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Early school leaving: from the analysis of perceptions to the inclusive perspectives of special education

La dispersione scolastica: dall'analisi delle percezioni alle prospettive inclusive della pedagogia speciale

Call

Early school leaving and educational failure are crucial indicators for reflecting on the levels of equity, inclusion and educational success of an entire school system. For these reasons, it becomes essential to approach the analysis of this complex phenomenon through the scientific research of special pedagogy. The present study starts from a mapping of school dispersion on the whole national fabric and on that of the Marche Region to proceed to the reconnaissance of the perceptions of a group of teachers in training at the secondary school level that were analysed through the Qualitative Content Analysis methodology. In closing, paper offers some reflections on the inclusive perspectives of special pedagogy.

Keywords: school drop-out | educational failure | teachers' perceptions | professional training

La dispersione scolastica e l'insuccesso formativo rappresentano indicatori cruciali per riflettere circa i livelli di equità, inclusione e successo formativo di un intero sistema scolastico. Per tali motivazioni, diventa fondamentale avvicinarsi all'analisi di questo complesso fenomeno attraverso le ricerche scientifiche della pedagogia speciale. Il presente studio muove da una mappatura della dispersione scolastica sull'intero tessuto nazionale e su quello della Regione Marche per procedere alla ricognizione delle percezioni di un gruppo di docenti in formazione della scuola secondaria di II grado che sono state analizzate attraverso la metodologia *Qualitative Content Analysis*. Il paper offre in chiusura alcune riflessioni in seno alle prospettive inclusive della pedagogia speciale.

Parole chiave: dispersione scolastica | insuccesso formativo | percezioni docenti | formazione continua

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1. Introduction

At present, school drop-out and school failure represent relevant indicators of the school system as they directly impact job placement and social cohesion, in addition to generating socio-cultural disadvantage (Domenici et al., 2017).

The scientific literature (Perone, 2006; Colombo, 2010; European Commission, 2015; Santagati, 2015; Zurru, 2018) well highlights the complexity of the field of investigation of school drop-out and failure. This brings with it a reflection on the complex analysis of potential counter measures implemented by different school and social policies. It is, in fact, a matter of focusing on a continuum that may include plural conditions preventing the regular attendance of the educational pathway during the so-called compulsory schooling period up to the drop-out, (ithe interruption of the pathway preventing the acquisition of the qualification in secondary school). The process of definition must also take into account the meanings that such accessions (compulsory schooling, school dropout, etc.) take on in different spatial-temporal coordinates and «(...)always relative to the concept of schooling practised by a certain society at a certain moment in its history» (Zurru, 2018, p. 2).

The results of the recent Dossier “Analisi longitudinale sulla dispersione” (“Longitudinal analysis on dropout”) (MIM, 2023)¹ illustrate the complexity of such phenomena in the Italian context as well. The data show how in the examined decade (school year 2012/2013 - school year 2021/2022) «a considerable portion of students got lost in the way: precisely 96.177 are those who abandoned their studies in middle school, in high school or between them. And not always after fulfilling compulsory schooling» (Intravaia, 2023, p. 21).

Starting from these reflections, the present contribution aims to examine the theme of school dropout and failed achievement of educational goals, with the scope of identifying some of the possible education and didactic strategies to realize in the context of secondary school.

Starting from an initial framing of the phenomenon, which will illustrate a national and regional picture based on recent data provided by MIM (2023), we will subsequently focus on the presentation of secondary school teachers’ perceptions on this topic. Qualitative data was collected from a sample of 28 teachers from institutes in the Marche Region through the arrangement of focus groups. Collected data allows us to examine experiences and opinions concerning the knowledge of the two phenomena, as well as prevention and intervention strategies.

The final reflections focus on the perspectives of special pedagogy for inclusion in order to outline some important guidelines for the implementation of teacher training courses and for the design of interventions aimed at preventing early school leaving.

2. School dropout and educational failure: a national and regional picture

As proven by scientific literature (Sicurello, 2017) the phenomenon of school drop-out is extended beyond the simple concept of abandoning the educational path, encompassing a variety of complex situations that can include, for instance, students repeating the year, suspension, delays in school age, inconsistent attendance, as well as the total lack of schooling of the student. Educational failure is among the primary causes of school abandonment as well, together with other factors linked to the economic and sociocultural conditions of students’ families that can worsen the case (Sabates, Akyeamong, Westbrook, & Hunt, 2010). Indeed, “implicit manners” of such a phenomenon can be found and is also inferable from the results of Invalsi tests (*La dispersione scolastica implicita. L’editoriale INVALSI 2019*): an apparent increase of students who completed the whole educational path with insufficient basic competences to

1 https://www.miur.gov.it/pubblicazioni/-/asset_publisher/6Ya1FS4E4QJw/content/analisi-longitudinale-sulla-dispersione-scolastica-aa-ss-2012-2013-2021-2022



face adulthood, practice active citizenship, continue their studies or start a professional path has emerged. Therefore, school drop-out can occur in different phases of the educational path and can consist not only in the abandonment and/or early exit from the educational system but also in the passive attendance or stratifications of gaps and delays that can invalidate the cultural and professional growth perspectives of the student (Genzone, 2019). For such reasons, as highlighted by research (MIM, 2023; Montanari, 2023), the phenomenon of early abandonment of the school and education system must be analysed in holistic and multidimensional terms, as it cannot be attributed to a singular cause (whether of biological, psychic or social nature), consequently requiring a wider and multidisciplinary look to understand and confront it.

In the European context, the terms utilised to quantify the phenomena of school dropout and educational failure are “drop-out” and “Early School Leavers”. Specifically, the term “drop-out” refers to young people abandoning the educational or working path without attaining a formal certification. On the other hand, the definition of “Early School Leavers” (ESL) (Eurostat, 2017) refers to individuals aged between 18 and 24 years who leave the education or training system without attaining a diploma or a regional professional qualification obtainable in courses lasting at least 2 years and who neither attend school programmes nor participate in education activities.

On the national level, regarding this phenomenon, officially available data unfold a complex scenario, with a national average of 16,5% (MIM, 2023).

Examining disaggregated data, it appears that abandonment has progressively increased over the considered school path (school year 2012/2013 - school year 2021/2022). In particular, «over the first two years of middle school abandonment stood at 6.600 units in each school year, (6.486 in the first year and 6.848 in the second year), in the third year 14.346 students abandoned the school system, including both those who did it during the year and those who left without motivation in the transition to the following year. Concerning secondary school, in the first year 15.906 students left, while in the second and third year respectively 18.159 and 18.300 students. In the fourth year, 14.373 students left. During the fifth year 1.579 students abandoned the school system without attaining the secondary school diploma or a three-year or four-year qualification» (MIM, 2023, p. 44).

Additionally, we can observe that the global abandonment rate of northern and central regions stands, on average, at lower levels compared to the national value (equal to 16,5%), while for southern and insular regions the rate increases, measuring respectively 17,4% and 20,6%.

However, it is important to note how, among the southern regions, the region of Campania presents a higher abandonment rate: 19,9%, while the region of Basilicata (with a rate of 9,8%) and the region of Molise (with a rate of 11,3%) are among the regions with the lowest rate of abandonment.

Concerning students’ gender, in the examined period, 13,7% of the sample is composed of females and 19% of males. With reference to citizenship, the abandonment rate is significantly higher for foreign students: 40,3% compared to 13,7%.

As it is known, the indicator implemented in the European context to quantify the phenomenon of school dropout identifies the number of ESL, named *Early leaving from education and training* (ELET), which is calculated in Italy by Istat through data collected by the Labor Force Survey. The ELET indicator illustrates a situation referred to previous periods, quantifying the premature exit from the scholastic system after some years. A further element of interest is the *Longitudinal Abandonment Rate* (TAL), which provides a similar quantification of the phenomenon referring to a closer time. ELET and TAL indicators, with due caution, can be compared for a deeper understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon. The ELET indicator measures a national average of 13,1%, while TAL data reach a national average of 14,7%.

By investigating the considered phenomenon with reference to our context of interest, that is to say, the Marche region, those who attain neither a diploma nor a three-year or four-year qualification (and are no longer attending in the 2021/2022 school year) represent the 13,2% with a national average that stands at 16,5%.

Additionally, in this Region, the *Early Leavers* indicator reaches 9,8%, according to data obtained from



the *National Students Registry* - Ministry of Education DGSIS Statistics Office. This data, compared to the Italian average, which is set at 13,1% with a decrease objective of 10%, allows us to «reconstruct the beliefs and perceptions of the development and scholastic success of parents and teachers, the educational attitudes towards children and students, the communication and educational skills of parents and teachers; [...] the role of active and cooperative didactic methodologies on scholastic performance; the diriment importance of the harmony between instruction and education in the school design and organization; the quality and educational and didactic competences of teachers, the availability and global quality of schools and related spaces; teachers' and parents' ability to use ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies), etc.» (2023, p. 50).

The reconstruction of such alarming data, both on the National and Regional territory, focuses our attention with reference to the European Union Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 concerning policies to reduce early school leaving². Based on such operational guidelines, the research that will be presented in the following section aims to illustrate the perceptions of a group of teachers in training who work in secondary schools of the Marche region concerning the topics of school dropout and early school leaving.

3. Perception of teachers in training: a survey in the Marche Region

To provide valuable reflections to understand the phenomenon and to plan targeted actions in the school context, we examined the considerations that emerged during a professional refresher course (lasting 30 hours) for secondary school teachers belonging to schools in the Marche region.

The perceptions were collected during three focus groups (Buseti et al., 2006; Cataldi, 2009; Oddone, Maragliano, 2016) conducted concerning the European Recommendations (2011/C 191/01 of the Council of the European Union). Specifically, the topics were circumscribed to the following macro-areas: “knowing the phenomenon”, “observing to prevent”, and “support strategies”. The topics were addressed during three consecutive meetings lasting 40-45 minutes each.

The sample was selected on a voluntary basis (GAO, 1996): among the 200 teachers participating in the training course, 28 of them expressed a willingness to take part in the research activities. The participants were randomly assigned to three groups of 6/8 teachers. The interactions that took place during the focus group were recorded, subsequently transcribed and analysed according to the Qualitative Content Analysis methodology (Schreier, 2012).

The analysis process (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) involves open coding activities that allow categories to be identified from meaningful text units. During cross-reading and recursive reading of the materials, the researchers drafted notes and headings on the transcripts, which were then re-read vertically, verifying that all the headings which were necessary to describe aspects of the content were present. This process allowed the researchers to identify sub-categories that were then grouped into higher-order headings (categories). The open coding process was supported by the MAXQDA software.

The system of categories, sub-categories and text fragments that emerged concerning the three topics of interest will be presented and discussed in the following section.

2 [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32011H0701\(01\)&from=FR](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32011H0701(01)&from=FR)



3.1 Data presentation and results analysis

3.1.1 Knowing the phenomenon

Concerning the first macro-area of interest, i.e. “knowing the phenomenon”, participants engaged in several reflections on the complex aspects of school dropout and educational failure that they had the opportunity to witness in their schools or during their professional experience.

The phenomenon of early school leaving is interpreted in light of aspects related to students’ criticalities which the teachers attribute to multiple factors. In this direction, the subcategories that emerged from the analysis of the transcripts relate to factors linked to “learning” (individual and school), “family” contexts and “socio-economic” status. These subcategories were grouped in the higher-order heading ‘complexity’ (category). Reading the transcripts revealed the difficulty of circumscribing the phenomenon since it was connected to aspects that could not be exactly assessed within the school institution (e.g. family or socio-economic factors). Hence, the teachers’ need for a meaningful connection also with out-of-school activities, as highlighted in the following extract:

[...] To this end, it is necessary to investigate possible learning problems in synergy with the family
[...] (Report of 10/02/22).

Moreover, participants point out criticalities in the identification of the phenomenon since it can be traced back to complex aspects concerning students’ learning, such as: “perception of self-efficacy”; “levels of self-esteem and confidence in one’s abilities”; “self-regulation capacity in learning”; “participation in the learning context”. In this regard, the words of a teacher who expresses the importance of supporting his students’ self-esteem for learning are exemplary:

[...] The difficult work of teachers does not stop at the ‘dissemination of knowledge’, but must also be directed at the analysis of self-esteem, to understand their confidence levels (Report of 10/02/22).

In the same direction, teachers state that sometimes there is a:

[...] difficulty in identifying the pupils’ real educational needs and in setting up appropriate and personalised paths (Report of 10/02/22).

Specifically, some teachers point out that the phenomenon can be traced back to some difficulties that may be related to a lack of or an incorrect approach to personal study methods, of which students themselves are unaware.

[...] The difficulties encountered, moreover, could be linked to a problem in the study method, which is not only lacking but also a real awareness of it (Report of 10/02/22).

In line with the perceptions that emerged from the focus groups, studies (Santagati, 2015; Zurru, 2018) agree that early school leaving is a complex and urgent phenomenon that cannot be simplified into unambiguous cause-effect relationships. As Zurru (2018) argues, the phenomenon requires “a systemic approach to personal and social reality, to a continuous interaction between conditions inside and outside the school, variously intertwined with the problems of the juvenile experience, also correlating to inequalities in the broader social, economic and cultural context, especially on a local basis” (p. 3).

For such reasons, these factors - as also highlighted by teachers in training - are closely linked not only to the social, economic and cultural context that young people experience but also to their learning experiences.

Focusing on the complexity of the relationship between the dropout phenomenon and the dynamics linked to students’ social, economic and cultural contexts, research (Lundetrae, 2011; Pandolfi, 2016; Nakajima et al., 2018) reiterates how socio-economic and cultural distress can significantly influence dropout



and educational failure processes. For instance, analysing the family context, it can be noted that children with parents who have low levels of education present a higher probability of early school leaving. These parents, in turn, often show low interest and expectations towards the education system and their children's academic success (Lundetrae, 2011; Nakajima et al., 2018). Moreover, economic constraints within the household can also translate into the inability to cope with school expenses, such as the purchase of learning materials, transport costs or those related to residence (Abuya et al., 2013).

Concerning educational and didactic care, special attention must be paid to the multiple dynamics involved in learning processes. In line with scientific studies (Fan & Wolters, 2014; Renaud-Dubé, Guay, Talbot, Taylor, & Koestner, 2015; Alivernini, Manganelli & Lucidi, 2017) teachers recall a high sense of self-efficacy, higher self-esteem and confidence in one's abilities as key factors in reducing the risk of dropping out (Dalton, Gennie, & Ingels, 2009; Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011). As highlighted by research (Yusuf, 2011; Komarraju & Nadler, 2013; Barbero, Vignola, & Duca, 2016), students who have a good awareness of their intellectual abilities and use effective learning strategies further consolidate their basic and transversal skills, thus achieving broader educational success.

3.1.2 Observing to prevent

"Observing to prevent" represents the topic of interest of the second focus group. Analysing the teachers' perceptions, the theme of "motivation to study" emerged as the main category linked to observation from a preventive perspective. In this regard, some teachers declare how, among the alarm bells observable at school, there are signals precisely linked to the lack of interest and motivation to learn, as highlighted in the following extract:

[...] In my professional experience, I have been able to note that it is precisely the students who are most uninterested in learning who are among the first to drop out (Report of 20/02/22).

Regarding 'motivation', the teachers emphasise how the school system as a whole can play a fundamental role: involving 'extra-curricular activities' with clear objectives, 'teaching staff' able to use stimulating and active teaching strategies, 'classmates' as anchorage to the social world, represent some of the incentives not to leave the educational pathway.

In detail, the teachers express themselves in representative words:

[...] It turns out to be necessary to propose extra-curricular activities, with clear and concrete objectives, which can act as an expedient to make the student anchored in the school context, making him or her feel truly involved (Report of 10/04/22).

[...] The teacher should increase the student's motivation by making them participate (Report of 10/04/22).

[...] Leveraging the student's possible need to spend time with peers and thus choose to continue school also helps to maintain this sociability. Among the motivation factors is also the sense of belonging to a group (Report of 10/04/22).

[...] It is necessary to support the motivation of pupils at risk by also focusing on the relational aspect, for example by supporting pupils in creating their sense of belonging. This can be a pivotal element for the continuation of the school as the students can also be motivated to continue to experience such sociability (Report of 10/04/22).

The reconstruction of teachers' perceptions makes it possible to grasp how crucial it is to focus on encouraging students' motivation, also by carrying out transversal educational interventions capable of avoiding situations of risk of dropping out and educational failure. In this sense, studies in the field (Eccles, 2009; Incandela, 2018) interpret motivation through the lens of the relationship between expectation, value and commitment to the achievement of a given task or purpose.



[...] Leveraging the student's possible need to spend time with peers and thus choose to continue school also helps maintain this sociability. Motivation factors include a sense of belonging to a group (Report of 10/04/22).

In addition, the effort to be made to achieve this is related to expectation and value, in an interplay of forces which, if not kept in balance, produces demotivation.

As highlighted by teachers' perceptions, and discussed by research (Moscovici, 2005; Roletto, 2005), another aspect closely related to motivation is the social representation of knowledge and learning. In this sense, extracurricular teaching activities, supporting and supplementing curricular ones, play a fundamental role in learning. This entails the adoption of a didactic organisation that can envisage, for instance, the strengthening of links between education and the world of work, the extensive use of laboratories and libraries, etc., implementing actions that go beyond the spaces of school facilities (Balzano & Balzano, 2023). The implementation of such interventions can indirectly determine a positive effect on motivation, since it precisely stimulates the students' interest, being called upon to express their creativity, and to experiment themselves, thus producing a positive effect on personal learning ability (Ibidem).

Based on this reconstruction, the need for effective 'support strategies' for educational success that are also useful in the direction of implementing motivation emerges (Anderman & Anderman, 2014).

3.1.3 Support strategies

Entering into the last macro area of interest, i.e. "support strategies", participants engaged in multiple reflections on the elements that can be taken into consideration in light of the criticalities that emerged.

The reading of the transcripts and the open coding process allowed the researchers to identify several sub-categories: 'enhancing the sense of belonging', 'active teaching strategies', and 'favouring self-assessment'. The sub-categories were grouped within the category 'flexibility'.

The participating teachers, in fact, among the possible strategies to be considered in response to the phenomenon of early school leaving, often emphasise the role played by peer support, and how peer tutoring strategies can be fostered in this respect. Increasing involvement through group work or peer education can represent, according to what the trainee teachers describe, a useful strategy to support educational success.

[...] To encourage [...] to follow the lesson and increase their involvement, group work or peer education can be structured. It is also possible to present an alternative opportunity to the curriculum and projects envisaged for areas at risk of dispersion, such as theatre workshops, creative writing workshops, maintaining the school page on the web, practical subject courses [...] to stimulate a sense of belonging to the school context (Report of 01/04/22).

[...] Disciplinary competencies can be achieved with different and individualised systems, strategies and activities. From this point of view, the collaboration and confrontation between teachers and the support of students who, in a peer education regime, can help to support the weaknesses of their peers appear important (Report of 01/04/22).

[...] Amongst the proposals were periodical peer tutoring activities and help pairs; the preparation of segmented lessons [...]; suspension of over-evaluation in favour of supportive techniques and positive reinforcement; construction of links with the real world and professional needs (Report of 01/04/22).

To foster the construction of a greater sense of belonging to the classroom context and motivate the student to learn, the teachers during the focus group activities dwelled on the potential offered by active and cooperative teaching strategies.

[...] need to diversify teaching methodologies, using cooperative teaching strategies (aimed at also creating moments of interaction among peers)[...] (Report of 01/04/22).

[...] I believe that if we want to improve the sense of belonging we have to work on why we go to



school. We have to show the children, with concrete activities, that school has direct implications in the world of work. For example, we must provide more authentic tasks (Report of 01/04/22).

In the same vein, teachers recognise an important role in the assessment.

[...] Possible strategies for improving school performance are to activate self-assessment processes with, for example, self-assessment closed-ended tests with clear solutions. [...] Feedback programming would also be desirable for oral tests (Report of 01/04/22).

In line with the perceptions of teachers in training, research (Hattie & Clinton, 2011; Hattie, 2012) emphasises that to foster students' ability to learn, it is crucial to create teaching-learning contexts in which students are active protagonists and teachers play a role in 'guiding' the learning processes. In the latter direction, literature (Scierri, Toti & Trapani, 2019) shows how the use of authentic tasks fosters students' motivation, stimulates discussions and comparisons among them, ensures a constant flow of feedback, strengthens the bond between teachers and students, encourages distributed practice over time, promotes the use of metacognitive strategies, stimulates creativity, fosters critical thinking and problem-solving, encourages cooperative or small group learning, and promotes self-assessment. All these elements are considered to have a 'high impact' on student learning (Hattie, 2009; 2012). The spirit that should guide the design of teaching activities should therefore be that of concrete and realistic learning, useful in life contexts, linked to the student's interests, that can be challenging, stimulating and solicit curiosity.

In continuity with these reflections, the centrality played by assessment processes that are linked to the experiences of disaffection when the student experiences scholastic failure or repetition emerges. It is known that dropout is often determined by failures and repetition of school years (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011), as well as the fact that failing has negative effects on performance (Hattie, 2009), making pupils experience selective failure (related to one discipline) with repercussions on wider school dropout (Mata, Monteiro & Peixoto, 2012). In this direction, studies (Pandolfi, 2016) emphasise how promoting self-assessment allows the achievement of a meta-cognitive work on learning and the visualisation of ongoing progress, contributing to the development of competencies and lifelong learning (Balzano & Balzano, 2023) useful for broader educational success.

4. Conclusions

Based on the considerations that have emerged in this contribution, it appears that the phenomena of school drop-out and educational failure recall situations are linked to the dimensions of "complexity", "motivation" and "flexibility".

As evidenced by the reconstruction of teachers' perceptions, also in line with the references (Nanni & Pellegrino, 2018; Zurru, 2018), the complexity of the considered phenomena often calls into question a series of socio-cultural and economic aspects peculiar to the families and contexts of origin. In these circumstances, it is often poverty and educational neglect on the side of parents and adults of reference that generates, as indicated by Nanni and Pellegrino (2018), a significant impact on the development and educational success of young people, thus creating additional obstacles in the attainment of opportunities and overcoming of social inequalities.

Among these, we should remember that the teacher must also pay attention to those dimensions that are more related to the personalisation of the teaching process. These include how the teacher must also pay attention to those dimensions more related to the student's learning, such as the sense of self-efficacy. Experiences of failure or disregard of personal goals can lead to low levels of self-esteem, low motivation in study and consequent educational failure. For these reasons, concerning the motivational dimension, the results that have emerged, in continuity with scientific literature (Incandela, 2018), highlight the im-



portance of a constant commitment to motivating students to recognise the meaning of their educational paths. It also becomes crucial to foster in students a positive and self-aware view of themselves about their social role within the school environment (Eccles, 2009; Palmonari, 2011). Thus, it is important to realise synergic alliances and create contexts which are sensitive to diversity, where each student can see their subjectivity considered and can enjoy equal opportunities (Balzano & Balzano, 2023) that disregard situations of educational urgency to avoid generating and maintaining a state of demotivation.

In this sense, the teacher represents an important catalyst for authentic change, becoming a promoter of effective inclusive educational actions aimed at supporting pupils in achieving their educational success. Therefore, the considerations that have emerged in this study lead our reflection to emphasise the crucial importance of teacher training, with a special focus on guidance didactics and teaching methodologies, including research-action activities, the shared construction of tools, strategies and innovative practices. Targeted and systematic training can ensure that teachers acquire the necessary skills to effectively address the challenges related to school dropouts and promote the educational success of students.

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