</i> - <i>Agriculture specialisations:</i> forestry, ecology. etc. - <i>Nautical sector specialisations:</i> captain, machinery operator, shipbuilder. - <i>Tourism</i> - <i>Social studies</i> (the former <i>Istituti tecnici</i> for girls). <p>Technical education underwent the most relevant transformations through experimentations elaborated by the Ministry; as a consequence, the original teaching programs, subjects and timetables were replaced by programs, subjects and timetables foreseen by experimental projects which affect by now all technical education specialisations</p>
<p>Istituti professionali: Lots of three-year sectors and branches of study specialisations are offered. After the three-year period of specialisation, two-year courses can be instituted to offer cultural and practice education at upper secondary school level.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Agriculture specialisations:</i> agricultural; agroindustrial. - <i>Industry and crafts specialisations:</i> economy and business; clothing and fashion; building; chemical-biological; mechanical and thermal; electrical and electronic. - <i>Service sector specialisations:</i> economy-business-tourism; advertising; hotel and catering services; social services. <p>The courses leading to qualifications have been considerably reduced, based on the assumption that if initial training is not too specialised, the student's personality can become more flexible and he/she can be better introduced into the working world or be re-trained. The new system introduced the concept of basic training in the first three years, also as a guidance period helping to pass on to other courses or schools. Professional specialist options are still</p>

	<p>found in the fourth and fifth year. Relevant innovations concerning curricula are expected following the reform of upper secondary school; however, school autonomy already assures to schools the possibility to adopt all the measures aimed at implementing organisation, teaching as well as research and experimentation autonomy foreseen by the <i>Piano dell'Offerta Formativa</i> (POF).</p>
<p>Istituti d'arte: The main three-year specialisations offered by the istituti d'arte are the following. After the three-year period of specialisation, two-year courses can be instituted to offer cultural and artistic education at upper secondary school level.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Painting.</i> - <i>Sculpture.</i> - <i>Graphics.</i> - <i>Ceramics.</i> <p>Specific teaching programs have not been established at national level. They are elaborated at school level.</p>

2.6. Permanent Education and Training for Young School Leavers and Adults

Civil, social and economic development as well as technology progress required the promotion of permanent education and training which became more and more relevant in the framework of the economic development policy fostering the highest exploitation of human resources.

As for young people, the strongest effort was aimed for many years at *fighting school dropout*. Such phenomenon, which has almost completely disappeared in compulsory school age, still affects post-compulsory school age. In order to combat drop out, first Law of 17 May 1999, no. 94, and then Law no. 53 of 2003, introduced *compulsory training up to 18 years of age*. Young people must complete compulsory training within general or vocational upper secondary education system, through *apprenticeship*, or within the basic vocational training system (also called «of 1st level»). As far as adult education is concerned, its primary aim was to fight the heavy question of complete illiteracy. This kind of illiteracy has certainly decreased, but another is persistent, in the same way worrying and widespread, which we may define as functional and which includes everyone who —having or

not a certificate of compulsory school— is not able to understand a simple text related to everyday life.

The qualitative change in literacy brought to develop new instruments, different from those used in the past, when the main problem was to teach adults to read, to write and to count. In the last years, the amount of workers attendance decreased remarkably, while courses are attended by a higher number of unemployed, housewives, young people over *15 years old* and, recently, Third World immigrants too. The original users changed as well as the requirements of the social tissue. These changes addressed *school policies at community level* not only in Italy, towards a general system of lifelong learning which includes not only school education and vocational training but also permanent training for workers and citizens.

2.7. Ongoing Debates and future developments

Permanent education is one of the main principles at the basis of delegated decrees foreseen by Law of 28 March 2003, no. 53 for the reform of the education and training system. It is likely that the debate on this subject will arise again as soon as these decrees' projects will be submitted to the parliamentary committees and the *Conferenza unificata Stato/Regioni*, which includes State, Regions, local governments, in order to obtain their opinions. Vocational courses (1st level) aim at the learning of specific professional theoretical and practical skills, also through exercises and stages in enterprise. They last two years and are subdivided into cycles that can be certified. They are made up of reception, guidance and tutoring modules and offer the possibility to attend a third year at the end of which it is released a specialisation certificate. The structure of these courses will be modified according to Law 53/2003.

The recent Law of 14 February 2003, no. 30 on the *relation between training and employment*, introduces innovations on the connection between employment supply and demand, through the reform of services for employment Servizi per l'impiego — SPI and apprenticeship contracts, as well as through new types of labour contracts (job on call, etc.). The new regulations provide for a subdivision of apprenticeship (BINANTI, 2005) as follows:

- *Apprenticeship for the accomplishment of the diritto/dovere* to education and vocational training for students between 15 and 28 years of age.
- *Professionalising apprenticeship* for students between 18 and 29 years of age.

Permanent training activities can be carried out also by *private organisations*. Enterprises, for example, plan training activities for their employees. Initiatives can be started also by training bodies, professional class associations, professional associations, etc. Furthermore, as for non formal offer, it's worth it to mention popular universities, telematics universities for distance education, universities for the third age, recreational-cultural and voluntary associations, libraries, museums, theatres. Some of these initiatives can be financed on the whole or partially, by public bodies. Support criteria and monitoring procedures vary from one body to the other.

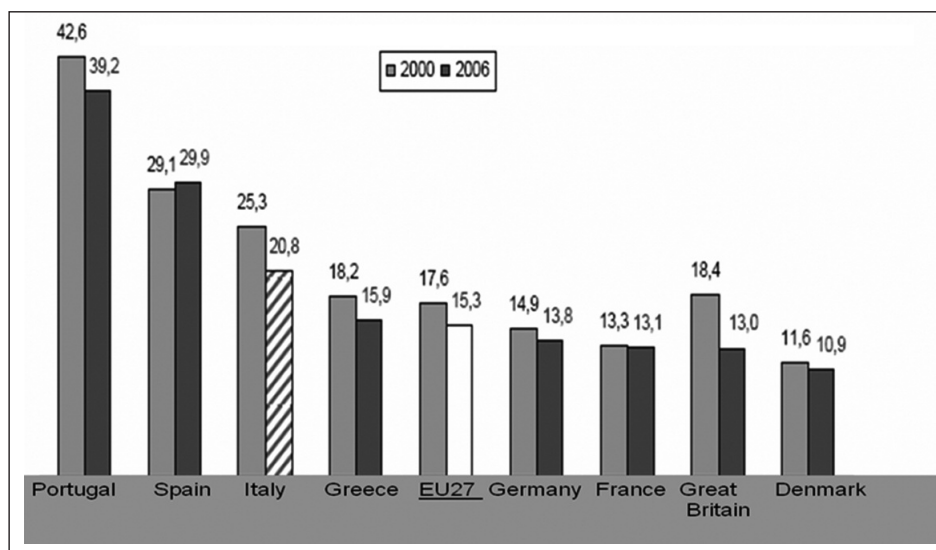
3. EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS AND DROPOUTS IN SOUTHERN ITALY: FOCUS ON APULIA REGION

In our country it has been discussed for the last 10 years about the possibility to raise the level of young people's competences, in order to face the challenges of the societies of knowledge. It is not merely a matter of culture in general, but it regards also the demands of the job market. In the past the school leaving phenomenon was limited by social and economic conditions. Nowadays, on the contrary, it is due to a subjective demotivation linked to the environments of growth and education. If the school environment does not reassure students and enhance their abilities, it becomes natural for them to prefer other environments answering better to the need of supporting their self-esteem.

Through some graphs we will try to analyse deeply the phenomenon of school leaving by examining a set of basic indicators relevant to the school year 2006/07 published in May 2008 by the Ministry of Education Statistical Service. In this work, the phenomenon of school leaving is interpreted through two different aspects of analysis: (1) The one of the 'drop-outs', and (2) The one of the 'early school leavers'.

In the former situation, the phenomenon of school leaving corresponds to the number of dropping-outs registered during a school year. Bearing in mind the complexity of variables — related both to scholastic reasons and to the socioeconomic context — influencing school leaving, this analysis highlights the indicators of the potential causality of the phenomenon, such as: Number of students repeating the year, number of students who have passed with an educational deficit, delays done during the years of course, and changes of course of studies. The latter situation analyses the phenomenon on the basis of the indicator of ‘early school leavers’, which refers to the quota of young people between 18 and 24, possessing the mere lower secondary school leaving qualifications and being out of the education-formation system. According to this interpretation, Italy is still in a delayed position, notwithstanding the improvements observed since 2000: in 2006, 20.8 % students stopped at the lower secondary school leaving qualification without attending any course of formation, against the European average of 15.3 % (*Graph 1*).

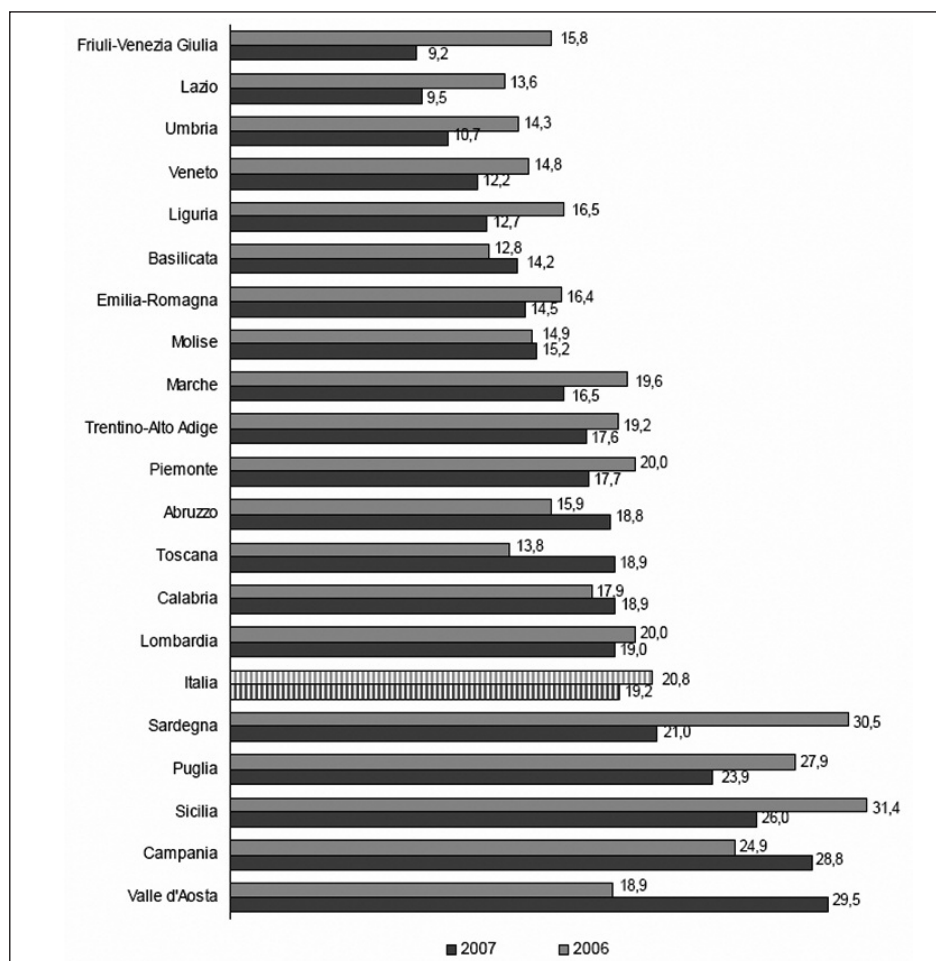
Graph 1: Early school leaving phenomenon in Europe: the Italian position



The phenomenon of school leaving rises to a very critical dimension in the South of Italy. The southern regions showing to have the most evident

difficulties are (*Graph 2*): Campania (28, 8 %), Sicily (26 %), and Apulia (23, 9 %).

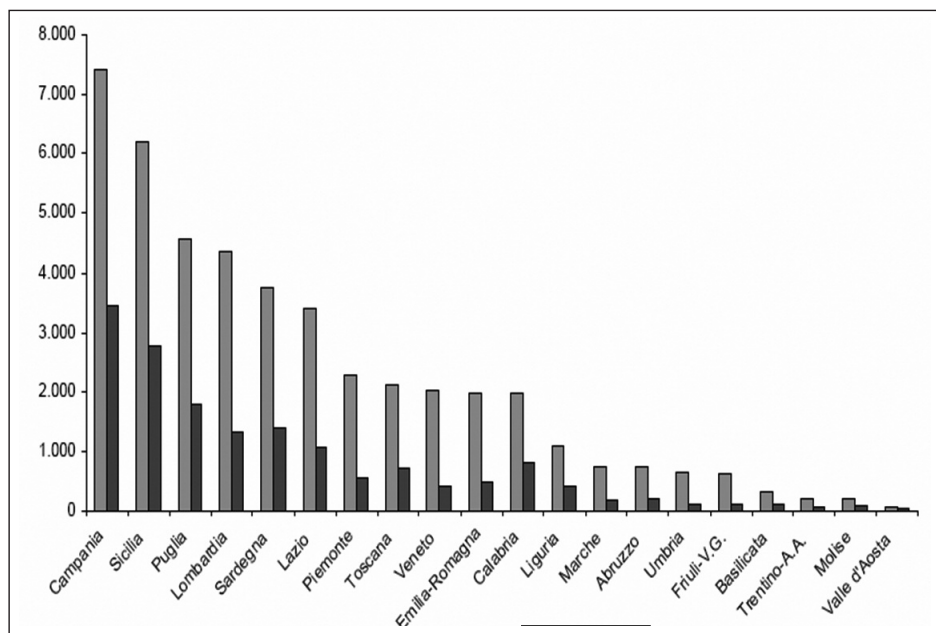
Graph 2: People aged 18-24, possessing the mere lower secondary leaving qualification



Data show the percentage, by regions, of young people aged 18-24 possessing the mere lower secondary leaving qualification and being out of education system. In the first 2 years of Upper Secondary School 8, 5% students repeating the 1st year and 7,2% students repeating the 2nd year. In

the first 2 years of Compulsory Secondary School, 2,7% students repeating the 1st year and 3,2% students repeating the 2nd year. *Graph 3* refers to the percentage of early school leavers by regions with the incidence of the 1^o year leaving in upper secondary school.

Graph 3: Early school leavers and 1st year upper secondary early school leavers



The following data analyse deeply the phenomenon of school leaving by examining a set of basic indicators relevant to the school year 2006-07, published in the «Regional Report on Educational System in Apulia». The data refer particularly to the last survey carried out in Apulia Region on 906 schools out of a regional total of 926.

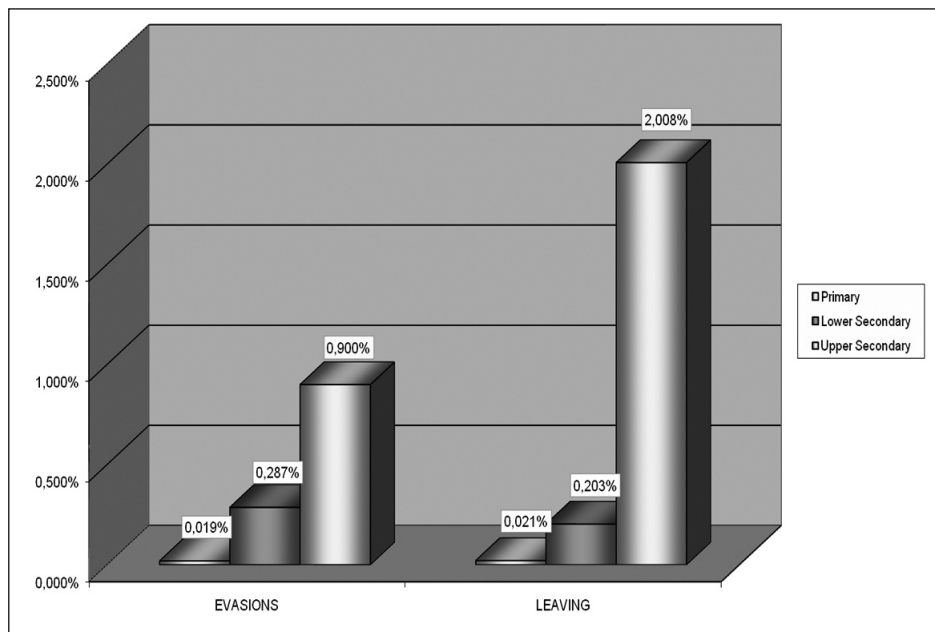
The data were analysed on the basis of the 6 indicators of school leaving:

- *Evasion*- students regularly enrolled who have the right-duty to attend, but have never attended, school
- *Leaving*- interruption, after an initial period of attendance, without any formal act of dropping-out

- *Formalized dropping —out—* interruption of the attendance with a formal act of withdrawal
- *Retentions-* students who are repeating a year at the moment of enrolment
- *Non-admissions-* students who are not admitted to attend the next grade or have not passed the exam at the end of the school year.
- *Irregular attendance-* students with more than 50 days of absence.

The *first two indicators* — evasion and leaving — represent what we could define ‘*school leaving*’ in a general meaning; it is meant as an interruption of the school attendance, as reported in *Graph 4*.

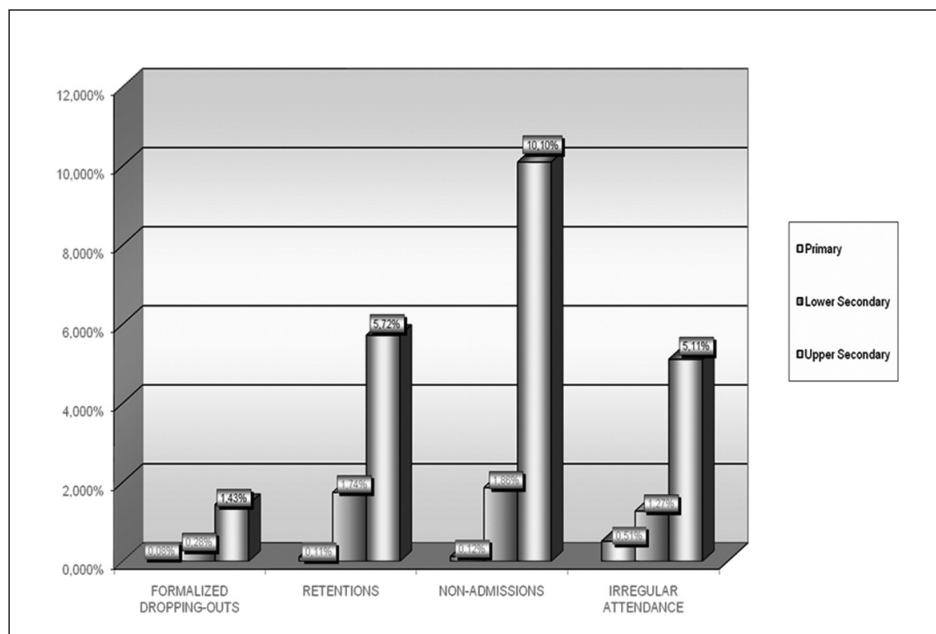
Graph 4: School leaving in primary, lower and upper secondary school



The other indicators represent, instead, what we define as ‘*potential school leaving*’, which includes also the phenomenon of *irregularity and school failure*; its rate of incidence indicates the severe difficulties students

can come across during their educational path. In graph 5 we can see a general picture of the phenomenon differentiated by the 3 school phases: primary, lower and upper secondary school.

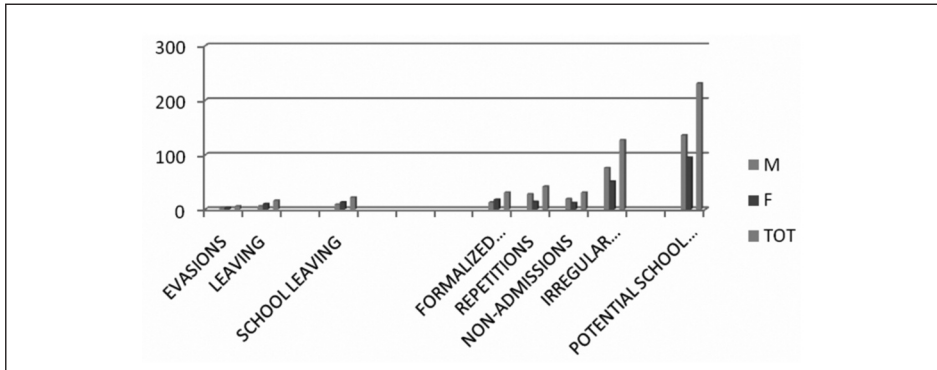
Graph 5: potential school leaving in primary, lower and upper secondary school



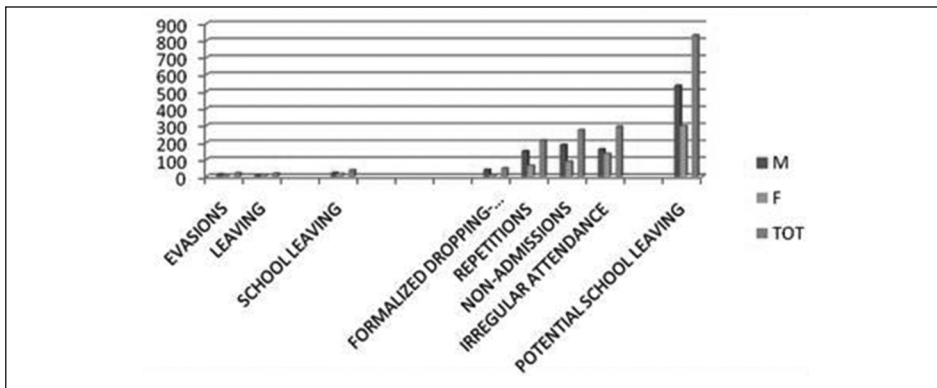
The last 3 graphs refer to the Province of Lecce. Each graph shows the incidence of the phenomenon by school phases and by genders, according to 5 indicators:

- Evasions and formalized dropping-out, *referring to the physical leaving.*
- Retentions, non-admissions and irregular attendance, *referring to the potential leaving*

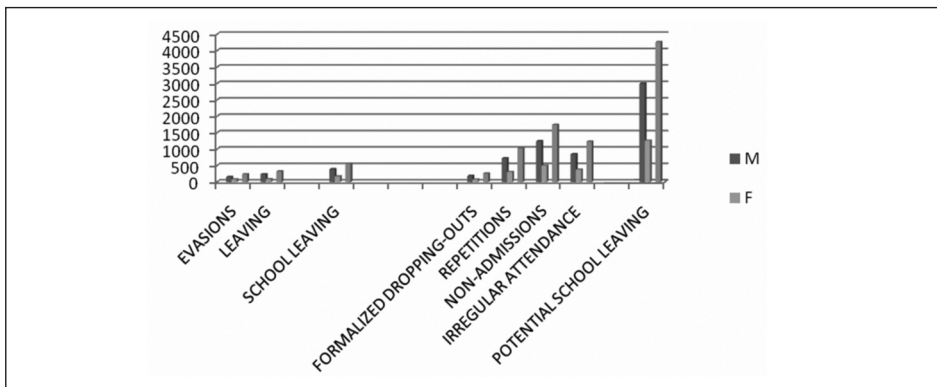
Graph 7: Province of Lecce-Primary School



Graph 8: Province of Lecce- Lower Secondary School



Graph 10: Province of Lecce- Upper Secondary School



4. POINTS OF ATTENTION

Bearing in mind the complexity of variables influencing school leaving phenomenon, this analysis highlights a very high percentage of students drops out between the first and the second year of upper secondary school (aged 15-17). This phenomenon could be the results of possible problems of school guidance and it draws the attention to the guidance actions as the main strategies in the view of continuing to study and entering the labour market, or successfully being oriented to a different educational path. Moreover, the 'context' in itself is one of the causes of the serious shortcomings of the system in southern Italy: low expectations of students and society do not help generate pressure to improve education system. That is why it needs a more prominent and clear role of education in regional development policies. And last, but not least, school leaving and dropping out are not necessarily an indicator of failure from perspective of the individual students.

High dropout rates may indicate that students realize they have chosen the wrong subject or course; or they fail to meet the standards set by their educational institution. Sometimes school system lacks educational appeal, and students find attractive employment before completing studies. *But very often, education system doesn't meet students' needs!*

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